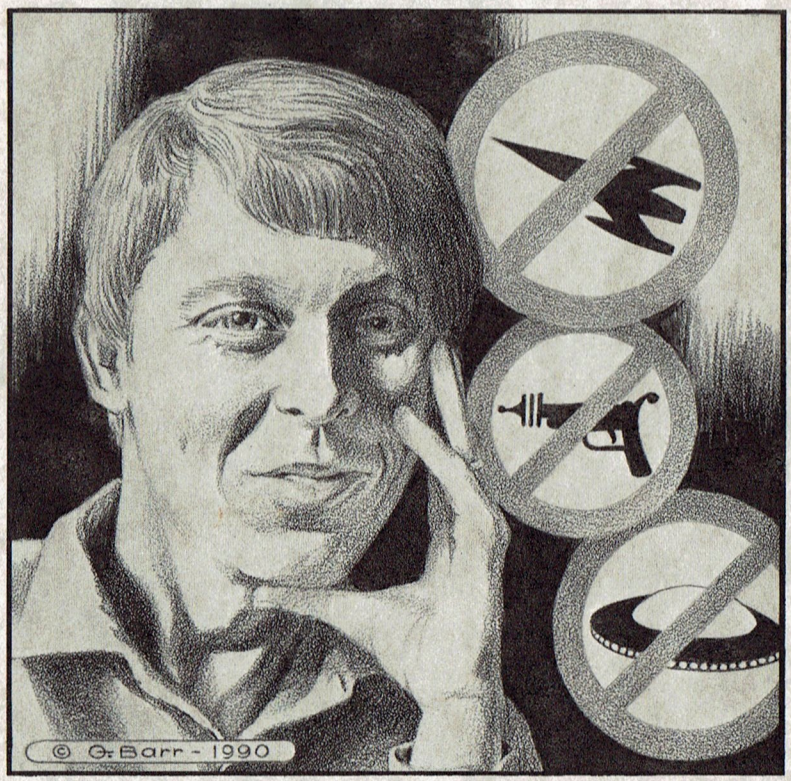
AUTHOR'S CHOICE *Monthly*

Issue 15



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Issue Fifteen, December 1990.

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EMPHATICALLY NOT SF, ALMOST: INTRODUCTION

I've published three previous collections of short fiction, two from Arkham House (*Blooded on Arachne* [1982], which I'd wanted to call *On the Street of the Serpents*, and *One Winter in Eden* [1984], which I'd wanted to call what it's called) and one from Peachtree Publishers (*Close Encounters with the Deity* [1986], whose sales I tried to boost by appropriating part of a title once used on a film by a young guy named Steven Spielberg). Each collection features stories that allowed its publisher to market it as SF (whether you interpret that acronym to stand for Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Speculative Fantasy, Surrealistic Fabulation, or Slipshod Folderol). Which was okay by me because I was trying very hard to *be* an SF writer.

But one of these collections, *One Winter in Eden*, contains a story, "Patriots," that isn't SF or fantasy at all, even though it developed from the bizarre, if documentable, fact that a remnant of never-say-die Japanese soldiers continued to fight World War Two on several different Pacific islands for years after Emperor Hirohito signed surrender terms on the U.S.S. *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay. Many of the other stories in that collection, notably, I think, "Saving Face," "The Quickening," "Collaborating," "Vernalfest Morning," and "The Yukio Mishima Cultural Association of Kudzu Valley, Georgia," are either borderline SF or borderline fantasy, if not both, and my writing them in the late 1970s/early 1980s proves that I hadn't yet

shaken the impulse to do borderline "mainstream" stuff as well. In fact, I've since written some unalloyed contemporary stuff. I like a lot of contemporary fiction — the kind published by *Esquire, The New Yorker, The Atlantic,* etc., whether borderline or traditionally over the edge, so long as, in some positive way, it's visionary — and I'm *not* among those SF advocates who appear to believe, because they aggressively argue, that SF is the one true voice — the *only* pertinent literature — of our time.

"Patriots" is contemporary, I mean, mainstream, fiction, but I wrote it in the context of an anthropological science fiction novel that I was struggling both to structure and to bring to a suitable conclusion. "Patriots," which cannibalizes *Sideshow: Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* by William Shawcross for a crucial incident in Lt. Rojas's recent past, as well as for much of its apparent savvy about that sub-rosa incursion, is an outtake from *No Enemy But Time* (1982). Clearly, then, I wasn't trying to transform myself from an SF writer into a funky Vietnam War Era Norman Mailer or James Jones when I wrote it, but I did have these writers somewhere in my head, just as I unabashedly employed both Gregory Benford's *Timescape* and John Updike's *The Coup* as structural or world-building models for the novel into which I later embedded "Patriots." Further, I read everything I could find about Guam, and I still remember a travel magazine featuring color photographs of a "Necco Wafer" Guamanian village. That startling metaphor was the travel writer's. It was all I could do not to steal it, especially since the doomed Denny Rojas would have been about the right age to remember those chalky little candies from his boyhood.

But "Patriots," the only title in this volume that you'll find in any of my collections, is the eighth of nine stories listed on the contents page. Let me introduce the other eight in *something* like the order in which they appear in the text.

"Unlikely Friends" is a detective story. No, it isn't — it's an oblique, not to say askew, study of a type of friendship that,

once beyond the obligatory shackles of family relationships (as embodied in the rapport that forms, or doesn't, between grandfolks and grandkids), we encounter all too seldom in real life; namely, a friendship between persons of widely separated generations, as here embodied in the relationship between young Paul Bevilacqua and the septuagenarian Samuel Halterman. So seldom do we see this sort of friendship — it's damned hard work getting into, and appreciating, the mindset and interests of a person more than a decade or two beyond our own age — that we often automatically suppose something ulterior or illicit about such bonds.

I let Gene Wolfe read "Unlikely Friends" after it had appeared in the November 1982 issue of *Ellery Queen*. He told me in a letter that it wasn't a bona fide detective story, but that it was "a good story *about* a detective." At the time, I was reading the Spenser mysteries by Robert B. Parker and the Jacob Asch detective stories of Arthur Lyons (having already teethed on the hard-boiled novels of Hammett and Chandler), and the seedy Jimmy Bevilacqua was my answer to Spenser-Asch-Marlowe-Spade-etc. Strangely, I've never written another story about Bevilacqua, my less than insightful P.I. Maybe one day... Meanwhile, let me boost *Hard Trade* by Arthur Lyons as the best title in the Jacob Asch series and perhaps one of the best hard-boiled detective novels ever written.

"Wished-For Belongings" has its moments, but, to be honest, it isn't an entirely successful story. A rejection from Rust Hills at *Esquire,* in fact, indicated that what begins as an adept character study concludes in melodrama. Nor did Hills think that the irony deployed to leaven the melodrama succeeded in doing that. I admit, with a curse and a sigh, that these are fair criticisms. I take some consolation — not much — in the portrait-from-life details that Jonathan Smith trots out in a voice that is consistent in both style and tone from start to finish, as well as in the O. Henry-ish conclusion. One more irony is that I'd hoped to land this story in *Esquire,* but that I acquiesced in feeling wanted at three cents a word in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.*

The next four stories comprise a mini-anthology that I call *A Pocketful of Angst*. (This collection is two collections in one, the literary equivalent of Wrigley's Doublemint Gum.) I group them because they employ a storytelling approach that I've never viewed as one of my fortes, even though I often admire it in the work of Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, O. Henry, W. Somerset Maugham, John Collier, Roald Dahl, and, closer to home, Frederic Brown, Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont, and Damon Knight, among others. This method is the sly buildup to a twist, trick, or zinger ending. In a sense, it's the apotheosis of terminal deceit, the triumph of gall over integrity.

Well done, this technique can be weirdly satisfying, a guilty pleasure. Poorly executed, it can make you cringe or swear more surely than can a shameful pun. It's not high art, or literature for the ages, but it can be powerfully affecting, and the finest examples may stick in your memory better than do the humane short masterpieces of Tolstoy or Camus. They're entertainments, acidic bon mots, and, hey, it's not fatal to swallow one occasionally.

I can't say much about the four tales in *A Pocketful of Angst* for fear of betraying their zingers, but I'll try. Of the four stories, two pivot organically on character, and may be worthy of a second look: "A Father's Secret" and "The Egret."

"Dear Bill" and "Give a Little Whistle," however, are setups, traps designed to ensnare or impale. Once you've been netted or skewered, neither will again hoodwink you or command your respect. "Dear Bill" relies on the most conspicuous gimmick, in the least subtle way, and if you don't quickly figure out what's going on, you're probably not a candidate for Harvard Law School. (But we've got too many Ivy League lawyers already.) "Give a Little Whistle" is more vicious, and a little less obvious, but it's hard to care about either of the grown-up children locked in connubial warfare at its acrid heart. I *do* feel sorry for the dog, but Squeedunk, given a large orchard and a dilatory dog catcher, may get away

scot-free. The idea for "Give a Little Whistle," including the title, was my wife's. Within a family context, Jeri has strong feminist leanings, with a peculiar fondness for militant T-shirt catchphrases like "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." Read the story and make of that what you will.

"A Father's Secret" is about child abuse. It's based, as I've written elsewhere, on a minor celebrity's matter-of-fact revelation that he was continually molested as a boy, and on his backasswards (by both my own and prevailing cultural standards) response to that molestation. I offered the story to the editor of an anthology who wanted new work by Georgia writers, and he returned it with a note stating that he might have made a mistake rejecting it. Whether he rejected it out of distaste for the subject matter or some scruple about my handling of the issue, I don't know. It remains among the oddest rejections I've ever tried to decode. "A Father's Secret" eventually sold to a deliciously curious "seasonal" magazine called *Pulpsmith,* edited by Harry Smith, whose assistants sent me $35.00, a Pulpsmith lapel pin in the shape of an anvil, and what seemed to me a blizzard of subscription forms. As for "A Father's Secret," I continue to like it. It's nasty and real, with a twist that makes the title do double duty. And, again, if a twist is to be anything more than a cheap trick, it ought to emerge from the unpredictable vagaries of human character.

That's what happens in "The Egret," too, I think. This story (to date my only sale to *Playboy,* whose fiction editor Alice Turner has read more of my short stories than any other magazine editor in the world) evolved from two widely spaced incidents in my life. As a boy on the south side of Tulsa, Oklahoma, I once took part with my friends in winter air-rifle wars. We wore parkas to absorb the impact of the BBs, and we shot at one another from behind whatever cover we could find — low sandy hills on the playground, breezeway support columns, outsize propane tanks. It was an insanely risky, irresponsibly exhilarating pastime, and my pump-action air-rifle — versus the kinds my adversaries had to lever-cock

before they could shoot again — gave me what seemed like an unfair advantage. Then, rising up from behind a propane tank, I took a BB between the eyes, at the top of my nose, a BB that left a visible dent, and I began thinking about what *could* have happened, if, say, either the BB or I had been differently positioned.

The other incident was more recent. A few years ago, my son and daughter found a baby blue heron — not an egret, as I have it in the story — in our backyard. We called a naturalist at nearby Callaway Gardens, a local resort and vacation spot, to see what to do with this kind of bird, and she warned us about certain of its adult behaviors. Luckily, the bird that Jamie and Stephanie had caught was still a fledgling, but Jeri and I began wondering what might have happened if it had been full-grown. "Stork" Magruder and One-Eyed Harry Profitt evolved from the happy conflation of these two incidents.

That takes us out of the mini-anthology, *A Pocketful of Angst.* Three non-SF, non-fantasy stories remain, but because I've already discussed "Patriots," we're actually down to the "T" twins, "Tears" and "Taccati's Tomorrow." "Tears," except for some minor punching up of character and event, is a true story. Mister True is based on a real person. So is Miss Carolyn, his wife. I view "Tears" as a story of heroism, primarily Miss Carolyn's, but there is also explicit in "Tears" an examination of the deterioration of mental function triggered by Alzheimer's disease and of the impact of this irreversible deterioration on loved ones. One editor who nixed "Tears" (and many did before Lamar York at *The Chattahoochee Review* accepted it) said that his assistants and he couldn't tell, given the story's structure, with which character they were meant to identify and assess the situation. Frankly, I was at a loss to know how to help them. I still am.

"Taccati's Tomorrow" justifies the *almost* in *Emphatically Not SF, Almost.* It's not an SF story, but it focuses on an SF writer, and takes place at an SF convention, and first appeared

in print in an SF magazine, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Despite a storyline that should play almost anywhere, "Taccati's Tomorrow" found no editor outside the genre willing to concede that SF people might be as interesting, and as illuminating, as the people in any other cultural subset. "Get a life!" William Shatner, *aka* Captain James T. Kirk, once told fanatical Trekkies in a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*. I regard that as solid advice, not to be cavalierly ignored, but I also believe that the Quixotic singlemindedness of SF fans is psychologically compelling and potentially nutritious grist for the mills of serious contemporary fiction. Believing that, I tried to write a story about SF people that, given a different set of editorial prejudices, might find acceptance at *Esquire, The New Yorker,* or *The Atlantic*. It didn't. The prejudices that exist, exist, and maybe "Taccati's Tomorrow" fails to achieve what I wanted it to.

First, "Taccati's Tomorrow" fictionalizes several events that occurred in and around a real convention that Jeri and I attended in Chattanooga. Except for well-performed dramatic readings of the poetry of several guests, and the chance to talk with old friends and make some new ones, this convention didn't earn many points on our thanks-for-the-memories fun-o-meter. Some kids — just as in the story — threw a cherry bomb into our path as we drove into town. A soused fan got us up after midnight with a telephone call indignantly telling us that we'd taken her room and that we should vacate it at once. (We hadn't. We didn't.) But for some time, perplexity and then anger kept us from our beds. Finally, the incident comprising the pivotal scene in "Taccati's Tomorrow," a tiff over a pen in the McDonald's near the hotel, occurred as we were trying to share breakfast and talk with a writer friend.

This limning of actual circumstances inspiring "Taccati's Tomorrow" disturbs some people, for it hints that the characters Bev and Gil are really my wife and I and that the character Taccati may not be the idealistic sage that his note to Gil, read sympathetically, appears to project. In fact,

another writer, a good friend, complimented me on putting across in this story, in a nondidactic way, the message that we must build bridges to one another if our world is to survive. But I view that message as obvious, and the frustrating point I was trying to underscore is that the individual differences necessitating bridges too often thwart our best efforts to rig and sustain them. Taccati's a quasi-lout, Gil's a quasi-prig, the angry black man is either an ill-mannered bully or a sicko, and Bev — well, Bev is the healthy sun around which these nut cases orbit.

Does "Taccati's Tomorrow" do what I want it to? Maybe not. A writer of demonstrated astuteness has misread it — from my point of view, at least — for I don't see much that's attractive about Taccati, despite his note, or a lot that's heroic about Gil, even though I *wanted* him to look heroic because in suspiciously similar circumstances I acted as he does. In short, "Taccati's Tomorrow" is a series of unanswered questions posed as dramatic episodes, and my fondness for it no longer has anything to do with its attempt to justify my behavior in a conflict that was as muzzy in real life as it may be here. Hooray for ambiguity.

And hooray for this chance to parade some of my non-SF stories before you as if each of them deserved it.

— June 26-27, 1990
Pine Mountain, Georgia

UNLIKELY FRIENDS

You *had* to wonder about them, Sheila told me. It wasn't natural, their relationship. That was why she had called, synapsing the gap between her trailer court in Barclay and my brownstone in wicked old Hotlanta. It was up to me to see that Paul's life didn't go monkey-mash sour before his twentieth birthday. I owed him *that* much, didn't I?

"Listen, La, I'm on a case, and it doesn't sound so godawful serious as all that. My rent falls due — "

"You're Paul's father," Sheila reminded me, although I hadn't forgotten. Something fishy was going on, she insisted. She was scared for Paul, but she couldn't do anything because she didn't move in the circles this high-tone old geezer named Samuel Halterman moved in, and Paul hadn't talked to her since catching her *in flagrante interdicto* with a Man Not Her Husband, while still the Lawful Wedded Wife of Jack Whitman, Paul's most recent stepfather. At chance meetings downtown — the bank, the post office, Foster's Barbecue Hut — her own son cut her dead. Made her feel lower than spaniel puke.

"He's not any fonder of me, La."

"Fonder? Why, Jimmy Bevilacqua, he hates your ugly face."

"Right. Perfect reason for me to butt in. What a break for Paulie, you ringing me up like this."

As in the Old Days, La and I went back and forth. Eventually she hit me with a shopping list of my fatherly faults,

failures, and cop-outs. Her voice quavered through the line the way a phonograph record sitting lopsided on a turntable wobbles the music coming out. When I finally tossed in the towel — "All right, all right, I'll look into it" — she whooped in triumph, then damn-near splintered my ear bones cradling her receiver.

Collect call. What else?

Just what I needed, another nonpaying case. (Put "case" in quotes.) Plus a chance to rub raw the sensitivities of some of the disapproving Barclavians who Knew Me When, to open lots of old wounds with Sheila, and to rile up an overbearing teenager who chiefly remembered me for hurling beer cans and pounding on walls.

Not to mention the chance to meet this Halterman character, a retired architectural mucky-muck from New Yawk New Yawk. Upon him, according to La, Paulie had fixed the spillover of his grateful-puppy-dog affections. Or something. Anyway, they were now an every-evening item around Barclay, as inseparable as collards and corn bread.

I drove down early Tuesday in my twice-repossessed-and-reclaimed Trans Am and stopped three miles outside of town at the Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company, which was where Paulie worked. The fastest way to lay La's overimaginative worries to rest, it seemed to me, was to talk to the boy. If I could catch him alone for about twenty minutes, I could probably figure out his business with Halterman, reassure my ex by telephone, and scoot back to Atlanta without ever putting leather to a Barclay sidewalk.

The Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company looked like a military installation. A chain-link fence surrounded a pine copse cleared to reveal a prefabricated office building, a warehouse, and an elevated conveyor belt for dropping wood chips into open railroad cars. You had to stop at the gate to tell the guard what your business was.

The guard was Prescott Seeley, a hefty-bellied joker from my senior class at Barclay High. In intramural scrimmages

twenty years ago he had lined up against me in the defensive-end position, from which, with Good Old Boy affability, he would taunt me about my lack of success in getting around him for a pass. A couple of weeks into the regular season, as he was sashaying back to the bench after coating my nose with quicklime for the third time in as many plays, I bounced my helmet off his noggin and got suspended from the team. This morning, though, my shades, beard, and motoring cap concealed my identity from old Prescott — right up to the moment I opened my mouth and told him I had to talk to Paul.

"Paul don't want to see you, Jimmy. Ain't you got some other reason I should let you through?"

"I'm his daddy. That's good enough."

Squinting skeptically, Prescott told me where to find Paul — he was moving wood chips from an asphalt lot into one of the warehouse bays — and passed me inside.

I parked in front of the corrugated office building, then walked between it and the conveyor-belt tower to the chip lot. Engine noise led me right to Paul. Periodically wiping his forehead with his sleeve, he was driving a dirty yellow tractor with a dented lift-scoop. His hair was cut so short his blond temples looked naked. Eighteen years old? Hell, an elongated ten or twelve was more like it. It was odd watching him do man's work.

"Paul!" I shouted, waving my cap.

He saw me, and his face changed. An expression of concentration gave way to one of mad-dog meanness. He wheeled his tractor around and drove it grumbling and popping straight at Dear Old Dad.

I retreated through a narrow corridor between the fence and the warehouse. Paulie kept coming. When he was as close as I was going to let him get, he dumped a scoop of wood chips at my feet, spilling them out toward me like the sawdust guts of a disemboweled Trojan Horse.

You can't sneak past my defenses with a wave and a shout, he was telling me. Eight years ago I had deserted his mama and him, and the times I had come back with money and toys

didn't square our accounts, not by any reckoning he was willing to consider. Well, I had known that, but I hadn't expected him to try to bury me under a pile of miniature pine shakes.

Paul backed his machine away and contemptuously returned to work. I followed him around the lot trying to make myself heard over the noise, but he ignored me so expertly I began to feel like an invisible, and inaudible, man. I was less than a ghost to this boy. His hatred wiped me out of existence.

At which point it occurred to me that Sheila's reading of Samuel Halterman's role in our son's life was all wrong. He wasn't a pederast or a leech, this dude from Up East. Hell, no. He was an immensely attractive substitute for Jimmy Bevilacqua. Yeah. He was a Father Figure.

As soon as that thought hit me, I stopped trying to make Paul acknowledge my presence and hightailed it out of the oily prison yard of the Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company. As I drove through the gate on my way to the River View Trailer Court, Prescott Seeley touched the brim of his hat.

"That's bull, Jimmy. Halterman ain't no father figure to Paul. You been reading too many *Psychology Today* articles."

"Just why is it bull, La, tell me that."

"Because Paul's already *got* a father. You don't need a father figure if you've already got a father."

"Do you mean me?"

"Like hell."

"Who, then? Jack?"

"Of course I mean Jack. Paul loves that man. They used to hunt, fish, do everything together. Why do you suppose he took me messin' around with Gene Darby so hard?"

"But Jack's not always around." No truer words. Jack Whitman worked oil rigs off the Louisiana coast, and his duty tours sometimes kept him on a platform for as many as ninety days on end. These protracted absences had led La into

temptation, just about the only place a man could ever hope to point her with her full compliance. "That's why you had to telephone Hubby Numero Uno, remember?"

"You're trying to weasel out of this and go back to Atlanta."

"Sure I am. It looks pretty innocent to me."

"Nothing looks innocent to you."

"Sheila-love, what the hell do you *want?*"

"Talk to this Halterman fella. I'm afraid to. Talk to him, look at him hard, see if you can find out what's happening to Paulie."

It was a real mercy to get out of Sheila's trailer, which reeked of dirty diapers and day-old bacon grease. I headed through town to the resort where Halterman spent alternate afternoons working as a starter on the golf links. Orange spider lilies and smoky-blue hydrangeas lined the marshy ground behind the first tee. Coming down the path from the clubhouse, I quickly caught sight of my prey.

Halterman was chatting with one of the men in a mixed foursome. He was wearing gray plaid trousers with a yellow stripe, perforated loafers with tassels, and a short-sleeved yellow jersey with gray piping. His face was long and deeply creased, his hair silver and plentiful. He looked like a wartless Honest Abe, if Abe had somehow managed to jog past his assassination and into the fullness of his senior years. I liked his features, but not the way he was slapping scapula, tilting back his head, and cracking jokes through the brilliant off-white baleen of his dentures.

Dapperness, I decided, but no dignity.

Two groups went off before I could get up the grit to approach him, and even then I didn't know exactly how I was going to play my hand. I didn't want to waste time on ploys he'd see through P.D.Q., but neither was I sold on simply introducing myself as Paul's daddy and taking it from there. My son, no doubt, had already set out rat poison around my reputation. So I flashed a phony identification under

Halterman's nose and told him I was a Georgia Bureau of Investigation agent looking into various illicit drug connections in predominantly rural counties.

"I was told in town, Mr. Halterman, that you know a little something about the young people hereabouts."

"Oh, really. Who told you that?"

"I can't divulge my sources. Is it true?"

"No, I'm afraid it isn't."

"You know Paul Whitman, don't you?" I had almost said Bevilacqua for Whitman. Three years ago Jack Whitman had legally adopted Paul, and my son had forfeited a beautiful Italian monicker for an Anglo-Saxon whicker-and-gulp.

"He's one of my closest friends in Barclay." The way Halterman said this put me off. "Paul's not under suspicion for something, is he?"

"Should he be?"

"Of course not. Considering his background, he's about as up-and-up a soul as you're going to find in his generation. What we used to call a straight arrow. Doesn't smoke or drink. Wears his hair just the way Dwight D. Eisenhower would've liked it."

"I'm told you spend a lot of time together."

"By whom?"

"Why did you deny knowing something about the kids in this community?"

"I didn't deny knowing Paul. I just don't lump him with your faceless herd of 'kids in this community,' that's all."

"Why not?" My anger was getting up like a midnight wind, and I was pressing too hard. Another foursome had come down from the clubhouse, and they were taking in our talk from the edge of the waterlogged putting green.

Suddenly Halterman's eyebrows went up. When they came down again, he was chuckling like a munitions manufacturer after a declaration of war. "Oh, my goodness," he said. "If you look hard enough, there's a real family resemblance. It's the mouth, I think."

I looked at the people waiting on the putting green. No help from that quarter. No help from anywhere.

"You've got no legitimate business with me, and I don't think Paul would want me talking to you without his consent."

"I'm looking out for Paul's best interests."

"Better late than never."

"You're a grown man. Why do you need a boy's consent to talk to me?"

Halterman said, "You'd better go before I call the clubhouse manager down here." He made this sound like a suggestion rather than a threat. "Goodbye, Mr. Bevilacqua. I've got another group to start."

Brassiness opens doors that timidity stubs its toes against. In the clubhouse I wangled Halterman's address from the burly manager he had just threatened to have bounce me off the links. I told this gorilla I was the son of one of Halterman's old cronies in the architectural business. Said I wanted to surprise him when he got home that evening. Said I had a case of his favorite wine in the trunk of my car and an orchid corsage for his wife. It was dot-to-dot easy, this impromptu scam.

Two minutes later I was cruising out the Alabama Road to the Greenbriar Vacation Chalets, a pseudo-Swiss village in a thirty-acre glade of loblollies. Getting out of my car, I felt I should be wearing Tyrolean shorts, brocaded suspenders, and a pointed cap with a feather in its band. The chalets were A-frames with lots of curlicue cutouts in the gingerbread trim, and they all had dappled sundecks overlooking a weedy black tarn that didn't much resemble Lake Geneva.

I climbed to the boxy front porch of Chalet No. 73 and introduced myself to Mrs. Halterman's daytime nurse as an insurance investigator checking out the credentials of a policy applicant by the name of Paul Whitman. The nurse, a middle-aged black woman in rubber-soled shoes, led me through the house to the sundeck, where Neva Halterman was

sitting in a wheelchair knitting or crocheting or whatever elderly crippled ladies do with brightly colored balls of yarn on afternoons that stretch out before them like the arid wastes of the Mojave.

"Sammy could tell you more about Paul than I can, Mr. — "

"Waters. Well, I came straight out from town. Didn't realize your husband wouldn't be home. Maybe you could answer a couple of questions just to keep me from wasting the trip."

Through this opening Mrs. Halterman juked like a tailback cutting for daylight. She said Sammy — Mr. Halterman, she meant — had met Paul at the Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company when her husband had driven a neighbor's pickup truck out there to fetch home a load of chips as mulch for her flower beds. Then, it having been quite near quitting time, Paul had ridden back with Sammy to help him shovel out the load — an offer the boy had made unbidden, apparently because he doubted Sammy's ability to accomplish this task alone. As a paltry sort of reward for the young man's help, Mrs. Halterman had slipped another frozen dinner into the oven, and over this meal the three of them had discussed history, politics, architecture, literature, music, and religion.

"Heavy," I said. "Did the kid bring along his notecards?"

"He's a very bright young man, but we talked about practical matters, too, Mr. Waters. He told us about his job at the pulpwood company and the difficult circumstances under which he grew up. He has a great deal of residual hostility toward his parents, I'm afraid, but as he matures, he'll probably come to terms with it. 'A good man,' said John Dewey, 'is someone trying to be better.' That's what impressed Sammy and me about Paul, even more than his courtesy or his intellect — this quiet struggle to release the butterfly in the chrysalis of his youth."

Mrs. Halterman stared off over Little Lake Geneva, almost mistily, and I thought about Paulie trying to plant me up to my neck in pine chips. Some butterfly. Some chrysalis.

"So you and Mr. Halterman have become stand-in parents? Substitutes for the ones he doesn't get along with?"

"Oh, no. He's too independent for that. We treat him as an equal. In fact we finally told him to stop calling us Mr. and Mrs. Halterman and use our first names."

"He must spend a lot of time out here."

"Well, no, he really doesn't. He's probably been out here only four or five times. Sammy sees a great deal of him downtown, but I go to bed early and they're able to talk more comfortably at the place Paul's renting in Barclay. Paul's been very good for Sammy."

"Good for him?"

Neva Halterman fixed me with a frank and trusting stare. "I was paralyzed in an accident two years ago, Mr. Waters. I fell from a small bluff on a backpacking expedition through the North Georgia mountains. Sammy had to abandon me for three hours to summon help. I survived, as you see, but for several months my husband was a changed man, listless and very negative in his feelings about himself. He became a kind of zombie, a completely different person."

"He's all right now?"

"Oh, yes. Paul revitalized him. It was all I could do to get Sammy to drive out to the pulpwood company for those wood chips, but that little trip turned his life around again. Soon after meeting Paul he took his job as a starter at the golf course. It was a miracle, really. I'm extremely grateful to Paul for performing it."

I asked some more questions. In responding to one of these Mrs. Halterman said that after learning that Sammy had grown up in The Bronx and served in World War II, Paul had researched the histories of all the New York boroughs and both of the military units to which her husband had belonged. He had also done some genealogical work on her and Sammy's family names. In her opinion, Paul had undertaken these researches in order to supply himself a fund of "artificial memories" to coincide with the Haltermans' real ones.

"What was the point?" I asked.

Mrs. Halterman put a dunce cap on me with her eyes. "Why, to get closer to us. To earn — in his *own* mind, that is — the status of equal we'd bestowed upon him by insisting he call us Neva and Sam. An elderly person can seldom be a really good friend with a younger person — a postadolescent, I mean — because of the overwhelming disparity in their funds of experience. The amazing thing about Paul is that he worked to close this gap."

It was getting late. All I needed was for "Sammy" to come home while my buttocks were dimpling the canvas of one of his recherché deck chairs. When he did come home, his wife would tell him about her visitor, and he would quickly deduce my identity — but by that time I hoped to be staking out Paulie's house in a last-ditch effort to figure out Halterman's disturbing interest in him. His wife being a cripple — a point Sheila hadn't mentioned — had begun to worry me. And I was tired of listening to Neva Halterman's patter.

I stood up. "So you think the kid's a good insurance risk?"

"I know absolutely nothing about his driving record, but he's not your stereotypical teenager. — Don't you want to wait for Sammy? He should be home in fifteen or twenty minutes."

"No, no, you've been very helpful, Mrs. Halterman."

She propelled her chair toward the patio doors, which were surmounted by a scalloped stained-glass window that glowed indigo, amber, and lemon in the afternoon sunlight. Coming into the house, I had given all my attention to the woman on the sundeck so that this was my first good look at the window. Now I was gaping at it raptly, like a kid watching a Roadrunner cartoon.

"Paul made that," Mrs. Halterman said. "He's exhibited and sold some of his work at craft fairs. Within a year or two he hopes to quit his job at the pulpwood company and do stained-glass full time. He's remarkably talented, don't you think?"

"Very classy." I liked it — but it made me shiver.

"He's teaching Sammy how to do it, too."

She crossed the threshold into the chalet without my assistance or the nurse's, then wheeled about in front of a cabinet lined with stand-up photos of Halterman children and grandchildren. In a couple of them her husband was wearing a soldier suit and balancing curly-haired tykes on both knees. Thirty years ago, the photographs told me, Neva Halterman had been a looker. Even in her wheelchair, she was still a handsome woman.

"Must be hard for you," I said, "not being able to be a proper wife."

Her eyes caught fire. "Sammy was never one to want a *proper* wife, Mr. Waters."

I stood there trying to get a handle on this remark. It kept sliding in and out of my understanding.

"Sophistication can be a bigger trap than innocence, Mr. Waters. Worldly people outsmart themselves with cynicism almost as often as bumpkins do themselves with ignorance."

"Thanks for your help, Mrs. Halterman." I got out of the Greenbriar Vacation Chalets pronto. On the drive back into town I passed Halterman's red Datsun going the other way.

Because I didn't know what to tell her, I didn't report back to La. Her suspicions about Paulie spiraling down into some sort of weird dependency on Halterman had really begun to nibble at me. Neva Halterman had described Paul as a self-sufficient, supermature eighteen-year-old, but as far as I was concerned her testimony on this point was worthless. She had talked with him only four or five times, and she hadn't seen him in action that morning at the Ocmulgee Pulpwood Company. Most of what she knew about him she got from her husband.

I got to thinking about the stained glass over the sliding doors to the Haltermans' sundeck. The irony of the whole screwed-up situation, I began to realize, was that Neva Halterman probably had just as much cause to be suspicious of

Paul as Sheila had to be suspicious of the architect. Our kid might be playing the affection-starved old man along for a nest egg to finance his handicraft ambitions, while Halterman might well be making his payments contingent upon Paul's coming across physically. Being country-shrewd and churchmouse poor, Paul would probably tiptoe out of this imbroglio unscathed, but Halterman had placed himself in a hair-trigger blackmail trap. Whoever jostled the spring, or threatened to, would be in a position to bleed him dry.

This last thought was worth a private smile. I kept it between the rearview mirror and myself.

After two pork sandwiches, a side order of Brunswick stew, and a cup of gritty black coffee at Foster's Barbecue Hut, I asked for a cup of coffee to go and went out on my stakeout. Paul lived alone in a one-story frame house on a narrow street angling off the Atlanta highway. I took up position in the rear lot of Cooksie's Texaco station, which overlooked an unmowed meadow comprising Paul's corner of the neighborhood.

The shell of an ancient school bus and a mound of discarded tires pretty well concealed my Trans Am from the house. Although I made my coffee last until sunset, the last few drops went down like chilled linseed oil.

Forty minutes later Halterman drove up and parked parallel to the house under the cork elms drooping over the front porch. The porch light was on, and he paused before knocking to peer up and down the street. He looked directly up at Cooksie's for a second, but his gaze didn't tarry and I let my breath out in a nervous burst. Neither Paul nor the old man knew what kind of car I was driving (unless Prescott Seeley or Mrs. Halterman's nurse had passed the information on), but it was pretty clear that Halterman had been looking for someone. Namely, Jimmy Bevilacqua.

Semis and pickups rumbled by on the highway, and a gaggle of pubescent black kids made their way up Paulie's

street from the shantytown everyone called Pearl Harbor to the convenience store across from Cooksie's. Otherwise it was quiet.

I got out of my car and scampered down the incline behind the service station into the meadow beside the house. I had a small recording unit on my hip and a camera that would operate in the dark without a flash. After creeping around to the back, I climbed to a rickety screened porch, eased my way through the unlatched door, and stepped up onto an old railway bench to see what I could through the squares of the casement window. Pink Floyd's album *The Wall* was vibrating the floorboards, muffling the telltale bumps and creakings of my maneuvering on the bench.

Inside, Paul and Halterman were bent over a worktable on which glazing tools, lead cames, and pieces of carefully cut stained glass were laid out atop a complicated paper pattern. The pattern seemed to be for a gothic window big enough to turn a K-Mart's into a cathedral.

My timing was bad, it looked like. Paul had his shirt off, but his eyes were all business. He was pointing at various parts of the design, explaining what had to be done yet. Halterman was really into this instruction. He put his hand on Paul's shoulder and laughed about the shape of a piece of glass that hadn't come out right. They were very cozy, studying the layout.

Because of the music, my recording unit was useless. I took a couple of photographs and stepped down from the bench. And just as Pink Floyd was making a between-cuts breather, a slat fell out of the back of the bench and clattered into an empty metal basin underneath it.

I hopped through the door and down the dilapidated rear steps. The moon rolled out from behind a cloud to spotlight my getaway, and to avoid revealing the location of my car I had to head for a drainage ditch instead of Cooksie's. Crouched low in the grass, I saw Paul and Halterman come out onto the porch, down the exterior steps, and into the dewy September meadow.

"Leave us alone!" Paul shouted. "Leave us *alone!*"

Halterman touched Paul's elbow, talked to him softly, and inveigled him back to the porch. I stayed where I was for a long time. Eventually the old man's Datsun pulled away from the house and accelerated through Barclay toward the turn-off to the retirement village. My watch put the time at 11:42. I had probably sent him packing early.

A couple of lights in Paulie's house went off; tomorrow was a work day.

Relieved, I crept out of the drainage ditch and made a wide circuit through the meadow to Cooksie's. Then I climbed into my car, leaned my head back, and promptly fell asleep.

A crash awakened me. There in my windshield, fissures in an expanding network. My car began going up and down, and through the cracks I saw Paulie, dressed for work, looming up into the dawn like a gigantic hood ornament. He had just bounced a small cinder block off the windshield and now he was throwing his weight from side to side to set up a rocking motion in the body of my Trans Am. I kicked the door open and jumped outside, right into a hill of threadbare tires. Somehow I managed to get my balance.

"I'll whip your butt, boy!"

He stared down at me out of a face as bright and hard as a hubcap. "God, I hate you."

"Any idea why?"

The question made him blink. "Because you're the only living soul I know who can make me carry on like this."

"I'm your friend, Paulie. I'm trying to look out for you."

"So you told Sam. But you lied through your teeth to Neva. You've got no business putting her through that kind of Mickey Mouse."

"She's got a stake in this, too."

"In *what,* Daddy? In what?"

First time he'd called me Daddy in eight years. A slip-up or deliberate mockery? "In this fishy do-si-do between Halterman and you," I said.

Paulie just stared.

"I'm here to get to the bottom of it."

"You're at the bottom. You're always at the bottom. Stop worrying your evil mind and you might be able to figure everything out."

"I already have."

"I'll bet you have," Paul said. "I'll just bet you have." He jumped down from the hood and paced along the slope dropping away behind the filling station.

"What about my windshield?"

"It's cracked, Daddy, just like your opinion of my life." Paul trotted down the slope, then sauntered off through the bejeweled morning meadow toward his own automobile, a beat-up VW bug with oversized tires and a custom-made grill.

"I'm going to have your wages garnished!" I called after him.

He whirled about and pointed a finger at me. "Stay away from my friends and stay away from the pulpwood company! You're in real danger if you keep this up — I swear to God, Daddy, you're in real danger!"

"His life's ruined."

"That's the smalltown view, La. How many kids Paulie's age've got a steady job, their own car, and a house to rent?" We were in Sheila's bedroom, but making love in a mobile home is like playing soccer in a packing crate: all your kicks come back on you.

"Halterman's ruined him."

"Circumstantial stuff, Sheila-love. Nothing hard. Besides, there are thousands of well adjusted people in Atlanta like Paul."

"Barclay ain't Atlanta, and those other people ain't Paulie."

"What do you want me to do? I've got about as much influence with the kid as the Man in the Moon."

"Stop Halterman, Jimmy. Get him out of Paul's life."

"You putting out a contract, La?"

"I don't mean knock him off. I just mean scare him off. You can do that."

"But why the hell *should* I?"

"Mama!" a child's voice cried. *"Mama!"*

That was Kimberly, Sheila's two-year-old daughter. Right at the beginning of *Captain Kangaroo* Sheila put her in a high chair in the living room with a couple of squeeze toys and a big box of Honey Bran cereal.

"I mean, I'm not making any money here. Nothing I do is really going to change anything."

"Paul's your son, Jimmy, and I'm his mother, and you owe us."

"It won't make any difference, though."

"It will to me. It's the least you can do."

"Mama!"

"Coming, darlin'!"

An hour later I stumbled out of Sheila's trailer into the sunlight and found myself smack up against the flank of a red Datsun. The passenger door swung open, and the driver asked me to get in.

"What're you doing here?"

"I've decided to talk to you, Mr. Bevilacqua. Yesterday you *wanted* me to talk to you."

Wearily, I climbed inside. The automobile accelerated, nearly struck a stand of mailboxes at the end of the trailer court, and careered off down Fryes' Mill Road at a furious clip. Halterman, as if I were an outerspace creature doing a shabby impersonation of a human being, kept glancing at me sidelong. I returned the favor, staring hard, and he started paying more attention to the shanty-lined road.

"Paul telephoned me from work this morning. He told me what he'd done to your car."

"That's all right. I intend to make him pay for it."

Halterman turned on an access road leading up into the state park, tourist territory. Autumn haze threaded the meadows and pine copses like cannon smoke, the aftermath of a ghostly Civil War engagement. I liked this country much better

than I liked Atlanta, but unless you were a mill hand, a farmer, a pulpwooder, or a mewling merchant, you couldn't make a living here. Only chumps and retirees really enjoyed the place.

"Listen, Mr. Bevilacqua, I'm an architect. I know a little something about building complicated structures from the ground up. If you lay your foundation on quicksand, you can't even begin to build. Do you have any idea what I'm trying to tell you?"

"I learned about metaphors in high school. Catching onto when folks were talking down to me I picked up a lot earlier."

"Touché." With rigid hands and a cowcatcher chin Halterman negotiated the curvy, steepening road. "What I'm trying to say is that you've misjudged the relationship between your son and me."

"Is that right?"

"Paul and I are friends. Very good friends. That's the extent of it, the whole truth and nothing but."

"Seventy-year-old men and eighteen-year-old boys aren't 'friends,' Mr. Halterman. The world doesn't work that way."

"The world doesn't, but people sometimes do." He yanked the Datsun into a semicircle of gravel overlooking the matchbox landscape of pastures and churches in the valley and got out of the automobile, leaving the door open, and walked to the edge of the overlook with his hands in his pockets. A minute or two later I followed him, watching the smoke from my cigarette evaporate in the lazy September air.

"Mr. Bevilacqua, I want you to get out of Barclay and stay out. There's absolutely nothing to keep you here."

"I was raised here."

The architect approached me as if he was going to grab my lapels and try to fling me over the guard rail into the valley. Instead he took a check from his shirt pocket, and thrust it under my nose. By tilting my head I could see he had made it out to me for seven hundred and fifty dollars. "My, my, what could this be for?"

"Don't assume it's hush money. Part of it's to repair your broken windshield. The remainder's an inducement for you to save at least two lives, possibly more, by returning to Atlanta."

He pushed the check against my belt, but I refused to touch it.

"The lives are yours and Paul's," he went on. "I'm afraid of what he'll do if you stay around very much longer. So is he. He'll make a fine man — a man of talent and accomplishment — if he can outlast this urge to prove himself by doing you some terrible bodily harm."

"I came down here to help him."

"You can do that — and you can help yourself, too — by accepting this check and going on back to Atlanta."

I told Halterman that his motives were transparent. He feared the impact of exposure on his frail and trusting wife. Besides, three quarters of a grand was a mere drop of chlorophyll in the immense evergreen forest of his bank account.

Whereupon he got angry, heart-attack angry, and threatened to report me to the GBI for impersonating first one of its own agents and then an insurance-company detective. For an old guy he put on a rousingly convincing show, pacing the edge of the overlook in exactly the way Paulie had paced the slope behind Cooksie's after fracturing my windshield. Finally, though, he remembered his Up East manners and simmered down enough to paint me a picture of the consequences of "provoking Paul any further." An appeal to my better nature and an empty threat, nice and fatherly.

"Come on, Jimmy. Take the check."

Not a bad two days' work for a budget detective on a pleasure jaunt into the sticks. After all, how often does a man get paid for preventing his own murder?

I watched the faceted countryside give way to shards of skyscraper and splinters of concrete overpass. It was good to be shut of Sheila and the shackles of small-town domesticity.

A man's "friends," I decided, are nobody's business but his own.

WISHED-FOR BELONGINGS

My mother did not want me. Like a Victorian foundling, I was abandoned to the doubtful charity of the world. Indeed, I first presented myself to the world beyond my mother's brief embrace in a picnic hamper haphazardly lined with handfuls of facsimile excelsior made from the sports section of the Atlanta *Constitution*. It was February and very cold when, as if by hobgoblin messenger service, this hamper materialized on the back seat of a black Ford parked beside a farmhouse in Meriwether County. The owner of both the automobile and the farmhouse rescued me from the Ford, carried me inside, and, despite the perfunctory pleas of his wife to keep me, promptly telephoned the authorities in Greenville.

I became a ward of the state. Over the next seventeen years I must have lived in a dozen different foster homes, usually in the care of kind-hearted but penurious people whose affection for me depended in part on the stipend they received for caring for me. Some families gave me up because the primary breadwinner had lost his or her job, some because I could not achieve viable truces with my accidental siblings, some because they found the fosterage of other folks' children less profitable, emotionally and financially, than they had expected. The result was that I soon became a reluctant expert on lower-middle-class housing in western Georgia, from tin-roofed shotgun bungalows to double-wide mobile homes to high-ceilinged drafty boxes with screened-in sleeping porches. My opinion of and trust in people suffered in

direct proportion to the involuntary enlargement of my architectural savvy — but I did not give up on either myself or others.

Instead I became a reader, thinker, and spectator, always with an eye on joining the crowd the moment an opening presented itself. Passed over in grade school for such prestigious semihonorary positions as Fire Marshal, Hall Monitor, and Lunchroom Attendant (I actually *heard* the capitals fronting these wonderful words), I got into the Library Club because all you had to do was express an interest, sign up, and report on a book every other week or so. I read Walter Farley and Vance Packard, A.A. Milne and Edward Gibbon. I ran for office every nine-week period for nearly two years (the longest I ever stayed in any of my foster homes), but could not win a single election. Finally our advisor appointed me club historian. I learned a great deal and worked assiduously at being liked.

To some extent, I *was* liked. My accomplishments were nonthreatening. When my classmates vied among themselves for recognition, I faded obligingly into the background — even as an ostensible competitor. And, come the sure unraveling of my latest foster relationship, I faded away altogether, exiled by circumstance to another set of parental stand-ins and to another school where the glacial cast in my eye and the lovelorn way I hunched over my desk told everyone already there that I was a professional transient. It was okay to like me because I wasn't going to be around long anyway.

Through high school I maintained above-average grades. After failing an air force physical, I bummed around the Gulf Coast for a year, doing odd jobs for cash and haunting the history sections of all the local public libraries. Back in Georgia again, I wound up at the state university in Athens. Because the scholarships I applied for went to other young men and women, I paid for most of my expenses — tuition, board, books — by working as a counterman at a fast-food establishment not far from campus.

This eatery was well known for its greasy chili dogs and its equally oleaginous teenaged employees. Some of these white-capped coolies were decent if embarrassingly inarticulate kids. I remember one who could say nothing but "Walk her through the garden!" — a cry signifying that I was to confetti with cole slaw the next hot dog on our frantic assembly line, but an expression he also habitually used as a retort to suggestions that he speed up the processing of orders. None of my fellow countermen was as old as I, and during our infrequent breaks and slow periods I found myself matter-of-factly excluded from every impromptu practical joke or mind-fogging two-minute bull session. I knew nothing about Otis Redding, Camaros, or the fabled goings-on at Effie's place, and my acne-scarred colleagues did not give a damn about the Sepoy Mutiny in India or the British colonization of East Africa. Why should they? They were high school boys with more immediate ambitions.

By this time I was fully aware of the insidious pattern unifying my life, and I knew better than to register for fraternity rush. I thereby escaped blackballing at the hands of a pack of blazer-clad SAEs or Sigma Chis. I had no family, no connections, and no money, and not a fraternity on campus would have popped a single pop-top can of Pabst to sign me. To give the Greeks their due (though I never put them, or they me, to the ultimate test), I was not especially strong on personality, either.

But consider my background.

In graduate school, which I reached by dint of hard work and grudging recommendations from the necessary senior faculty members, I fell in love with a young woman named Melissa Ahmadjian. I loved her exotic name, her short fair hair, her strapping golden body, and her capriciously lively mind. Melissa reciprocated my interest if not my love. She drove a yellow Mustang (another product of the Ford Motor Company with a crucial role in my personal history), and on its cramped back seat, not far from a secluded undergraduate trysting place

called Slippery Shoals, she indoctrinated me into the fibrillating rituals of sex.

By this time I had ceased walking hot dogs through the garden for my paychecks and made a respectable salary as a research assistant in the history department. The world looked bright. In spring quarter of that year, potentially solvent for the near-term future, I asked Melissa Ahmadjian to marry me. She did not say no.

She said, "I'll think about it, Jonathan."

Over the summer she meant.

Just to keep Melissa stage-center a little longer, I could protract this part of my tale, but you have probably already concluded that she came back in the fall to decline my offer. However, you may not have anticipated her returning with another fiancé behind the wheel of her Mustang, yet that is exactly what she did. The interloper hailed from Melissa's hometown in Tennessee, and they were resuming a romance that by mutual consent they had broken off shortly after Melissa's senior year.

My rival was five inches taller than I and a hundred pounds heavier. Moreover, he owned stock in an aggressive New England company that did certain mysteriously merchandisable things with tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen. He knew that I had proposed to Melissa, and he did not like me. Worse, he stayed in town living off his tritium dividends and comporting himself like a middle linebacker suckered into essaying the title role in a community-theater production of *Hamlet*. I had no chance against him.

A year and a half after Melissa married this boorish hulk, I found myself approaching the happy couple on the main interior concourse of the Georgia Coliseum during the basketball game against LSU. Melissa's husband spotted me, and the irresistible counterstreamings of the halftime crowd gave me no room to retreat or turn aside. "Open your coat," the lummox stage-whispered to my lost love. To her credit

Melissa did not obey this gloating imperative. Besides, she did not have to part the wings of her navy blue London Fog for me to see that, as round and firm and fully packed as a Lucky Strike, she was radiantly pregnant.

Buckling down, I took two advanced degrees in history. But I began to job-hunt when college-level teaching positions in the humanities were as rare as snow leopards. How could you bag a beast that was nearly extinct? I am not the one to answer this question. I interviewed for positions in four different states, and no one hired me.

At last, completely demoralized, I gave up the search, betook myself to the small West Georgia city of Tocqueville, and went to work for Piedmont United Mills as an apprentice loom operator on the night shift. I was lucky to get this job, but it was not what I wanted to do, and sometimes I could swear that my machine was spitefully chanting, *"Walk-her-through-the-garden, walk-her-through-the-garden...."* I had no friends at the mill, and I spent my afternoons, when I should have been sleeping, drifting through the corridors of the admin building of Tocqueville Junior College carrying the Xeroxed transcripts of my grades from Athens.

I worked at Piedmont United Mills three and a half years before someone in the history department at the junior college had the ill luck and consummate kindness to die. (This was a young person who made the mistake of bicycling to class after an especially severe winter storm. The ice-weighted upper branches of a pecan tree cracked and plummeted at the exact moment of her passage, burying her and her ten-speed Gitane beneath a glittering demistructure rather like a fallen chandelier. Every year on the anniversary of her death I place a rose on her modest marker in the Tocqueville cemetery.) I was hired on a contingency basis. If I did not work out, a hotshot Harvard grad would swoop down from Massachusetts to send me packing.

This threatened event did not occur, and I began to feel gingerly at ease in both the department and the classroom.

True, the papers I wrote did not find their way into any of the requisite journals, and my many awkward approaches to undergraduate women whose eyes, during my lectures, seemed to be engaging mine in colloquies of ill-disguised desire finally led me to conclude that I was an eye-language illiterate. These women were not flirting; they were striving to appear intelligent and attentive. Maybe they *were* those things. When I invited them to films or pizza parlors, they invariably lifted their bright, bewitching eyes to confess that they already had boyfriends. That didn't stop Melissa Ahmadjian, I wanted to say — at least not at first. But this unspoken rejoinder only served to underscore the dismaying possibility that my Melissa had never had very good taste in men.

One goal kept me going, both as a professor and a would-be campus swain. Tenure would be mine if I stayed on the faculty for five consecutive years and won departmental approval. With tenure in my grasp I would surely begin to exude the ravishing pheromones of Eligible Bachelorhood.

However, my failure to publish a single definitive article on any historical topic arose to haunt me. To exorcise this specter, in the five months preceding the formal review of my credentials I cranked out a total of eight different papers on distinctive crucial episodes of imperial British history. My papers took turns limping home with form rejection slips until I at last placed a psychohistorical profile of the flamboyant explorer Richard Burton with *The East Alabama Review of Nineteenth-Century Approaches to Cartography*. (This was a little magazine in the most outrageously exacting sense. Each issue contained one medium-length article, a fold-out reproduction of a nineteenth-century map, and a page of subscription coupons.) Unfortunately, my piece was not scheduled to appear until the quarterly's fall issue, months after my tenure hearing, and I was going to have to hope that word of this pending publication, along with my far from negligible skills as a lecturer, would carry the day.

It did not. Just like a carny who has goaded some backwoods Nolan Ryan into hurling a softball at the metal bull's-eye triggering his (the carny's) plunge into a tub of icy water, I was dropped from my precarious perch. Denial of tenure meant dismissal.

The many unequivocal lessons of my past notwithstanding, the shock of my dismissal overwhelmed and invaded me. Drowning, I did not go sweetly to my doom. I thrashed, I sputtered, I screamed for mercy. But censorious cold water closed over my head — the frigid amniotic fluids of failure — and I was flushed out of Tocqueville Junior College like a fetus so far along that its accusatory resemblance to a human being made even its executioners weep.

They did not spare me, though, and I spent three days naked and unshaven in my apartment staring at a jade plant whose small cushiony leaves — they reminded me of emeralds with pleurisy — took turns falling to the floor with sorrowful clicks. Perhaps out of a Freudian desire to compensate for others' niggardliness toward me, I compulsively overwatered my house plants. Now we had both drowned, my jade plant and I.

"Poor baby," I murmured as I sat there. "Poor baby."

Then I remembered that I had nearly seven grand in the Tocqueville Farmers, Merchants & Mill Workers Bank, and this recollection vanquished my doldrums. I would withdraw the money, pull up stakes, and light out for Alaska. Losers, loners, bankrupts, outcasts, drug addicts, and drunks made one glorious Walt Whitmanish fraternity there (according to a recent segment on a television news magazine), and I would join it by landing in Juneau and buying a round for the house in the city's most visibly companionable bar. Yes, sir. That was the ticket. I must emigrate to the land of the timber wolf, the lucky strike, the pipeline, and the effervescent tritium-glow of the aurora borealis.

Completely ensorceled by the siren song of the Klondike (an inaudible, spirit-stirring call of the wild), I shaved, dressed, ate, and drove into town to get my money.

• • •

I walked straight into a bank robbery. Three determined persons in ski masks, parkas, baggy pants, and jogging shoes were pointing stubby weapons — apparently illegal submachine guns assembled from mail-order parts — at people lined up two and three deep at the tellers' windows. (Most of these people were almost certainly farmers, merchants, mill workers, or their spouses.) Grabbed by the elbow, I was spun into the line nearest the door and told in disconcertingly dulcet tones to behave myself.

As two of the holdup artists fanned out across the lobby, the one who had just spoken to me pulled a set of unpleated gray draperies across the bank's interior plate-glass entrance. A fluorescent twilight enveloped the actors in our surreal little drama.

The robbers were women. Two of them began working the customer lines, collecting wallets, coin purses, jewelry. The eyelike bore of the machine gun trained on my midsection by the third woman held me immobile. Soon her cohorts were moving back and forth in the teller cages and passing zippered money pouches from hand to hand. No one spoke, time passed, and at last the wailing of police sirens sounded in the background like the cries of peacocks on a muggy summer's night. The robbers, conferring now in heated vernacularisms, decided they needed a hostage but wasted a good deal of precious time puzzling the matter out among themselves.

"Me!" I roared, surprising even myself. "I'd make a great hostage!"

They took me. Out of all the people fixed in the quivering aspic of apprehension in the hijacked lobby of that bank, they selected me, Jonathan Smith, to see them to safety.

Finally resolute, the leader poked me with the barrel of her weapon, and the four of us essayed a mincing retreat to the miniature rotunda housing the bank's drive-in window. Here, while the leader held the customers and bank officials at bay,

the other two young women shed their outer garments, revealing rumpled Sears Catalog floral-print dresses and the frowzy, flattened mops of their hair. With loot-packed purses they burst through the rotunda's outer door, all the while crying, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" — a pair of terrified hostages who had just escaped their captors. I, the real hostage, looked on in wonder and admiration.

The remaining young woman and I got out about five minutes later. Lady Pat — for so I call the wily maiden who masterminded both the holdup and the getaway — put her head and shoulders up under the cape of my windbreaker and the barrel of her submachine gun right into the hollow at the base of my skull. In the parking lot outside the bank we undoubtedly bore an alarming resemblance to a pair of vaudeville performers in the ill-fitting halves of a horse costume. The police barricading the lot, brandishing their shotguns and bullhorns, froze and fell silent. They were effectively stymied by my many loud proclamations that the holdup man was a Vietnam veteran in dire need of psychiatric help, a spiel I rattled off at Lady Pat's whispered promptings. When her two accomplices came squealing up in a commandeered police car to take us aboard and spirit us away, right under the noses of the beleaguered deputies and patrolmen, the rescue operation — our Great Escape, if you will — was a breathtaking *fait accompli.*

"Why aren't they following us?" I marveled as we shot through alleyways, down side-streets, over bumpy tractor trails, and eventually along a stretch of county-maintained asphalt west of Tocqueville.

"Dee Dee and I took the keys out of their ignitions," said Dee Dee's sister, Mary Faye, and everybody laughed.

Ten or twelve miles farther on, in a stand of loblolly pines, we transferred to a civilian vehicle put there for just that purpose — a cute little Escort, another product of the Ford Motor Company — and headed into a heartstopping Alabama sunset. Three poor-white former bank tellers with a grudge

against the system, and their prematurely graying, far-from-reluctant hostage. Oh, what a sunset!

I have stayed with Lady Pat and the girls. They all took a shine to me. Such is their trust, I have helped them pull off a half-dozen subsequent heists.

Between times we hole up in Lady Pat's deceased parents' lakeside cottage in rural Alabama, a place you'll never find because I am lying about the lakeside. The house has a garden, unfortunately fallow nowadays, and every evening at sunset I walk my gun moll through it thinking of my bygone years.

Then we kiss, and I stop thinking altogether.

Poverty drives some people to crime, acquisitiveness others, and a desire for vengeance or a craving for the perils of mortal gamesmanship yet others. (Pick up any decent history book with a chapter on domestic law enforcement.) My motive, however, was something else entirely. I am going to marry Lady Pat, and one day it is conceivable that she and I, along with our cheerful henchwomen, will move to Alaska to escape the heat. Meanwhile, the number of people who want me — really, really ***want*** me — grows larger by the minute.

DEAR BILL

The man paces, worrying about Bill. Poor Bill has been acting strangely lately. He has filed a divorce action against the sweet young woman from South Dakota — Kathryn, Kate, Kitty, whatever the hell she's calling herself now — he brought home to Dougherty County five years ago. Besides that, Bill has been behaving as if his and Kathryn's son Zach hasn't even happened. The unfeeling son of a bitch. How can he do this to Zach, an innocent little kid who needs his daddy?

Kathryn — or Kate — or Kitty — Bill's wife — she's got to be in a mixed-up mental state, too. You can tell by the fact that she can't settle on a first name for herself. The question is, Has her hubby Bill's erratic behavior set her off on her frantic search for herself, or has her harum-scarum search for her "true identity" knocked jealous Bill's feet out from under him? The chicken or the egg? The man worrying about Bill now believes that Bill triggered the change in Kathryn rather than vice versa.

An objective look at the suffering of Bill, Kathryn, and Zach suggests that Bill is the prime cause. If the guy doesn't get some help soon, from people who care for him and have the gumption to call him to accounts for his selfishness and his kamikaze bouts of carousing, well, dear old Bill may very well end up taking a header into the flinty Flint River or sticking the barrel of a pawn-shop .38 up against his palate as if it's no more lethal than a plastic soda straw.

Splash!

Bang!

No more crazy Bill.

The worried man has no idea what to do. Nowadays, Bill trusts almost nobody. Whenever Kathryn tries to call him, he hangs up on her. He avoids his friends, and the man in the apartment is fairly sure that Bill avoids them because he's embarrassed to talk to them. He knows that they know that he has broken his marriage and left little Zach fatherless. What can Bill possibly say to his former buddies when everyone, Bill included, knows that he's been acting like a horse's butt?

The situation has Bill's would-be Samaritan stumped. He can't telephone Bill because he can never get through. Just getting the guy's number to ring is a chore, and even if by some miracle he should make connection, the man worrying about Bill doubts his ability to say the right words. He has never been able to talk to people about Really Important Things, and, besides, he *hates* the goddamn telephone.

A face-to-face meeting? You'd have to corner Bill, and lately Bill's been in no mood to let anybody corner him. Anyway, you'd still have the problem of mounting a convincing argument — of proving with your every tongue-tied word that Bill's welfare, and only Bill's welfare, is uppermost in your mind. Talk — heartfelt, off-the-cuff talk — is a painful obstacle to a one-on-one powwow, and the man worrying about Bill doesn't trust himself to get past the trickiness of such an encounter.

Impossible, he finally decides. Downright impossible. You're an idiot to even consider it.

What, then? What can you do?

It hits him as he paces the apartment.

A letter! He can write the son of a bitch a letter!

This thought excites the worried man, and he begins scrounging around for paper and pen. Because he hardly ever writes letters, the search takes a while. At last, he finds a Bic ballpoint in a kitchen drawer and a wrinkled sheet of

notebook paper in the back of a telephone book left in the apartment by a former tenant. He sits down at the kitchen table and thinks and thinks.

Finally, he writes:

> Dear Bill,
>
> Your wife loves you. Your little boy needs you. It's not their fault you're losing a little hair on the top of your head. They don't care how you look, they just want you around. Do you think boozing and chasing women younger than Kathryn and LOTS younger than you is going to make YOU younger? Well, it won't, you know. People get older every day. It's something that happens. There's only one way to make yourself stop getting older.
>
> You know what I'm talking about, Bill. Please don't do that, either. It wouldn't make sense. You're not just worried about getting older, you're worried about lost opportunities. You think because you got married young and had a kid right off, well, that maybe you missed some things. But if you simply STOP getting older, what opportunities will you have then? Can you answer me that?
>
> Snap out of it, Bill. You've got to snap out of it for Kathryn's sake, and Zach's, and also your own. Right now, you're just killing yourself slow and we're afraid that if you don't stop, you'll finally get to a place where you'll decide to do it fast. PLEASE don't do that, Bill. Think of everyone who's worried about you. Think about me, too. Would I write you all this stuff if I didn't mean it?
>
> Someone Who Cares

The man makes an envelope out of a brown paper sack and a few strips of Scotch tape. He finds an uncanceled stamp on a letter from his attorney — the machine at the post office

missed inking over the stamp. He tears it off, trims around it with a pair of scissors, and puts it on his own envelope with another tiny piece of tape.

Looking out the window, the worried man realizes that it is already dark.

Well, so what? He won't be able to sleep until he mails his damn letter. If he mails it tonight, it will reach Bill the day after tomorrow. Maybe that'll be soon enough to save him, to do the poor joker some good. If nothing else, it'll let Bill see his screwed-up situation from the point of view of someone who has carefully weighed all the factors that Bill himself has been self-destructively ignoring.

It can't hurt, can it?

The man gets his coat, jams the letter into an inside pocket, and walks seven blocks against the December wind to the mailbox on the corner of Oglethorpe and Hart.

To his dismay, Charlie Griffin is standing at this box feeding a stack of Christmas cards into the drop that he intended to use himself. Even worse, Charlie has already seen him.

"Hey, Bill!" Charlie shouts. "How's it going?"

"None of your goddamn business!" Bill responds. He takes out the letter he has written, tears it into little pieces, and showers the pieces in the air like confetti. Then, abruptly, he turns on his heel and starts walking the seven cold blocks back to his empty apartment.

"Merry Christmas to you, too!" Charlie shouts indignantly after him.

A FATHER'S SECRET

"You're not thinking about Dad again, are you?" Tina asked.

Gordon did not reply. Sitting on his knees, he was leaning back away from her in the early summer dark. He looked like an oarsman, slick from the exertion of a race by moonlight, and she...well, she was the scull that he had been rowing. His eyes were closed with the sad fatigue of a disappointing finish.

As gently as she could, Tina said, "Gordie, please lie down beside me. I'm not comfortable like this."

Gordon's eyes opened. He studied Tina as if she had emerged on a silent mechanical lift from the interior of the mattress. Exhaling defeatedly, he stretched out beside her. Tina covered herself with the sheet.

"That was good," she said hopefully. "For a man cave-crawling his own grief, that wasn't bad at all." She tried to put a smile into her words so that he would not take them for bitchiness disguised as sympathy. Gordon's hurt was hers even when he tried to conceal it with an outdated and unhappily hokey Gary Cooper stoicism.

"It's so quiet tonight," he blurted, sounding genuinely amazed. "It's so quiet you can hear the goddamn crickets singing."

"Then it really isn't quiet, is it?" Tina intended this riposte as banter, but it came out like naked contradiction. Given Gordon's recent simmering irritability, that was dangerous.

What was she doing?

"I mean inside the house, Tina. It's so quiet inside you can hear what's going on outside. That's rare. We're usually trying to figure out just how the hell we're going to take care of—"

"Shhhh. Keep your voice down. Be grateful he's resting easy."

To Tina's relief, Gordon permitted himself to be shushed. "I am grateful," he whispered. "I just can't believe the crickets, that's all. We've got the Great Southeastern Cricket Philharmonic in our own backyard."

Tina waited several beats before speaking: "Did you hear me say, 'That was good,' Gordie?"

"Yeah. It wasn't, though. It was like accidentally letting go of a rubber band before you've got it aimed good. Same sort of feeling. Thinking just of myself, of course."

"Three weeks is a long time, Gordie. Three weeks is — "

"I also heard you say something semi-annoyed about my dad."

"Not about Dad," Tina hurried to correct him. "Just about your preoccupation with him during...you know. Thinking just of myself, of course." Sarcasm could dent his fenders, too.

Gordon turned to his side, propped himself up on one elbow, and looked down into Tina's eyes. His face hung gargoylish above her, shadow-etched to the verge of unfamiliarity. "I'll tell you something, gal. Even before he died, I thought of Dad — I think I always thought of Dad — during our bouts of you-know. It wasn't something I could help."

This confession — if it qualified as a confession — had no handles for Tina; she could not pick it up. "You mean you thought of your father while we were making love? That you always think of your father when we're doing it?"

"That's a pretty good paraphrase."

Beneath the surface ridicule, which Gordon called teasing, she could sense the body of the indistinct monster making these disturbing waves. So far, though, the monster's body had no shape; it was only a blip on her emotional sonar. "Why

would you think of Dad, Gordie? I don't understand. Is this some sort of parable or something?"

"Oh, yes. A terrible parable." He eased himself to his back again. His hands were like cast-iron gnarls on his thighs. "If you believe the world, anyway. If you believe the pious hoi polloi."

"Gordie, talk in an alphabet I already know!"

"Shhh. Keep your voice down. The kid needs his — "

"All right. All right." Now Tina was the one staring down into the other's face, the tips of her hair brushing his shoulders and biceps. "I'm supposed to believe that every time we — "

"You-know."

" — make love, damn it! That every time we do that, apparently all the way back to our very first time in Daytona, some part of your mind is mulling over old memories of your dad? Is that right?" Incredulity coated her words like a glaze. This was a riddle he was putting to her, a bedtime tightening of the brain screws. Only she knew it was something more than a riddle, something more than a game.

"It's true, Tina. I swear it."

"But why is it true? This doesn't make sense."

"Listen, gal, let's just forget it, okay?"

"I won't forget it. You're the one who brought this up. Halfway up, anyhow. So please haul it all the way into the light."

Gordon's lips met in a lopsided line closely resembling a scowl. His eyes blinked twice, rapidly, as if he were clearing them of matter. "It's a secret, Tina. I promised him I'd never tell anyone."

"He's been dead nineteen days. I'm your wife. You're supposed to use me as a sounding board."

Surprisingly, Gordon vouchsafed her a smile.

"Among other things," Tina said. "Besides, I assume you kept your promise to him while he was alive. What's the harm in telling his secret now? Gordie, you've fulfilled your end of the bargain."

"Maybe I have." He seemed to consider the point. "But you have to promise to let it go no further than this room. Not your sister or your mother or anyone else at all is to hear it repeated, Tina. Ever."

"All right."

"Pinch your earlobe and swear."

With an exasperated snort, Tina took her earlobe between her thumb and forefinger. "I swear. Now talk."

"My father was an unusual man — "

"Gordie, I'm not a stranger to that fact. Can't you skip the memorial preliminaries? We ought to be sleeping."

Gordon raised himself to his elbow so that Tina and he were nose to nose. Involuntarily, Tina drew back. "Between the ages of eleven and fourteen," Gordon said angrily, pursuing her with his emotion-distorted features, "I was my father's catamite, his little live-in boyfriend. Is that succinct enough for you? Does that acquit me of shilly-shallying around?"

Tina, struggling to hold her own, stopped retreating. Outside, the crickets' unearthly thrumming began to seem to her like a deranged gloss on her husband's confession.

"You mean that Dad sexually abused you? Your own father?"

"I guess that's what a psychologist or social worker would call it. Sexual abuse. Yeah, I'm sure they would."

Now Tina stroked Gordon's temple, her fingernails solicitously combing the graying hair above his ear. "That's hard to believe, Gordie. I never would have suspected it of Dad. He was always such a gentleman around me."

"He was always gentlemanly. It's true, though."

"But you forgave him, that's the really amazing thing. You took him into our home. When the others jumped ship, you paid for his nursing services. Your cousin from Knoxville — Hazel — she was the only one of that sorry bunch who came to the funeral. You stuck by him in spite of what he'd done to you." Tina touched her lips to Gordon's forehead. "That's admirable," she declared. "I mean, if it had been me he'd

treated that way, I don't know whether I'd've ever been able to forgive him. You never let on, though. It's a wonder, Gordie. It really is."

Gordon dropped back to his pillow again. "A wonder," he echoed her pensively. "Maybe. If you want to know the truth, it just never occurred to me that I had anything to forgive him for."

"He took advantage of you."

"Well, you'd never catch me calling it sexual abuse. I don't know about other such cases, Tina, but Dad never hurt me. He taught me things. We had secret times together when he instructed me in lore that other kids my age just weren't getting." Gordon barked an enigmatic laugh of reminiscence. "It was all learning by doing, that's all."

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"I'm not kidding, Tina. Sometimes I look back on that three, almost four-year episode with nostalgia. Never with guilt or revulsion. In fact, every sexual encounter reminds me of Dad — if only fleetingly, at some crucial point in the process."

A shudder went through Tina, a sensation like that prompted by the unexpected popping of ice cubes in a sweaty tea glass. "Process," she said. "Jesus."

"Come on, Tina. It's over. Dad's in the cold, cold ground, and I'm right here at your beck and call. Maybe I wasn't so hot tonight, but I'll lay my daddy's ghost the next time I lay you, gal. You can count on it."

"Wait a minute, Gordie. If you enjoyed these grab-ass sessions with Dad so much, what made you stop? Why didn't the two of you just keep on horsing around forever?"

"Girls, Tina."

"Girls?"

"Yeah, I got interested in girls. I had more than just an inkling of what to do with them, too. It gave me an advantage over my uninitiated male counterparts. It gave me confidence."

"So you sent your own father a Dear Dad letter or something?"

"I just didn't meet with him anymore. I avoided him. He understood, I think. It made him sad, but I was getting to be a big boy and he realized I had undiscovered countries to explore. Besides, he knew I still loved him. He knew how grateful I was for the headstart he'd given me."

"Wonderful."

"I'm pretty sure he'd already found a replacement anyway, a second cousin's kid three or four years younger than me. Everything worked out."

Tina stared at her husband, who, in turn, was staring at the tiny inverted dunes stippled across the ceiling. She could think of nothing else to say to him. The deranged choiring of the crickets had finally begun to subside, and quite far away, off in another neighborhood, she heard a dog bark, its voice both lugubrious and frail.

Closer, just down the hall, another sound startled Tina: a sobbing intake of breath followed by a series of desperate gasps. She and Gordon bolted upright at the same instant, but Gordon was quicker to find his clothing. He stepped into the bikini briefs he had taken to wearing of late and hurriedly pulled on his blue jeans.

"Poor little tyke," he said, struggling with the zipper. "God, Tina, I thought he was going to outgrow these attacks. I thought by this time he'd be roughhousing his bike through every flowerbed on the block and playing shortstop for a little-league team."

"I'll go see about him," Tina said.

"Stay where you are. It's my turn and I'm already dressed." As if to prove that point, he snapped the button on his jeans. "For once, heaven be praised for small mercies, we weren't sound asleep when the hacking began." Gordon dashed from the room and down the hall to where their son Jonathan lay.

Tina could imagine the boy blinking against the harsh glare of the tensor lamp at his bedside and groping frantically

for his inhaler. His gasps had utterly obliterated the insipid music of the crickets.

"Hey there, Jonnie," she could hear Gordon saying. "Daddy's here, boy-o. It's going to be all right."

Alone in the king-size bed, Tina put her face into her hands and bit her bottom lip until she tasted blood.

GIVE A LITTLE WHISTLE

George Caspary, the owner of a dealership specializing in sleek, foreign-made cars, returned home early from a business trip to find his wife Lena having coffee near their pool with one of his better-looking salesmen. After a crisp exchange that Lena did not interrupt or even seem to listen to, the salesman, stunned by the sudden loss of both his job and his dignity, turned on his heel and left the grounds. After watching him go, Caspary strode into the huge house and climbed the stairs to his bedroom. The next evening he came home with a lop-eared puppy that looked as if it had jumped from the bed of a mud-caked pickup.

"That's a hideous little dog," Lena said. "Why've you brought it into the house?"

"For company," said George from a wing chair upholstered in a muted floral print, the puppy in his lap. "You entertain human curs. I prefer real canines." He held up a tiny choke chain and a jingling set of tags.

"The ugly little thing's shedding all over your suit."

"Dog hairs suggest an awfully innocent infidelity, don't you think?"

"You sound jealous," Lena said. She poured herself a glass of wine from a silver carafe.

"You give me cause to be. You do it on purpose."

"It's one of my chief pleasures, George. You're either jealous or boring — nothing in between. I like you better jealous."

George continued to stroke the trembling dog. His pudgy, white fingers sent filaments of pale fur drifting through the air beneath the chandelier.

"That puppy is a tactic," Lena said.

"A tactic?" George smiled at her over the dog's head.

"Yes. A tactic. But that's all right. I can counter it."

"Of course you can," George said.

George found that he could not take the dog to work. Either it distracted customers in the showroom or it soiled the carpet in his business offices. During the day, he kenneled it with a breeder and trainer with whom he had gone to college. In the evenings, he brought the dog home and played with it, shoving its head from side to side or pinning its forepaws to his knees so that it would lick placatingly at his fingers.

"The dog doesn't like you," Lena said.

With a monogrammed silk handkerchief, George wiped slobber from his hands. "Yes, it does. We're great buddies."

"And you don't like him. It's cruel to cage him up every day. Let him stay at home with me."

"So you can alienate its affections?" George said.

"Affections? He hates you. He only acts that way" — the dog was licking George's hands again — "because you terrify him."

"Terrify it? I've never even raised my voice."

"He's waiting for you to. He can sense your unpredictability."

"Me, unpredictable? I thought I was supposed to be boring."

"When you're not jealous, George, you are."

"But you think I'm jealous now?"

"Maybe he can sense he's only a tactic to you — not a living, breathing creature."

"It's a companion."

"'It.' You call the darling 'it,' George. You've had him two months and you haven't even given him a name."

"I call it — I call *him* — Paladin."

"Since when? A second ago? And that's the name of one of your overpriced automobiles. It's not a dog's name."

"It is now."

"Leave him at home with me. Stop kenneling him."

At the end of six months, George surrendered and gave Lena the dog. She renamed him Squeedunk because she'd once had a pet turtle by that name and because the name irritated George. She groomed, fed, and played with Squeedunk with a single-mindedness that added to George's annoyance. Squeedunk was soon the only name to which the dog would answer. Lena exulted.

She also found that her interest in novice salesmen, wealthy prospective customers, George's out-of-town colleagues, and even the no-strings Casanovas who flirted with her downtown had dwindled to a harmless itch. She only had eyes for Squeedunk, and Squeedunk for her, and George was continuously jealous without her having to engineer either a real affair or the semblance of one.

"I bought that quisling mutt for me!" George would rage every time he saw Squeedunk nuzzling her hand or lying beside her chaise longue on the patio. Squeedunk would flinch away, or his nape hair would rise, and George would either throw a cup against the wall or kick over a piece of garden statuary.

"You've become an absolute delight to live with," Lena liked to tell him, and she meant it: George was a *much* more interesting man nowadays.

One night Lena awoke and realized that Squeedunk was not lying at the foot of her bed. Hearing a muffled bump and a skittering of claws on the gallery's marble floor, she bolted upright. Out of bed, she pulled on her nightgown, opened her door, stepped into the sheen of the electric sconces, and saw George leading Squeedunk on a choke chain toward the circular staircase.

"Stop right there! I've caught you!"

"Just taking this wretched animal for a walk."

Lena glanced at her watch. "At two thirty in the morning. You don't expect me to believe that, do you?" Squeedunk, she noticed, was standing spraddle-legged on the slippery floor, tail tucked and eyes averted. George yanked his choke chain too hard. "After all, I'm not an utter nincompoop."

"I never believed you were."

"Don't flash that insulting, quasi-charming grin at me — I'm not buying it."

"Sorry."

"And know this: if you harm a single hair on Squeedunk's head, I'll make life miserable for you."

"More miserable than it is now?"

"What're you talking about? I've been a good girl."

"You're toying with me, Lena. I'm almost old enough to be your father, and you treat me like a brain-damaged child."

"Let Squeedunk go."

George unhooked the leash, Squeedunk apathetically slipped the choke collar, and Lena knelt beside the dog to whisper praises and comfort.

"My God," George said. He stalked off.

"That's another round to me," Lena told Squeedunk.

Squeedunk looked at her with lifted eyebrows. (Yes, eyebrows; the dog actually had darling cream-colored eyebrows.)

"But who'd've ever imagined a man so insistent on seven hours' sleep would sneak into my room at such an hour to wreak vengeance on my furry *pobrecito?"*

Squeedunk applied a ribbon of saliva to her throat.

"He gets better every day. I mean it, Squee — Georgie-Porgie gets better every day."

Two months later, at George's insistence, the Casparys held an extravagant party to celebrate another good year at the automobile dealership. Chinese lanterns dangled in the garden from Day-Glo orange nylon cords, and a small dance

band played on the lakeside lawn. Most of the salesmen with whom Lena had discreetly slept — the ones George hadn't felt honor-bound to fire — had come with their wives. They danced at least once with Lena (to suggest that there was no reason for them not to) and enjoyed themselves to the limits of their instincts for self-preservation. Canapés were consumed, wines and cocktails spilled, and bawdy stories and gossip exchanged like market commodities.

Near midnight, when only a few of the Casparys' most privileged acquaintances remained on the grounds, Lena called Squeedunk out of the house to perform a series of tired tricks for their amusement. The dog fetched a stick, begged, rolled over, shook hands, "spoke," and jumped through a plastic hula hoop.

Lena beamed. The guests politely applauded.

Off to one side, George talked with Jim Slawson, his assistant manager.

"'At's quite a dog Lena's got there," Slawson said, sipping at only his second martini of the evening.

"I bought it," George said.

"Well, it's pretty easy to see who he belongs to now."

Lena, who had once scolded George for getting dog hair on his clothes, was squatting before Squeedunk in her most expensive satin gown, an orchid pinned to her bodice and silver-lamé slippers on her feet. Squeedunk was nearly in her lap, struggling to place a barrage of doggy kisses on her throat, cheeks, nose, and forehead. George Caspary turned away.

"What's the matter?" Jim Slawson asked. "You're not worried about her gown, are you? I mean — "

At that moment Squeedunk pushed Lena onto her back, growled ferociously, sank his teeth into Lena's throat, and ripped away a collop of flesh, exposing and penetrating the jugular. When George turned around again, the women were screaming and the men shouting either abuse or impossible instructions at one another. Squeedunk, in this confusion, backed away from the body and sprinted wolflike toward the apple orchard beside the lake.

"God have mercy on us," said Jim Slawson.

"We never really know who loves us, do we?" murmured George to himself, then sighed audibly and spoke aloud. "Jim, would you go inside and call the police?"

"What about an ambulance?"

"By all means. An ambulance, too. The more the merrier."

As Jim Slawson rushed to obey, George Caspary pocketed a small metal device. The high-pitched sound that it had made — a sound inaudible to human beings — echoed in his mind like the siren on an emergency vehicle. It was hard not to smile.

I've always been a more interesting fellow than Lena supposed, he told himself. Always.

THE EGRET

As usual, the telephone rang at dinnertime. McGruder cringed, and from their places around the table Polly and the kids gave him pleading looks that meant, Please don't answer it — for once just let the damned thing ring.

As usual, McGruder ignored their silent pleas, rose heavily from his meal, and spoke a grudging hello into the mouthpiece of the instrument of torture on the kitchen wall.

"Did I catch you at dinner?" Harry Profitt's reedy voice wanted to know. "Too bad. But at least you got somebody to make it for you, don't you, Stork? Me, I eat out of tin cans or fry up cheap fixings for myself. A one-eyed fella, a guy more than half blind, never had a leper's chance to find him a helpmeet to do that kind of sweet domestic stuff. And you know whose lousy goddamn fault that is, don't you? Don't you, Stork-O?"

"You're never going to let me forget, Harry."

"Damned straight I'm not. Why should I? You ruined my life, you bastard. You've got a wife and kids. You're a bigshot ranger out at the state preserve. You wear a uniform and swagger around. Me, I got nobody. I got no position. The birds I like to watch fly over — sometimes I can't half tell them from tatters of smoke or cloud. And it all goes back to you, doesn't it, Mason? Forgive me — I mean, Stork the Dork."

McGruder took it. He took it every time that One-Eyed Harry Profitt called. Still guilt-riddled after thirty years, he could find no easy way to lay the specter of his culpability.

As a tall, skinny thirteen-year-old, Mason "Stork" McGruder had shot the fateful BB. It had been a bitter-cold December day, and the boys had all worn thermal parkas or heavy coats. The idea had been to score war-game points by making their BBs go *ker-THUNK!* in the folds of their enemies' winter clothes. That evening, hearing this news, McGruder's father had taken off his belt and repeatedly walloped his son before everyone in Harry's family. But Harry had lost his eye anyway, and an infection had settled in the other one, heaping even more guilt on the young McGruder.

So thirty years later he answered the phone every time it rang and resignedly took Harry's abuse. Tonight, after enduring a good five minutes of it, he said, "I'm really sorry about what happened, Harry, but it's time you shut up about all that and did something with the days you've got left."

"Like what?" Harry railed. "A job? I can't see worth a mole's butt. And I get dizzy spells. They grab me when I'm not expecting them. If it wasn't for my social security, I couldn't keep body and soul together." McGruder knew that this was true. Harry spent some of his money on bird seed — watching birds was just about his only healthy recreation — but a helluva lot more of it on cheap bitter beer in long-necked amber bottles.

But at last Harry was tiring. "Damn you to very Hell, Stork!" he concluded, as he usually did, and slammed his handset down with such force that the tiny bones in McGruder's inner ear began to vibrate. Polly, meanwhile, looked across the dinner table at him with reproach in her eyes.

One morning, slurping a mug of lukewarm instant coffee on the top step of his tumbledown back stairs, Harry Profitt thought he saw something moving in the weeds at the far edge of his yard. He had to squint, one-eyed, to bring this living object into focus, but the focus he got made it hard to see much but a cushion-sized white torso floating above two

spidery gray legs. A serpentine neck, also white, coiled up from the torso, and atop the neck was a narrow head with a feathery crest pointing one way and a daggerlike beak the other.

"A snowy egret," Harry muttered. "What's it doing in my back yard?"

Usually, like herons and ibises, the egrets just flew over — long-legged tatters of soiled silk on the china-blue sky, winging inland to their rookeries. Never, in Harry's experience, did any of these birds drop down to scout the weedy terrain of his two-bit barony. Now, though, the realization that one of the graceful egrets had *landed* on it truly fretted him. About fifty yards away, after all, lived a pair of tigerish yellow toms who, when it came to birding, took no prisoners. They were too thin and impatient to toy with their victims. Already this summer, Profitt had seen them butcher a mockingbird, three brown thrashers, four robins, a gray catbird, and a couple of bluejays. Pecan trees full of squawking relatives couldn't keep those toms at bay, and Profitt himself was too achey and slow to scare the bloodthirsty critters off.

"Egret, they'll catch you," he said, squinting at the small, long-legged bird stepping daintily through the weeds. "If you're hurt, you're damned well doomed."

He set down his mug and went to see what he could do.

Shuffling to keep from pitching headlong into the ratty bushes marking his yard's far boundary, Profitt stalked the egret. (It was definitely an egret.) The bird, prissily high-stepping, eluded him, but without panicking or trying to fly. It *couldn't* fly, the man decided; something had happened to one of its wings. So their pointless do-si-do continued, the long-legged bird moving to escape Profitt as the half-blind man reached out lurchingly to hug nothing but egretless air.

"To hell with this!" Profitt shouted. He straightened, turned his back on the bird, and limped back to the house. Once inside, he thought, only a real sonuvabitch would leave an egret out there to fend for itself with those damn toms around.

Finally, it came to him to telephone Stork McGruder and ask him how best to handle a downed bird of this sort. Even if it meant calling the joker for some other reason than to remind him of how McGruder'd ruined his life he'd do it to save the egret.

Profitt dialed the number of the ranger station at the preserve and asked for McGruder. A woman on the other end told him that the ranger hadn't reported today, that he'd come down with a virus and was at home. Great. Profitt could inconvenience buddy-boy Stork and do something for the downed egret all at the same time.

Profitt dialed again. Mrs. McGruder answered. She recognized the voice of their tormentor and told him angrily that Mason could not come listen to his abuse.

"I'm *so* sorry to hear that," Profitt said. "But this is urgent enough to get poor Mason up. Tell him who's calling."

"Good day!" Mrs. McGruder said, and Profitt knew that she was getting ready to hang up with one of his own receiver slams — when McGruder himself intervened to take the phone from her.

"What is it this morning?" the ranger asked, and he *did* sound weak.

Profitt, pretty clearly to the ranger's surprise, told Stork about the snowy egret in his yard. He asked McGruder's advice. He wondered if maybe someone couldn't come out to his house and get the poor bird before those damned marauding cats did.

"*You've* got to do it," McGruder said, warming to a problem that for once had nothing to do with a thirty-year grudge. "Listen, Harry, *you've* got to go out there and fetch in that egret."

"Damn it, I've tried. I'm better than half-blind, as you damn well know, and that sucker, hurt like he is, dances away from me every time I try to grab him."

"You got any meat in the house?"

"No filet mignon, Stork. No bits of tenderized beef."

"Some hamburger? A can of sardines, maybe?"

"Well, I've got some raw bacon that's just about gone bad on me. That the sort of thing you're looking for?"

"It'll do, Harry, it'll do. Take a strip of it and sort of duck-walk out there holding it in your fingertips. Your egret's probably hungry. Somebody's shot it or something, and it's been tiptoeing around your back yard looking for vittles. If you go out there and feed it, you'll be able to grab it while it's lifting its head to swallow your little peace offering."

"What do I do once the bird's in hand?"

"Carry it inside, Harry. You've got to get it out of the yard. Snowy egrets're valuable birds, and they're legally protected, but those cats over your way don't know that and probably wouldn't care even if they did. I'll call the preserve and tell 'em to send somebody over to take custody of the egret."

Profitt cradled the handset with mocking gentleness, found a strip of nearly rancid bacon in his refrigerator, and went down the back steps, squinting out into his lot for some sign of the egret. Ah, there it was. With the greasy bacon extended as bait, Profitt hunkered and began duck-walking awkwardly toward the bird. The hungry egret scented the bacon and began stepping gingerly toward the strange one-eyed man approaching it....

McGruder, exhausted, slumped to the couch beside the telephone stand. He was grimacing, but in his grimace, his wife thought, was something disturbingly akin to a smile.

"What is it?" she asked him. "You feeling sick again?"

"Much better, Polly. Much better. I might as well be hung for a hit man as a horse thief, hadn't I?"

"I don't understand."

"He'll never stop calling."

"He would if you wouldn't listen to him, Mason."

"I *have* to listen to him. I put out the crackpot's eye. I *deserve* to hear what he tells me. Some of it, anyway."

"That's foolishness, Mason."

"Well, from now on, it'll be easier to take — a whole helluva lot easier to take."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's instinct, Polly. It's biologically dictated egret behavior from years and years back."

"Do you still have a fever? You're not making sense."

"They go for the eyes, that's all I'm saying. They take their daggerlike beaks and go straight for the glistening eye."

It took about an hour for the phone to begin ringing again, but when it did, McGruder insisted on answering it himself.

TEARS

When True Stanford — Mister True to nearly everyone who knew him — came out his front door and crossed Orchard Street into my yard on his way uptown, I almost went inside to keep from having to talk to him. I was picking up pecans and dropping them into a paper sack, and his route through the yard would bring him right past me. For some reason, though, I called out, "Hey, Mister True, howya doing?" Maybe I felt guilty about wanting to avoid him.

Couple of years back, they made him retire from the bank. To keep busy he puttered around his and Miss Carolyn's yard. In the fall he raked up oak and pecan leaves. In the spring he put out tomato plants in topsoil surrounded by old tractor tires. Year round he drove their beat-up Impala to and from town with his felt hat jammed down on his head and a bewildered at-loose-ends look on his face. Miss Carolyn said that he was like a ghost in the house, haunting one room after another and fading off into the yard when he didn't know what else to do.

Hearing me, Mister True turned on a smile that would've been brilliant except for his crooked teeth. He was a couple inches over six feet but looked even taller because he was so thin and wore his trousers right up under his rib cage. He had his famous felt hat on and his famous button-up sweater hanging off his shoulders like a ratty cape. His walk was what got me, though. His legs only seemed to move below the knees, and he had his hands on his hips with his thumbs

pointing toward his belt buckle in a way that reminded me of a girl modeling a bathing suit.

Dressed like that, walking like that, he arrived about an arm length's off. A crust of dried egg yolk clung to the corner of his mouth, and a night's growth of beard stubbled his long jaw. He looked down as if he had something important in his shirt pocket, but it was just to keep from having to meet my eye.

Smiling, he mumbled, "It's not on. It's off. They have 'em up there. It'll do if I get one again."

He held his thumb and forefinger apart to show me the size of whatever he was talking about. He nodded toward town.

"It's this problem. We need one, and they have 'em. I've got to get it. It's off, that's why."

Mister True talked that way nowadays. Fuzzy pronouns and verbs that didn't go anywhere. To stay up with him, you had to make funny mental jumps. It was one of the reasons that the bank didn't even call him for part-time teller work anymore. In a grown man, it was irksome. You wanted to grab him by the shoulders and demand that he put real names and places to all his formless mutter.

"Look," I said. "Is there something I can do?"

Hands on hips, he swung his skinny chest around toward his own house and back again. "...out and won't stay on." I couldn't hear the rest of what he said.

"Is it your car?"

Mister True's head came up. His smile got sunshine bright.

Thinking I'd hit the jackpot, I told him that even though I wasn't a mechanic, I could check under the hood and maybe give him an idea what was wrong. Then he could tell Erroll Seaver or one of the other fellows at the Amoco station. This idea was hunky-dory with Mister True. He waved jerkily at the blue Impala sitting in his driveway, inviting me to go back over there with him. I put my sack of pecans on the straps of a lawn chair, and we crossed the street together.

I went to the Impala's hood, but Mister True climbed the steps to the porch and walked straight into the house. Maybe for a flashlight or a screwdriver, I thought. But when he didn't come back out, I stepped over a flowerbed onto the porch and knocked on the screen door.

Miss Carolyn let me in. Saying she was glad to see me and grateful that I'd come, she led me into a dark parlor with painted wainscoting halfway up the walls. In this parlor, Mister True was standing in front of the space heater and staring down at it as if it had hurt his feelings.

"The handle for turning on the gas came undone," Miss Carolyn told me. "True's been worried about it all morning."

I used a screwdriver on a lampstand next to the heater to tighten the handle. It took maybe thirty seconds. Mister True and Miss Carolyn beamed at me as if I'd just run a pack of rabid dogs out of their front yard. In the chilly gloom of the parlor, Mister True's eyelashes had a gluey look. He put one long hand on top of the heater and rolled his knuckles over the ugly amber metal.

In the hall I said, "I thought it was the car he was worried about. That's what he made me think."

"True gets confused these days," Miss Carolyn said. She was pretty close to crying.

"Don't we all," I said.

The next time I saw him, he was sitting on a folding chair in the voting-machine room in our new City Hall. Miss Carolyn was an election official, and she was checking the name of each person who came in against a list of registered voters. Mister True was at the end of the table, not far from her, because she didn't like to leave him alone. He'd turn on the TV or maybe the tap water and then go out for a walk. His driving had also gotten worse. Miss Carolyn had begun to hide the car keys to protect him and everybody else in town.

A small line snaked around Miss Carolyn's table. My wife and I made it longer, but folks kept throwing the levers in their

booths, opening the curtains for the next voter, and so the line kept right on moving. The people going past Mister True asked him how he was doing, and told him how well he was looking, and patted him on the shoulder of his musty-smelling cardigan.

"True just went to the post office," Miss Carolyn explained to everyone. "Says we've won the lottery or something."

I looked at Mister True. When my sister and I were kids in the pew across from his and Miss Carolyn's, she'd noticed that although Mister True would cross his legs at the knee, the foot of the upper leg would still rest on the floor — right next to the foot of the uncrossed leg. He was sitting that way now, and the smile on his face seemed to have as much to do with this peculiar posture as it did with any lottery victory.

"This is what we get," Mister True was telling everyone. "This right here. Hundreds of thousands of dollars. Millions maybe."

He had a brochure from an aluminum-siding company. With one spidery finger, he was tapping a toll-free telephone number given on the brochure. To him, the telephone number was the amount of prize money he and Miss Carolyn had won. At each person shuffling by, Miss Carolyn looked up in a pitiful, begging way: Don't make him think anything else, her look meant.

"Congratulations, Mister True."

"That's wonderful."

"Gonna take a trip to Hawaii now?"

Pam and I were coming up next. Pam leaned her forehead into my back and whispered: "It makes me want to cry, Al. I swear to God, it makes me want to cry."

A few days later, I came home to find the house empty. At the kitchen window I looked out over our dead lawn at Orchard Street and the tall tarpapered roof of the Stanfords' house. Just then, Pam pushed open Miss Carolyn's screen door, said something to somebody inside, and came down the steps. Pretty soon, she was with me in the kitchen. I made

us each a cup of instant coffee, and we sat down together at the breakfast bar.

"What's going on?"

"Miss Carolyn and I put Mister True to bed. Took some doing."

"It's only six-twenty. Is he sick?"

"Worn out. Miss Carolyn, too. Really wrung out, Al, the both of them."

"Yeah, it's tough puttering around the house all day."

Pam gave me a look. "They've been to a funeral in Sylvester. A double funeral for the teen-age grandchildren of an old friend of Miss Carolyn's. They were killed this weekend in a car crash. The Stanfords have been gone two days, Al. They only got home a couple of hours ago. Didn't you even realize they were gone?"

"I was at work. I was at work yesterday, too."

Pam tapped her coffee spoon on the Formica. She got to tapping it harder and harder — until, finally, I grabbed her wrist. Like Mister True, she refused to look at me.

"Miss Carolyn's about the bravest woman I've ever met," she said bitterly. "The absolute bravest."

"Is that something to get angry about?"

"Listen to this, will you? The funeral confused Mister True. He saw two coffins there. Two coffins for two young people. He thought his and Miss Carolyn's grown-up sons had died. The whole two days they were in Sylvester he thought that. He cried like a baby in church and at graveside when they lowered the caskets — the caskets were closed because it was such a messy wreck — and Mister True thought his own kids were being buried."

"Nobody set him straight?"

"Al, Miss Carolyn didn't *know*. It never occurred to her that he didn't realize whose funeral they were attending. It was a bit out of proportion, how he was carrying on, but Mister True's always been soft-hearted and everyone understands that he's been declining these past couple of years. It touched the folks there. It really did, Al."

In a modest sort of way, this was a fantastic story. I sipped my coffee and waited for Pam to get on track again.

"Driving home from Sylvester, Miss Carolyn finally figured out what'd happened. Mister True started mumbling the boys' names — 'Cliff, Cliff,' 'Martin, Martin' — and all about how it wasn't fair, him and Miss Carolyn going on to live longer than the boys when Cliff and Martin still had families of their own to raise. So it hit Miss Carolyn like walking through a big pane of glass — invisible to you one minute but the next you're all cut up and the hurt places're too many to count. She stopped the car to try to explain to him that it wasn't the way he thought."

"Didn't that do it?"

"Stopping confused him. He knocked his door open and wet the grass at roadside. Then he told Miss Carolyn they had to get home and check their insurance policies. You see, he figured out there was money owing Cliff's and Martin's families — which was pretty sharp thinking for a mixed-up old man. She tried to tell him again that those closed caskets hadn't held their sons, but he'd seen what he'd seen, and all she could do, then, was pull him back into the car and drive him on home."

"You mean he *still* believes their sons are dead?"

"Listen. Miss Carolyn called me as soon as they got home. I went over there to help her straighten Mister True out. We showed him school pictures of the kids who'd died. We explained about the car crash. We told him Cliff and Martin were okay. What finally did it, though, was calling Cliff long-distance in Birmingham and letting Mister True talk to him. Cliff talked to his daddy just as sweet and reassuring as you could ask. He wasn't a bit annoyed, just truly and sweetly concerned."

"And Martin?"

"He's up in Atlanta, but we couldn't reach him. Which was fine because talking to Cliff did it for Mister True, anyway."

Pam carried her cup to the sink and poured out what was left of her coffee.

After a while, looking out the window, she said, "You should've seen him, Al. He clapped his hands like a kid. He yanked his hat off and flipped it at the ceiling. He grabbed Miss Carolyn and began blubbering into her shoulder. Sobbing, Al, just sobbing to beat the band. Miss Carolyn got started, too, and this time it was tears of joy because their boys were still alive. Pretty soon, I was right in there with them, just laughing and crying at the same time."

"You're doing half of it again."

Pam turned on the cold water and rinsed her hands. "I don't know how Miss Carolyn stands it," she said. Then she leaned down and rinsed her face. Taking a dish towel with her, she went by me and straight upstairs to bed.

I made my own supper.

Mister True got worse and worse. He found the hidden car keys and wrecked the Impala without killing anybody or damaging anything besides the car but a zinc garbage can. He wandered off at odd hours, and the night patrolman brought him home a couple of times. By spring Miss Carolyn was spoon-feeding him his meals. She had to do other things for him, too, the kinds of chores that people with babies get used to doing.

In June, Mister True fell off a stool trying to unscrew a light bulb that hadn't even burned out. He broke his hip. His stay in the medical center seventeen miles up the road stretched on and on, and Miss Carolyn was hardly ever in her house. Evenings, her porch light burned until midnight or later. Pam kept up with things and gave me reports almost every time we sat down to eat.

One evening a TV program we like was on, right at this place where the detective is stalking a heavyset bad guy in a fatigue jacket. The telephone rang. Pam got up to catch it. Folks always call when you're five minutes away from a big shootout.

The program ended, another one began, and Pam came back from the kitchen and sat down on the sofa. Her eyes were red.

"That was Miss Carolyn. Mister True's dying."

I turned the TV off. "He's been dying for five or six weeks now, Pam."

"He's dying *tonight*. He's not going to make it to morning. Miss Carolyn just thought we should know."

"I'm sorry."

"I asked her if she wanted me to drive up there. She said no, she just wanted to be with him by herself tonight — to hold his hand and rub his forehead and kiss him goodbye until he can't feel it anymore. She'd be embarrassed to do those things if anyone else was around. She'd feel like she had to talk to them because they'd come all that way to sit with her and keep her company."

I looked at my feet. This was it. Never again was Mister True going to saunter out his front door with his hands on his hips like a contestant in a Miss America pageant. His famous felt hat and his famous ratty sweater would go into a box somewhere. So would Mister True, for that matter.

"It's probably a blessing," I said. "He hasn't been anything like himself for a couple of years."

Pam didn't seem to register this. "I started crying. That got Miss Carolyn going. I apologized, but she told me not to worry. Over the phone, it's something better than talking that two people can do together."

Pam took a deep breath. She wasn't crying now, but her eyes were red.

"Damn," she said. "So many stupid, goddamn tears."

I had no idea what to say to that. Pam didn't know what else to say, either. TV was impossible. I got up and went through the house and stood for a long time on the front porch with my hands in my back pockets. I looked at the clouds dirtying the night sky and listened to the semis going through town on the way to Columbus and other points south.

PATRIOTS

"Settle down, Denny," Hugo Monegal told the young lieutenant striding grimly barefoot down the beach ahead of him. "Everything's going to be okay, kid."

"If I go back."

"Well, of course. You've got to go back."

"I'm through, Sergeant Monegal. I don't give a damn if the General himself orders me back up."

"But this way, kid, you'll get your ass court-martialed."

Denny Rojas stopped, put his hands on his hips, and stared out across the dawnlit swells of the Pacific. The sun was rising on Guam. It was the Fourth of July, 1973, but the disadvantaged populations of Hawaii, Alaska, and the continental United States would not be able to celebrate Independence Day for another twenty-four hours. They were trapped behind the International Date Line, an invisible barrier over two thousand miles to the east.

"I'm already being fined six hundred and fifty bucks," Denny said. "Did you know that, Monegal?"

"For refusing to fly? You're lucky it's not four or five years in a federal prison."

"I haven't formally refused to fly yet. Only this morning did I make my mind up. The fine's for something else, Monegal — something that's being kept hushed up."

"What?"

Denny hurled a piece of coral out toward the reef and began lurching southward away from the base again. *"Madre de Dios,"* he said, "I really, really goofed."

"How?" the sergeant pursued him. "How did you goof?"

"I'm a fuck-up and a murderer," the young man said without stopping. Fragments of coral were shredding the soles of his feet the way a vegetable grater curls away the skin of a carrot.

"Denny, look at your goddamn feet, will you?"

"You think I give a shit?"

He did not seem to. Deliberately scourging himself, he stepped on every shard of coral he could find. Dribbles of blood punctuated the last fifty or sixty feet of sand the two men had plodded through.

Taken by a sudden impulse, Monegal grabbed Denny by the shoulder and thrust into his face the microphone of the cassette recorder riding on the sergeant's hip. The recorder was a recent BX purchase. Monegal's family back in Wyoming had begun sending him taped messages instead of letters, and he had brought the machine with him on this impromptu trip down the beach in hopes of eventually taping a reply to their latest one. Denny recoiled from the microphone.

"What the hell, Monegal!"

"Tell your story to the machine, Denny. A kind of confession. Then we'll throw the cassette into the ocean — wash your sins away."

"Ha!" the younger man said, resuming his single-minded march. "And probably right back up onto the beach."

Monegal shouted, "You've got to get this out of your system, Denny!"

Suddenly the lieutenant halted. Monegal caught up with him. On a beach blanket the size of Costa Rica, there a few yards ahead of them, a man and a woman were embracing on their knees. The young woman's naked back shone brown and supple; her buttocks, cradled in a pink-and-scarlet bikini bottom, were cleft as poignantly as any peach. The man was kissing her neck.

"We're just what they need, aren't we?" Denny whispered. "Come on, Monegal, let's get out of here."

They started to retreat, but a male voice hailed them: "American airmen! A minute, please, American airmen!"

When the two soldiers turned back, the man from the big green blanket was trotting toward them in a black Olympic-style bathing suit and a pair of expensive Adidas jogging shoes. He appeared to be a Japanese gentleman in his late forties or early fifties, very lithe and muscular in spite of his years.

"Let me congratulate you," he said, reaching Monegal and Denny and shaking their hands in turn. "Today's a glorious day in the history of your country, and it's fortunate we've met."

"It is?" Denny said. He had spent the night returning from a B-52 sortie over western Cambodia, and his subjective time sense was still muddled from the flight. Nor did either he or Monegal understand why interrupting the gentleman's dalliance with the young woman was so auspicious.

"Of course," said the Japanese gentleman. "It's the Fourth of July. I know because it's also my birthday."

"Happy birthday," Denny said, and they all shook hands again.

The newcomer introduced himself as Jinsai Fujita, an Osaka businessman specializing in industrial explosives and tourist-related enterprises. He invited the Americans to join his companion and him. Together they would celebrate not only his birthday but the independence of the United States of America. He was delighted they had come along.

Monegal gestured vaguely at the young woman, who was pulling on a man's summer dress shirt and knotting its tail at her midriff.

"No, no," Fujita said, as if reading the sergeant's mind. "We're finished for the morning. In fact, I'm probably spent until noon or after." He tapped the sleeve of Denny's flight suit and led the Americans away from the water to where the beach blanket lay. Smiling faintly, his companion inclined her head as they approached.

"This is Rebecca Facpi," Fujita said. "She's a Guamanian of Chamorro descent."

"I've got a little American blood, too," she told them.

"She's a member of the choir at the University of Guam in Agana," Fujita bragged. "She's pursuing a *double* major. Tell them in what subjects, Becky — I'm sure they'd like to know."

"Business administration and philosophy." This brief recital seemed to embarrass her. Crossing her arms, she hugged her shoulders.

Denny was staring absently out to sea instead of at this lovely young woman. Monegal began to worry about him again. He was a twenty-four-year-old bachelor whom the sergeant had befriended because they both came from Spanish-speaking cultures alien to most of their comrades.

Jabbering nonstop, Fujita folded up the beach blanket and gathered together the items that had just fallen from it: a package of Kools, a pair of Foster Grant sunglasses, a Ronson lighter, a bottle of Johnson's Baby Oil, an Italian billfold, and some odd-looking ivory paraphernalia that Monegal thought might be Oriental aids to potency. Fujita stuffed these various things into a canvas carryall.

"My firm's developing a three-hundred room resort hotel on Tumon Bay," he was saying. "Guam is a paradise for honeymooners, vacationers, world travelers. If you'll come with us, Lieutenant Rojas, Sergeant Monegal, Becky and I will conduct you on a holiday tour of the interior. We were planning a picnic at a secluded spot, but Becky would probably enjoy the company of people who aren't always talking about economic indices and international exchange rates."

"Denny can't take a tour of the interior," Monegal protested. "Look at his feet."

"I'm sure we have something to put on them," Fujita said. "Besides, he needn't even employ them. Becky and I have mounts." He pointed over sand and gray volcanic tuff to a grassy area beyond the palms where two grazing horses were tethered. "Their names are Tokyo Rose and Admiral Halsey.

They belong to the Jinsai Fujita Equestrian Academy for Tourists, just north of the village of Talofofo. No rental fee for you gentlemen today, however. This is my pleasure and my treat." He gestured with the canvas bag. "Come on, then."

Monegal helped Denny up the beach to the horses. Bridled but saddleless, the animals did not even lift their heads at the company's approach.

"Tokyo Rose is Honey's horse," Rebecca Facpi said. "Admiral Halsey's mine. Who wants to ride with whom?"

Grinning amiably, Fujita said, "Honey's her spooning sort of nickname for me, I'm afraid."

"I'll ride with Mr. Fujita," Denny abruptly declared.

"Why?" Monegal whispered, passing close to his friend. "Why ride with the old man when you could climb up behind that luscious *señorita?*"

Denny spoke curtly under his breath: "Because I don't deserve to ride with the girl. Any other questions?"

And so the lieutenant mounted behind Fujita, and the sergeant positioned himself on Admiral Halsey behind the young woman in the bikini bottoms and the nearly transparent silk shirt. Soon they were bound westward through mango and papaya trees, ragged palms, and bowers of wild orchids. Rebecca Facpi smelled as good as their surroundings, and Monegal could not help thinking that back home in Cheyenne a certain tough, talented woman probably believed him hard at work chiefing a maintenance crew on the sweltering flight-line at Anderson Air Force Base. Well, it was a holiday....

Tokyo Rose led Admiral Halsey farther and farther inland, through thicker and steeper vegetation. Once, through a gap overlooking a distant clearing, the sergeant spied a cluster of quonset huts painted in subdued pastel colors, a different washed-out pastel for each tumbledown hut. Later, a mile or more from that colorful enclave, their horses began descending a narrow path into a wooded ravine with a half-hidden fresh-water pool at its bottom. The sea and the tinted huts were altogether lost to the riders.

Looking down, Monegal saw that on the other side of the pool rested an abandoned army tank, of World War II vintage, twined about with creepers and gutted with rust. At first he had mistaken it for part of the jungle, a geological outcropping. The tank was treadless and hatchless, except for a solitary circular cover that stood open like the lid of a waffle iron. Fujita pulled up the reins on Tokyo Rose and turned the hefty filly about.

"I've never seen that before," he said.

"Does that mean you're lost?" Becky asked him.

"I hope not. I think not."

"Weren't you taking us back toward Talofofo?"

"Roundabout, roundabout," Fujita replied. Although Tokyo Rose stutter-stepped precariously on the narrow path, Denny Rojas sat behind Fujita as calmly as any zombie, listless and unperturbed. "Let's explore this beautiful place."

Fujita prodded their horse down the path toward the pool and the bright crystal rope of the waterfall splashing softly into it from a sequence of small stone ledges. Becky and Monegal followed on their mount, and at the bottom of the ravine the riders all climbed down to stretch their legs and drink. The horses also waded in.

Squatting on his haunches, Denny lifted water to his mouth in his cupped hands. Suddenly, though, he stood bolt upright and stared up the far side of the ravine at something none of the rest of them could see. *"Madre de Dios,"* he said.

"What is it?" Monegal asked him. All the sergeant could perceive was greenery and a single swiftly flying bird.

Ka-pow! Ka-chiiing!

Gunshots and wayward ricochets.

"Jesus!" Monegal cried, flopping down on his belly in the shallow pool, but Denny had been staggered by one of the bullets and driven backward to the water's verge, where he collapsed screaming. Becky lurched through the water to take shelter in the lee of the abandoned tank, and Fujita, who had been holding Tokyo Rose by her bridle, lost control of the

animal. She and Admiral Halsey plunged through the pool to a jumble of mossy boulders several yards to the north. Denny stopped screaming, and Fujita hurried to see what was wrong with him. Monegal pushed his cassette recorder to the small of his back and crawled toward them to check on Denny, too. As suddenly as it had begun, the fusillade from the farther slope had ceased.

"Father, I thank you for supplying me an assassin," Denny was saying. "You've taken my death out of my hands and given me hope of heaven."

"You're wounded in the shoulder," Monegal told him. "You're not going to die. Not today, anyway."

Two more shots rang out, the first throwing up a spray of water behind them, the second chuttering away through the trees.

"Let's get him to the cover of the tank," Fujita suggested.

With Denny suspended between them, then, Fujita and Monegal scrambled through the pool to the barnacled iron-clad. It occurred to the sergeant that they might have been smarter to go the other way. Now, along with Becky, they were pinned down without much hope of reinforcement or relief. The group crouched together on the moist ground behind the tank, breathing like winded sprinters.

"You saw the *cabrón* shooting at us," Monegal told Denny. "Who was it?"

"An angel in a tree," Denny said, his head lolling against the treadless side of the tank. "An angel or an ape."

"I know who it is," Becky vowed, easing herself alongside Denny and slipping her arm behind his neck.

"Who?" Monegal asked her.

"The Samurai Straggler."

Fujita's face took on a cold, malignant look none of them had seen before. "The Samurai Straggler doesn't exist."

"He sure as hell does," Becky countered. "He's been sighted around this island on and off for thirty years. Once he set fire to an airplane on the flight-line at Anderson."

"Rumor!" Fujita scoffed. "The last Japanese stragglers were taken off Guam in the early sixties. This is probably an escapee from an American military hospital, someone addled by his service in Vietnam."

"Someone like me," Denny declared, closing his eyes.

At the sound of another rifle report Fujita ducked his head beneath the tank's scaly fender. Monegal squatted in front of Denny, fiddling with a zipper on the upper arm of his flight suit, trying to get at the wound. It was not a fatal injury, properly cared for; the bullet had entered and exited cleanly. The sergeant used his pocket-knife to strip away the nylon sleeve.

"It *is* the Samurai Straggler," Becky hissed. "He makes occasional raids on our villages for food and weapons."

"Nonsense."

"Nonsense your stinkin' self, Honey. Stick your head up and shout something in Japanese. I bet that turkey gobbles right back at you."

Fujita appeared to consider this proposition.

"What are you waiting for? Tell him the war's over. Tell him to stop shooting at us."

Without moving, Fujita shouted several phrases in Japanese.

The sniper responded at some length in the same language. Then he loosed another barrage of bullets.

"Becky, I'm sorry. You're right. He's definitely Japanese."

"What did he say, Honey?"

"That I must be a traitor, a collaborator with the enemy. That his commander's last orders to him were to continue guerrilla warfare. That he's not going to quit the jungle until the forces of the Emperor return."

"If I die without confessing my sins, I'll be damned," Denny whispered. "Damned to eternal hellfire, Monegal."

The sergeant took off his T-shirt, tore it into strips, and began knotting a makeshift cotton bandage around the lieutenant's upper arm. "Denny, you're not going to die. I've already told you that."

Somewhere above them the Samurai Straggler rattled off another torrent of words and yet another angry enfilade of gunfire. Thirty years in the jungle had taken none of the edge off his hatred of the enemy. His would-be targets huddled together like people cowering in a tornado shelter.

"Translate," Becky urged Fujita.

"He says he has no intention of surrendering to three shameless beachcombers and a man in a juggler's costume."

This last was undoubtedly a reference to Denny's flight suit. An almost iridescent Day-Glo orange, it had so many zippers that it appeared to be held together by hundreds of gleaming metal teeth.

"We're liable to be here awhile," Becky said.

"I need a priest," Denny murmured, rolling his head. "Merciful God, you've killed me, but you haven't provided a priest."

"What about the cassette recorder, Denny? If you die, I'll play it back for the chaplain and he can absolve you *in absentia.*"

"Don't mock him," Becky scolded Monegal.

"It's a superficial wound. He's not going to die. Besides, I'm not mocking him. There's something he needs to get off his chest."

"Great idea, the cassette recorder. Let me talk into it before...before I black out, Monegal."

The Samurai Straggler opened fire again. Shouting more unintelligible abuse, he raked the tank, the pool, the waxy fronds surrounding the pinned-down party. Tokyo Rose, Monegal noticed, had prudently trotted three quarters of the way back up the hillside that they had just descended.

"Is the recorder on, Monegal?"

"Go ahead," the sergeant said, laying the microphone on his chest and depressing a plastic lever.

Denny looked at Fujita and then at the young Guamanian woman. "I'm a navigator, you see. Last month, on a mission over Cambodia, I was" — he grimaced — "navigating. In Cambodia we plot our bombing coordinates by taking fixes

on radar beacons installed in towns friendly to Lon Nol's government. There aren't any ground radar sites to help us target, not like there are in Vietnam."

"I don't follow you," Fujita said.

"I was using a beacon in a village called Luong Phom, or Phon Luom, or — hell, something gookish." Denny's exasperation with himself got the better of him. "I can't even remember the goddamn place's goddamn name, can I? No, sir. That goddamn place's goddamn name seems to have escaped me." He winced as Monegal tightened the bandage on his arm. "Ain't that just like me, Sergeant? Forgettin' a name as goddamn important as that one?"

"Just tell your story," the older man urged him.

"Yeah. My story. The true and faithful history of my fuck-up." He looked off past Monegal into the glittering trees. "You see, Mr. Fujita, I was supposed to throw an offset switch on my radar scope. That's how it's done. If you don't flip the goddamn switch, your B-52 goes growlin' over the village with the beacon instead of over the bombing site you've plotted beforehand."

"Yes," said Fujita, comprehension dawning.

"Let me finish. It won't count if I don't finish. God forgive me, I forgot to throw that switch. And God forgive me, too, for all the times I *did* flip it — for all the times I sat up there in my monkey suit with all the other star-spangled glory-boys." He winced again, either from the sergeant's nervous fumbling or from the hot excruciations of memory. *"Christ!"*

More rant and gibberish from the Samurai Straggler. Although the sniper did not follow this verbal outburst with another hail of shots, Monegal dropped down beside Becky to keep his head from being blown away.

"He's glad to have human enemies again," Fujita translated. "He says that for many years now his most terrible enemy has been Time. American aircraft get bigger and bigger while his own body shrivels and his youthful strength ebbs. By killing us he hopes to make partial atonement for failing to retake the island single-handedly."

"Tell him the Japanese have already retaken the island, Honey. The American bombers he's seen are now on the Japanese side."

Denny was not listening to either the Straggler or the Honey and Becky Show. "And so I murdered" — another painful grimace — "yeah, I murdered the very people whose lives and property we were supposed to be protecting. I was responsible for walking thirty tons of deadly ordnance right down the middle of Luong Phom, or Phong Luom, or whatever the fuckin' hell they call that fuckin' backwater." His voice was getting feebler. "Knocked out a goddamn hospital, Monegal. Wasted a sixth of the population, wounded another third, bereaved every-fuckin'-body else. It's all in the report. All in the classified report."

More shots, perhaps a dozen.

Denny licked his lips and continued: "Our ambassador in Phnom Penh went in there later and promised the survivors money to rebuild with — plus a hundred dollars for every fuckin' casualty. That's a little over a grand, the casualty money. Me, now, they fined six hundred and fifty smackers. For failure to take elementary precautions during targeting procedures. Pretty stiff, huh?"

The weakness of the young man's voice was beginning to alarm Monegal. "Denny, are you shot somewhere besides your arm?"

"I'm dying, Sergeant. That's all I know." He gagged on these words, and a tiny geyser of blood burst from his mouth.

"He's gut-shot," the sergeant told Fujita and Becky, leaning over Becky to examine the belly of Denny's flight suit. "Right here in the fold of this goddamn zipper. Jesus, he's been gut-shot all along."

"Shut off the fuckin' machine," Denny whispered. "You don't have to get my death rattle, too."

Monegal removed the microphone, sat back on his haunches, and mashed the recorder's Stop button.

"'Send My Body Home to Mama, COD,'" Denny said. That was the title of an apocryphal country-and-western song and

a long-standing joke among the airmen at Anderson. Spittle and blood made a vampirish froth on the young man's lips. "Ha, ha."

The Samurai Straggler began firing again, and Becky told Fujita he had better get busy if he was going to save them all from the same miserable fate Denny was suffering. She suggested that Honey try to convince the sniper not only that World War II was over, but also that Japan had won. The Straggler would find proof of this victory on Tumon Bay, where honeymooners from his homeland spent their nights together in luxury hotels and dined in elegant restaurants run by Japanese. Toyota, Honda, and Datsun automobiles would help corroborate Fujita's argument. All Honey had to do was entice the Straggler out of the jungle.

"Tell him he can have me as a hostage until he's completely sure we're speaking the truth," Becky said.

"I can't do that, Becky."

"Tell him," she insisted.

Fujita sighed and gave in. Shouting forcefully, he relayed the gist of Becky's message to the sniper.

Meanwhile Denny's head clunked against the fender of the tank, and his eyes filmed over. Fujita and the Samurai Straggler were still pursuing their friendly chat. To Monegal's amazement, Becky reached over and closed Denny's eyes with the tips of her fingers.

"I'm afraid he's dead," she whispered. "Your sad young friend."

"Dead," the sergeant echoed her. Reflexively, not really believing in the usefulness of the gesture, not really knowing what else to do, he crossed himself. "Dead?"

"You've seen this before," Becky replied. "Surely it can't surprise you."

"It surprises the hell out of me!" Monegal snapped. "It always surprises the hell out of me!"

"I'm sorry," the young Guamanian woman said.

"Tan tonto no puedo creerlo," the sergeant told her. "So stupid I can't even believe it."

"At least you confessed him, Sergeant. At least you gave him a kind of absolution."

"Absolution for another stupidity! Where does it stop? How does it all begin, and where does the stupidity stop?"

Rebecca Facpi said nothing.

"'*Morir! Tremenda cosa!*' That's from an opera my wife loves. 'To die is a tremendous thing.' It's bullshit, though. Verdi should have lived long enough to see for himself." The sergeant put two questioning fingers on Denny Rojas's chin. "Beautiful bullshit."

"You don't know," Becky said. "Your perspective's too narrow."

Fujita interrupted this whispered argument: "He wants you to go up there with him. He says taking a hostage is a fine idea."

Scarcely hesitating, Becky scrambled to her feet, put her hands behind her head, and strode up the dappled hillside to the sniper's leaf-veiled redoubt. Fujita kept up the reassuring patter that Becky had programmed into him, and when she returned to them, five or six minutes later, she returned with the barrel of a rifle in her back and a wizened Oriental face peering over her shoulder. This was the man who had just murdered Denny Rojas.

Hate rose up in Monegal like vomit. "You cowardly little shit!" he raged, spilling a little.

The barrel of the Straggler's rifle shifted from Becky's back to the sergeant's sweat-streaked belly — whereupon, bowing and smiling, Fujita intervened to dispel the mounting tension.

To the American he said, "I've just told our friend that you greeted him with a fierce Yankee epithet much used between veteran warriors. Don't make him think otherwise, Sergeant Monegal, or we'll all pay for your rashness."

The sergeant fought to control both his anger and his chagrin. The sniper was a man in his early fifties, a contemporary of Fujita's, but with eyes so deep set they looked as if they had been fired into his head with a slingshot. Sallow-skinned and cadaverous, he had gone bald on Guam. The

clothes he wore — although obviously not his original uniform — had almost rotted away, and he stank of a vivid salt-sweat musk. Somehow his cartridge belt had withstood the inroads of mildew and constant use, and his rifle — a .30-06 Remington with a cross-hair scope — seemed to have come fresh from the factory crate. His name was Imai or Inukai or something ending with a long anguished vowel sound. Monegal made no real effort to get it straight. Everything about the little man was hateful to him.

After parleying a few more minutes, Fujita and his countryman fell into each other's arms. The latter was weeping. His ordeal on Guam was over. His ordeal back in Tokyo — reporters, photographers, politicians, hucksters — had not yet begun. A little man rescued from duty by its fanatic fulfillment at the expense of Dennis Rojas, who had not even been born when the Emperor signed formal surrender terms aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay.

Becky fetched Admiral Halsey back to the tank, and Monegal slung his friend's body over the horse's broad rump. Then the four survivors trudged up the western slope of the ravine and eventually into a tiny meadow with a magnificent view of the ocean. Tokyo Rose was grazing there, and Monegal thought he heard the sound of gunshots drifting down the coast from the air base. The Samurai Straggler cast an apprehensive look at Fujita, who rattled off an explanation that apparently allayed his fears. Monegal was still in the dark, though. The continuing noise made no sense.

"Firecrackers," Fujita said. "A few of your friends are already celebrating the Fourth."

The American felt hopelessly stupid not to have guessed.

Later, on the beach itself, Fujita pulled the sergeant aside, found his Italian wallet in his carryall, and counted into Monegal's hand several American bills of large denomination. Benjamin Franklin's face flashed past the sergeant's eyes at least six times.

"The authorities have probably already docked this sum from the young lieutenant's salary, Sergeant Monegal, but maybe you wouldn't mind sending these bills to his family."

"I don't want your money, Fujita, and Denny wouldn't want you to pay his lousy fine, either."

"I'm not giving this to *you,* I'm afraid. Nor do I think you know what the lieutenant would or would not have wanted me to do."

Rebecca Facpi, hearing their argument, came to them from the water's edge and touched the American's arm. "Money's the only sort of spiritual gift Honey knows how to make, Sergeant, but it's sincere, it's utterly sincere. Don't refuse it."

Monegal let his fingers close on the bills.

Fujita bowed. Then he and his graceful companion walked back to the weary Japanese infantryman waiting for them beside the horses and the vast indigo serenity of the sea. Bereft of everything but Fujita's money and his own festering hate, the surviving American stood transfixed, listening to the faraway firecrackers bursting, bursting in air....

TACCATI'S TOMORROW

Driving into Chattanooga, Bev had a foretaste of the way Gil's long-awaited meeting with the writer Nathan Taccati would sour. At the wheel of the Pinto wagon, Gil was banking a high, multilane curve when one of the six or seven foreign-looking kids in the pickup truck in front of them hurled something over its tailgate. Whatever the shirtless urchin had thrown bounced a few times and then came skittering at the Pinto like a tiny animal with its tail on fire. Bev put one hand on the dashboard and Gil wrenched the steering wheel to avoid hitting the jettisoned object, which, in a tatter of greasy smoke, exploded. Loudly.

"What the hell!" Gil cried, swerving again.

Bev heard someone honk, and immediately Gil cut right to avoid a collision. Shuddering, the wagon fishtailed, and Bev jammed her feet into the floormat as if to brake a runaway semi. Her companion had almost lost it. They both knew that he had come within a fingernail of turning them into a trash-compacted tangle against the concrete retaining wall. Gil eased off the accelerator and moved the wagon as far right as the expressway would let him.

Six or seven car lengths ahead, the kids in the pickup were laughing and horsing around. Mexican or Vietnamese, Bev decided. Distance and noonday glare made it hard to say. They were angular and swarthy, though, and they had enjoyed the hell out of nearly killing an American couple in a beat-up old station wagon.

"I'm going to catch 'em," Gil informed her. "You know, ram 'em like the bad guy in the chariot race in *Ben Hur.*"

"Gil Vannoy!"

"The little bastards threw a cherry bomb at us. Just about did us in." He was visibly shaking.

"Come on, Gil. You'll just make it worse."

His anger appeared to dissipate. Was he relieved that she did not require some conspicuous defense of their "honor" in this basically meaningless highway episode? Maybe. Bev was gratified to note that when the pickup slunk down an exit two ramps ahead of the one to Martin Luther King Boulevard, Gil made no effort to pursue it. He continued to the King exit — but it was not until he had parked the car in the garage beneath the Read House in downtown Chattanooga that he finally stopped shaking.

Bev Jefferds and Gil Vannoy had come north to Tennessee from Warm Springs, where he worked for the Georgia Power Company as a troubleshooter. Bev, who was the chief naturalist at nearby Mockingbird Gardens, had agreed to sacrifice four days of her own annual vacation to her companion's wish to attend a gathering of science-fiction writers, editors, and ostensible fans. (*Ostensible* because it was Bev's experience that the "fans" at these get-togethers clearly preferred partying to either reading or talking about science fiction.) Scheduled to last four days, this convention would consist primarily of panels, readings, costume contests, all-night card games, and impromptu or planned room parties.

Already, Bev noted, teenagers dressed up like Darth Vader clones or barbarian warriors or sequined *Wizard of Oz* caricatures were matter-of-factly strolling the sedate lobby and carpeted hallways of the Read House. While hauling luggage upstairs from the hotel's underground parking garage, in fact, Gil nearly ran into a nubile young woman in a fur halter and loincloth.

"That's why we've given up a trip to the beach, isn't it?" Bev teased him, once they were out of the young woman's hearing. "So you can eye the half-naked nymphets."

"I came to see Taccati."

"Well, I hope he's wearing bikini briefs. That would only be fair. After all, I've given up Jacksonville for another silly sci-fi convention."

"Ess eff," Gil said peevishly. "Not sci-fi."

"Whatever." Bev had heard his ready-made lecture on this subject before. Although he did not think of himself as a fan, in the three years of their relationship he had dragged her to three other conventions — not, as he always qualified this suspicious record, to leer at the poignant spaced-out girls in their ridiculous Maiden Form bra costumes or even to sit in on the sometimes stupefyingly tedious panel discussions. No, his purpose was always to meet one of the writers who had meant something to him as an introspective high-school kid and later as an idealistic young adult. (In another month he would celebrate — if that was the right word — his thirty-eighth birthday. Bev was six years younger.) Thank God, he was still an idealist of sorts. Reading what he liked to call "serious science fiction" seemed to allay his tendency to despair and encouraged him to believe in the open-ended future of the human species. This aura of fragile optimism was what had attracted Bev to him in the first place. It had enabled her to drive or fly with him to faraway conventions honoring Theodore Sturgeon, Frederik Pohl, and, finally, Ray Bradbury.

This time the convention's guest of honor was Nathan Taccati, a somewhat less popular author of philosophical science fiction with whom Gil said he had briefly corresponded in the late 1970s. At Gil's enthusiastic urging, Bev had recently read a paperback novel of the writer's, one of more than two dozen that Taccati had produced during the years of the Vietnam conflict. (Of late, Gil told her, Taccati had devoted himself to reviewing for magazines and to touring college campuses for lecture fees larger than any of his early paperback advances.) Bev had not cared for the "novel." It had combined an infuriating lack of detail with a stylistic clumsiness bespeaking both haste and an imperfectly developed eye. All the characters had been androids, robots, cyborgs, machines, or telemetrically controlled human beings.

Further, the whole clunky contrivance had taken place on a Nightmare Planet whose ugly two-syllable name — Andrex, Cybok, something like that — had done double duty as the book's title.

Gil and Bev's room was a neat but tiny cubicle on the fourth floor. In New York or L.A., a room no bigger would cost at least half again as much; and, if Bev knew Gil, they would be spending most of their time in the con suite or in the other loggia-level banquet rooms anyway. She watched as the excited fellow struggled to stow some of the gear they had brought up from the garage. One grocery bag contained the entire yellowing *oeuvre* of Nathan Taccati at novel length, and this lopsided sack Gil placed on the carpet next to the bed. He wanted not only to meet the Miami-based writer but to solicit autographs. Bev thought this an undeniably fannish obsession, but Gil argued that he did it only to increase the value of his library. For whom, though? She could not imagine him selling his musty holdings for anything less than the accumulated wealth of the Rockefellers.

"When do you think you'll see him, Gil? The con committee's going to have a hundred different things for him to do."

"He'll see me. We corresponded."

"Five years ago. Did he answer the letter you wrote him to say you were going to be here?"

"He didn't have time. I only sent it last Saturday. He may not've even gotten it, Bev."

With the toe of one tennis shoe, Bev nudged the grocery bag bulging with Nathan Taccati's futuristic fictions. Which one had she read? Gil told her again, but the moment he spoke the book's forgettable title, she promptly reforgot it. It was lumpish and inhumane. Bev said so aloud — not for the first time — and Gil pedantically pointed out that you read Taccati for ideas, not style or characterization. He dramatized philosophical concepts that most contemporary writers eschewed in favor of middle-aged angst and adultery.

"That's admirable?"

"Look, Taccati is a critic of technological excess, Bev. Of impersonalization. The nonhumans in his stories — the ones that upset you so much, the robots and aliens and so forth — they're metaphorical stand-ins for present-day men and women. That's why his stuff troubles people the way it does."

"It doesn't trouble *me,* fella. It makes me want to read something else."

"Taccati's an acquired taste. You have to grant him his premises. You have to get past old-fashioned notions of rationality to the breadth of his invention and the moral force of his weird little allegories. He's a latter-day, high-tech Ecclesiastes."

Bev laughed at this analogy. "Do you have a pen?"

"A pen?"

"So that your high-tech Ecclesiastes can write 'Vanity, vanity, all is vanity' on the flyleafs of all your holy first editions."

Fumbling at his pockets, Gil said, "I don't have a pen."

Bev opened her woven handbag and took from it the plastic ballpoint that she had bought in a drugstore in Warm Springs. She gave this to Gil, who looked at it as if it were an artifact retrieved from a Jovian moon by an unmanned space probe.

"Now you're all set," Bev said. "Just carry your grocery bag around until you find him, give him that pen, and tie him to a chair till he's signed everything but the elastic in your shorts."

"Ha ha."

"Just don't build your hopes up too high, Gil."

"I'm not. I haven't. Didn't Bradbury offer to take us to lunch? Didn't Ted Sturgeon hug me like a long-lost brother?"

"Okay," Bev said. "Okay."

But finding Taccati in the multistory labyrinth of the Read House was not easy, and cornering him for a private talk proved virtually impossible. Bev watched Gil's frustration

mount. The desk clerks would not give out the writer's room number, nor would the harried organizers of the convention. By using their program booklets and periodically checking the message board on the mezzanine level, Bev and Gil were able to *see* Taccati several times over the first two days. In fact, after a fiercely argumentative panel on "Creating Aliens" on Thursday night, Gil even managed to work his way forward and exchange awkward pleasantries with the Guest of Honor. Never, though, was Gil able to steer Taccati away from the other attendees for an intimate discussion of the coming world state or whatever an *ess-eff* writer and one of his most fervent admirers would be likely to talk about. And it was...well, *semi*-heartbreaking watching Gil try.

On Friday morning, Taccati gave a reading of an excerpt from the novel on which, according to Gil, he had been working for the past six years. Bev folded her arms and waited for it to be over. Although the man read with real animation and dash, the passage he had chosen meandered like a brook in an eroded meadow. Afterward, to Bev's dismay, Gil again squeezed through a chaos of folding chairs and chatting teenagers to talk to the Great Man. This time he actually succeeded in gaining his full attention. Bev heard Gil invite the portly writer to lunch. He would buy, of course, and they could resume in person the debate over ends and means that they had once pursued in their brief correspondence.

"Extraordinarily kind of you, Mr. Vannoy," Nathan Taccati said in his booming voice, "but — " He gestured at the man beside him, whom Bev recognized as the science-fiction editor at a large New York publishing house. A kid, really, T-shirted and muscular, more like a promising minor-league catcher than an up-and-coming literary doyen. " — I already have an invitation for lunch."

Bev made her way forward to give Gil moral support. He was glancing warily at the other people who had herded themselves around his hero. They included not only costumed fans but male and female writers as young as, or even younger than, the editor, rising stars whose work Gil privately

disparaged as either flashy or callow. One of these newcomers — an olive-skinned creature with the faint shadow of a mustache on her upper lip — had held forth at length on the "Creating Aliens" panel, contradicting or qualifying Taccati's every word. Today, though, she was clearly a member of the privileged circle encompassed by the young editor's expense account. Bev could sense the invisible force field emanating from these people, excluding Gil from their company.

"If I could go along," she was chagrined to hear Gil tell them, "I'd be happy to pay my own way."

"I'm afraid we'll be talking business," the T-shirted editor said. "A lot of it's going to be boring and some of it'll be confidential. Why don't you and Nate try to work out something for tomorrow."

"Jack, I'm just about booked solid," Taccati said.

"I believe it," said the olive-skinned young woman. "Everybody here wants a piece of you."

"Any time," Gil put in. "At your convenience, sir."

Taccati finally met Gil's gaze, acknowledging him as a person rather than an animate annoyance. But, Bev noted, Taccati made this acknowledgment only grudgingly, as if he had a humane code of behavior denying him recourse to outright snobbery. Bev sensed that Gil had trapped Taccati with this code; the man felt sorry for her beau, would find it hard to sleep if he lied or dissimulated to avoid the interview that Gil wanted. Taccati had no choice but to do the right thing.

"How early do you get up?" he asked.

"Just name the hour."

"Meet me at seven-thirty at the McDonald's across the street for breakfast. That'll give us time to talk before these heartless Simon Legrees start cracking the whip across my back again."

"I'll buy," Gil reiterated.

"Let's make it Dutch, Mr. Vannoy. That way, we can order everything we want and say whatever we like to each other.

When Jack here buys, for instance, I have to pretend all his lousy acquisitions are masterpieces—even though he's turning his house into a schlock factory without parallel in commercial publishing."

Everyone around Taccati guffawed, the dumpling-cheeked Jack louder than anybody else. Bev, incredulous, realized that she was the only person near the Guest of Honor not utterly tickled by his lamely witty repartée. Then she and Taccati locked eyes, Taccati appearing to register her tacit disapproval and she reddening because she had let him.

Gil, unaware of this silent exchange, said, "Seven-thirty, then," and extended his hand so that Taccati had to shake it.

"He tossed you a crumb," Bev told Gil upstairs in their room. "Breakfast at McDonald's! That's not much better than asking you to sit on the edge of the bathtub while His Royal Majesty shaves."

"Bev — "

"You don't intend to lug your bag of books under the Golden Arches so that he can autograph copies over lukewarm hotcakes and Egg McMuffins, do you?"

"You were the one who told me not to get my hopes up. At least he's seeing me. Didn't I tell you he would?"

The afternoon and evening of the second day dragged for Bev. With three other conventions behind her, she felt that she had already seen and heard everything. *Déjà vu* did not apply. The experience was instead one of grueling Sisyphean recapitulation. You climbed steps (or rode elevators) and got nowhere. You looked at amateur and professional artwork that seemed to be on endless rotation from other conventions. You thumbed through books and magazines that you had thumbed through in other huckster rooms in other cities. You listened to writerly talk — gripes, counsel, tricks of the trade — almost as old as the profession. The emphasis on word-processing systems and computer-game spinoffs might be new, but so what? Bev had no desire to learn about these

up-to-the-minute technologies; she was a woods and wildflower person who liked good music and informal talk with people who were not so single-minded that they either harped or harangued.

Most convention-goers were just not her kind of folk. If that was snobbery, which, intellectually, she hated, well, Bev knew that they in turn dismissed her as a "mundane." This was a fannish epithet that not only pigeonholed but obliterated; it wiped you out, as someone altogether beneath consideration. She could live with Gil's bouts of fannishness because, thank God, they broke out so rarely, as if she had fallen for an otherwise decent Joe who got hives every time he ate fresh plums but whose taste for the fruit sometimes overcame his native good sense. And so Bev was bored, irritated with Gil for letting Taccati patronize him, and anxious for Sunday to come so that they could pack up and go home.

Maybe *Taccati* had already gone home. After his reading, no one could find him. He missed an afternoon panel, he was nowhere to be seen that evening, and a bit of midnight Grand Guignol that he was supposed to narrate in the main banquet room had to lurch along with a surrogate emcee. Watching this last campy production, Bev told Gil that unless she went with him tomorrow morning, he would probably be eating breakfast alone. All signs suggested that the Great Taccati had skipped out.

Gil's silence, Bev thought, indicated that he had reluctantly reached the same conclusion.

After the last make-believe ghoul fanged its last lingerie-clad victim, the couple rode an elevator downstairs to the lobby. They had decided to have a nightcap before turning in. Neither of them spoke on the ride down, and it occurred to Bev that they were as glum as dyspeptic cops.

In the open space beneath the hotel's mezzanine, however, a baby-grand piano dominated a large square of marble floor. At the piano's keyboard, plunking out a melancholy jazzish tune, sat one of Taccati's younger colleagues. Bev

halted to listen to him play. His name, Gil said, was Azoba Obiesie, a subsidiary guest of the convention. Checking her program book, Bev discovered that the dark, slender man was an expatriot Nigerian, the only African with full membership in the Science Fiction Writers of America. He had a gaunt, intelligent face with huge, lustrous eyes, which, playing, he sometimes closed. His only upper garment — somehow, it did not look ludicrous on him — was a sleeveless thermal parka of pale lavender. Bev was astonished by the nimbleness of the Nigerian's fingers, the flowing ease of his technique.

"C'mon, Miz Jefferds," Gil grumbled. "I'm ready for a good stiff shot of bourbon and branch water."

"Go ahead. I want to hear this. I'll catch up with you in three or four minutes."

Gil hesitated only a moment before sliding his hands into his trouser pockets and sauntering off in the direction of the first-floor bar. The slouchy set of his shoulders bespoke his irritation.

So what? Bev asked herself. I've accompanied him to smoke-filled room parties and idiotic group discussions, he can cool his heels a little while out of deference to *me*. So she cocked her head and listened to Azoba Obiesie make magic at the old-fashioned instrument panel of the baby grand. When he had finished, she applauded, and the African smiled at her sidelong in a way at once amused and self-deprecating.

"Thank you very much, kind lady."

"Do you know Beethoven's 'Albumblatt'?" Bev impulsively asked him. This was a piece that she often tried to play on her clunky upright. Mastery of its complicated fingering still eluded her.

Obiesie leaned into the piano. Without any additional coaxing or even the benefit of sheet music, he began to play. Clean, clear music filled the hotel's inner court, rising to the heedless slave girls and starship pilots on the galleries, protracting itself with the welcomeness of a favorite taste or easy, unrushed sex. The notes of the Beethoven melody filigreed

the stale hour, muting the disappointments of the day. Then the music ceased, and Bev handed Obiesie her program book.

"Please sign this for me," she said. "Right there next to your biographical sketch."

Obiesie raised his eyebrows, taking the booklet with what Bev read as true humility rather than put-upon reluctance. He signed its margin and handed it back.

"Do you know if Nathan Taccati's still here?" she asked to cover her own embarrassment.

"Why? Are you an admirer of his?"

"Oh, no, not at all. A friend of mine's supposed to have breakfast with him tomorrow, though."

Obiesie glanced conspicuously at his watch. "Today, you mean." But he assured Bev that Taccati had not left Chattanooga and that he would almost certainly honor his promise to breakfast with her friend. Taccati, after all, was an honorable man.

"Thank you," Bev said, retreating from the baby grand. "Thank you, Mr. Obiesie."

The Nigerian nodded abstractedly, swung back to the keyboard, and cajoled from it another angelic smattering of jazz.

At exactly 7:30 a.m., Bev Jefferds and Gil Vannoy were in the McDonald's across the street from the Read House. Taccati had not arrived. For that reason, Bev was especially glad that she had dissuaded Gil from bringing along his grocery bag of books. He was coming on too much like a fan, sacrificing dignity to overeager earnestness. Even he seemed to understand that. Therefore, he had left his books in their room.

Bev found a place in the dining room — it was crowded this morning — while Gil got in line behind a pair of black men in boots and overalls. From where she sat, Bev had a good view of the entire service counter, and, very soon, Taccati came in, nodded at Gil, and added himself to a line even longer than his.

"Tell me what you want, sir, and I'll get it for you," Gil told the writer. "My treat and my pleasure. You can go sit down with Bev." He nodded over his shoulder at her.

Taccati shook his head. "Kind of you, 'preciate it. But everything I eat on the road is tax-deductible and I need the receipt. 'Sides, haven't made up my mind yet. Pro'ly change it 'fore I get to the register. Go ahead, Mr. Vannoy, go ahead."

"Gil."

"Gil, then." In a black wool cap and a pink satin jacket — Bev decided that science-fiction writers had strange sartorial tastes — Taccati was a squinting soft-sculpture monument to himself. He made a small show of studying the illuminated menu behind the counter.

Ultimately, the volume of McDonald's morning business prevented the writer from joining Bev and Gil until they had almost finished eating. They made room for his Styrofoam packages while Taccati remained standing to cream and stir his coffee.

"Don't usually sit down with my back to all the other customers in a bar or restaurant," he declared. "For that very blunder, Wild Bill Hickock paid with his life — in a saloon in Deadwood, South Dakota."

"Imagine that," Bev said.

"But since you guys beat me to the dividing wall, I'm gonna make an exception and let you keep your seats."

"Gracious of you," Bev said.

With his plastic stirrer, Taccati touched the brim of his Greek fisherman's cap. From then on, even after he sat down, their talk — in Bev's estimation — shambled around like an alms-seeker in the parlor of a nursing home.

Gil, she saw, could not figure out how to focus the meeting. Taccati had plenty of words, but they all took spark from the tyranny of either his large intestine or the little minds at the Internal Revenue Service. I'm a fool to eat so much. Why can't the government leave a poor but virtuous writer like me alone? Nothing at all about Gil's favorite topics — the

inevitability of a single worldwide government, the infinite promise of space travel, the genetic perfectability of the human species. This morning, at any rate, Taccati's thoughts had less exalted origins, his billfold or his gut.

About twenty seconds after his Wild Bill Hickock remark, Bev had tried to tune the boorish geezer out. Nevertheless, she suspected that Taccati was purposely avoiding matters of substance, holding Gil at arm's length with spinsterish intimacies that really divulged nothing but his social awkwardness and his lack of face-to-face warmth.

Suddenly, an angry-looking black man on the other side of the dining room rudely hailed Gil. Was that possible? Bev wondered. No one at their table had done anything to offend the man. Maybe his shout had been directed at someone behind them. Bev glanced hastily back, but beyond the lattice-topped divider was nothing but a narrow walkway to one of the exits. This walkway was empty.

"Hey, Slim Jim!" the black man reiterated. "Yeah, *you*. Talkin' to you, Slim Jim. Cain' you hear?"

"What?" Gil managed.

"'What?' 'What?' he say. Lemme borroh you pen, thah's what? I need to borroh you pen, Slim Jim."

Taccati, who had continued to blather through the importunate Negro's first remark, finally shut up. Pointedly, he did not turn around. Bev's breakfast made a small but perceptible lurch in her stomach. The black man appeared to have allies. Two or three tough-looking teenagers sat to his immediate right, their expressions unhelpfully neutral. Bev could not tell if the angry man's rude tactics tickled or embarrassed them.

Their leader — if he *was* their leader — had a flabby-looking body but the face of a smutty bull terrier. His clothes, a torn plaid shirt hanging loose over grease-stained khaki trousers, were plainly less expensive than those of the long-limbed toughs nearby. Bev also saw that, his demand for a pen aside, he had no scrap or cardboard on which to write.

"He wants to borrow your pen," Taccati whispered.

"How 'bao' it, Slim Jim? Gimme it here."

"No!" Gil blurted.

"'No'? Whachu mean, 'No'? I'm gonna give it back, ain' I? Who you thin' you are, anyway?"

"I'm not anybody," Gil said, clearly struggling to stay calm. "And I'd've loaned you my pen if you'd had the courtesy to ask me decently."

"What the shih."

"My name isn't Slim Jim, and I was talking to Mr. Taccati here when you interrupted us."

The black man began to mumble curses, looking away from their table and also from his teenage allies — as if no one on the premises could comprehend the enormity of this latest affront to his righteousness. Several people in the dining room looked warily back and forth, between Gil and his unintelligibly lisping enemy. They probably feared the outbreak of a brawl. So did Bev. Taccati, meanwhile, opened his pink satin jacket and reached for the ballpoint pen clipped to his shirt pocket.

"Don't you dare," Bev warned him.

Taccati let go of the edge of his jacket.

Bev now imagined all four blacks approaching Gil to extort her pen from him. Instead, the teenagers abandoned their tables and filed down the far corridor to the exit opposite the Read House. Either the prize wasn't worth the aggravation, or they had never been the plaid-shirted man's comrades at all. Maybe, in fact, their departure was meant to signal their unanimous rejection of his behavior. Bev was unsure of their motives but grateful to them for withdrawing. Gil, she could tell, was no less relieved.

Still muttering obscenities, the would-be pen-borrower got up and began wandering from booth to booth. In one of the register lines, he buttonholed another black man and pointed at their table. The second man shook his head, took his coffee cup, and sat down at a booth well removed from theirs. Was the troublemaker emotionally disturbed? Was he on drugs?

For a long time, impossible to ignore, he patrolled the edge of the main dining room.

"I admire your courage," Taccati told Gil. "But it isn't much to loan a man a pen."

"He'd've never gotten it back," Bev said indignantly.

"So what? How much could it have cost?"

"Money isn't the issue," Bev said, not bothering to hide the fact that she was disgusted with Gil's appeasement-minded hero.

"Well, let's not argue," he said. "Bad for the digestion."

Breakfast more or less ended on that note.

Paranoid about the morning's events, Gil snooped around outside McDonald's before allowing Bev to step onto the sidewalk. But his enemy had already left by another exit, and no one else was lying in wait on the boulevard to ambush them. A moment later, in the hotel's foyer, Nathan Taccati took his leave of the couple, wishing them a good day and a safe trip home on Sunday.

"Thus I kiss off my dear friend Gil Vannoy," Bev said. She aimed a sweeping Dinah Shore farewell at the door of the elevator behind which the writer had just disappeared.

"Cut it out, Bev. He's not so bad."

"Why? Because he said he admired your courage?"

Gil shook his head exasperatedly, but she could tell that her assessment of the situation was right on target. For Gil, Taccati's offhand praise had made up for a lot, including his self-engrossed behavior. It almost redeemed their disturbing confrontation with the angry black man. Almost. Bev could not help wondering if the troublemaker would now try to find someone else on whom to take out his frustrations. This thought niggled like an ill-set hook.

Later that day, they went browsing through the huckster room amid dozens of long, low tables hopefully overburdened with merchandise. Books, slipcased comics, movie-poster albums, board games, boxes of handmade pewter jewelry and

funny tin lapel buttons. Taccati had just failed to show for another scheduled panel, and many of the conventioneers had gravitated to the huckster room simply to pass the time until the evening's banquet and the obligatory guest-of-honor speech.

At the banquet, Bev reflected, Nathan Taccati would be in his glory. In front of large audiences, he was a very accomplished speaker and something of a showman.

"Pardon me," a familiar masculine voice said, bringing her back to the moment.

Bev turned. The expatriot Nigerian who had played "Albumblatt" for her was standing beside her with a small package wrapped in brown paper. The package nudged its way into Bev's hands.

"What's this?"

"For your friend," Azoba Obiesie said. "From Nathan."

Gil was three or four tables away, examining pewter statuettes of unicorns and dragons.

"Why doesn't Nathan give it to my friend himself?"

"He's ill. A stomach problem. But he asked me to give this to you, to give to your friend, with his most sincere compliments."

"Does that mean he's going to miss the banquet, too?"

"No help for it, I'm afraid. He asked me to take his place. I agreed. I can promise you only a trifling sort of talk, followed by a brief performance of rather nifty card tricks."

"I'd rather hear you play the piano."

"Wrong venue, kind lady. Undoubtedly the wrong venue." Obiesie regaled her with his gaunt smile, bowed, and disappeared into the crowd of customers clogging Bev's aisle.

She worked her way down this same aisle to Gil and gave him the package from Taccati. His initial puzzled expression turned into a grin of anticipation and delight. He led Bev out of the huckster room to an ornate couch on the mezzanine overlooking the inner court. Here they sat down together to open the package. Gil tore the paper away, revealing a dilapidated paperback book.

"*That's* lovely," Bev said.

"It *is* lovely," Gil replied. "It's a first edition of the only novel ever to win Taccati the Hugo Award. Almost any of the book dealers in there would give me twenty or thirty dollars for it. Some of his fans would lay down even more than that, a hundred or a hundred-and-fifty maybe. It's *rare.*"

"Well, I hope he autographed it for you."

"I'm sure he did. Look, there's even a note attached to the inside of the back cover."

Bev took the book from Gil and unclipped the handwritten note. "Shall I read it to you?"

"Be my guest."

"'Dear Slim Jim,'" Bev began, shaking out the note so that she could see it more clearly, "'I've been thinking a lot about what happened this morning in McDonald's. Upon reflection, it seems to me that the whole incident was avoidable. When called out as Slim Jim, you might have better responded, 'Hey, Slack Jack, dinna yo' mamma teach you no manners?' In a friendly, bantering way, of course. You see, Slack Jack approached you too black, which pissed you off, and you replied too white, which pissed him off.'"

Gil's jaw had visibly begun to jut.

"There's more," Bev told him. "Do you want to hear it?" When he made no reply, she continued reading Taccati's note aloud to the end: "'Misunderstandings of this kind trouble me so deeply because they're precisely the thing that keeps the different racial, religious, and political factions of our species at loggerheads. And Gil, it's people who think and perceive as we do who have the *major* responsibility to build the bridges of understanding that others lack the background, the fellow feeling, or the will to engineer. I hope you'll think a little more about the way you handled that man's simple request. In the meantime, here's an early copy of *Androk* for your library. It pleases me to think of it sitting on the shelf of someone as bright and discerning as you.' It's signed, Gil. The signature is 'Overweight Nate.'"

A cute signature for a transparent little scolding, Bev thought. As for the book, it was nothing but a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine of Taccati's rebuke go down.

Gil did not move. With brown paper spread across his lap like an apron, he sat stone-still. Taccati had apparently shorn him of the one memory of their breakfast meeting that Gil wanted to preserve.

"Damn the superior old fart," he said. He removed the copy of *Androk* from Bev's hands and deliberately stripped the paperback novel of its cover. He ripped each of the pages away from the glued binding. He put the mutilated remains of the gift on the couch, stood up, and, squinting down at the baby grand in the portico, told Bev that he was ready to go home.

"Of course you are," she said. "I was ready to go home two minutes after we got here."

But she, too, looked at the elegant old piano downstairs, and the sight of it made her remember that her trip to Chattanooga with Gil had not been an unmitigated disaster. This evening, going home, they would completely redeem it. After sunset was the best time to embark on a long summer drive. On the balmy ride home in Gil's beat-up station wagon, she would lean back in her seat and think about that enigmatic Nigerian playing Beethoven.

Sometimes you lost, sometimes you won, and sometimes you drew even. On this occasion, Bev thought, maybe she and Gil had come out a little ahead.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE MONTHLY
PULPHOUSE PUBLISHING
Box 1227
Eugene, OR 97440