

A Charles Deemer Reader

A CHARLES DEEMER READER

Fiction, Essays, Plays, Screenplay, Poems



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STORIES

Do I have the family madness, Richard? Is this the beginning?

From "The Idaho Jacket"

THE IDAHO JACKET

Prism International (Spring, 1973)

Roll of Honor, *Best American Short Stories 1974*

Richard, realize one thing: I am beginning to wear the Idaho jacket comfortably now. Perhaps I'm not wearing it as comfortably as you would have, had genetics not played its tricks on us all and given the second son, and not the first, the bulky characteristics of the father. To Buck, I gather, biology remains so much scientific claptrap and when he gave you the jacket he did so knowing it was not your size. But you had asked for the jacket as a kid, the story goes, and so when you turned twenty-one, Buck gave it to you. And I have no quarrel with any of this past history, Richard, not even as I wear the jacket today. Frankly for a long time I did not understand why you gave me the jacket, particularly with the gesture by which it became mine. Not understanding, I was unable to wear the jacket comfortably. I wore it, yes, but rather with the self-consciousness with which a timid boy will wear a Halloween costume. That soon may be history, too.

I'm as ignorant about Idaho as I ever was. The memories I have before Mother took me with her to Los Angeles remain vague, like those hazy events subsequent to an accident which one experiences while conscious but later cannot recall. I cannot say whether or not I thought it was strange to be going on a long trip without you and Buck. Mother must have answered satisfactorily whatever questions I asked, for my mind unleashes no ghosts of a home and boyhood lost in Idaho. To tell the truth, I have no memory of the Idaho jacket before references to it began to appear in your letters.

When did we begin to correspond? By the time I was a teenager your letters had become my text, a text wiser than the dull books I was expected to read at school. Well, I shudder to think what Dr. Jefferson would make of that remark! Mother, God rest her soul, retained one idiosyncrasy which irritated me to the very moment of her death — her addiction to psychoanalysis. I must have told you what her last words to me were. "Tell Dr. Jefferson I have no more repressions." If I didn't know better, I'd think she said that for my benefit, hoping to get a grin out of me before passing away. Richard, something is grossly unethical about the way that headshrinker catered to Mother's obsession to be "normal." We all know she was a bit mad — madness was a large part of her charm, wasn't it? She was very kind. Eccentric and unpredictable, yes, but kind to the end. Could her last words have been for me after all?

At any rate, your letters have always meant something special to me. When so much space in them came to anticipate your twenty-first birthday, the day on which you'd receive Buck's jacket, I found myself growing excited with you. I was excited even though none of your reasons for wanting the jacket made sense to me. You wrote me so many stories about your northern Idaho, the land, and about something called "the high lonesome" and how the Idaho jacket was part of each, but not once did you say that you wanted the jacket simply because it had belonged to Buck. Reading your tales, I decided you were an incurable romantic. But my fingers were crossed for you all the same.

Then you mailed me a photograph and in it you were wearing a green and black plaid jacket several sizes too large for you. Buck's Idaho jacket, I presumed. I put the photograph in my wallet, often taking it out to look at it. Do you see a physical resemblance between us? I fail to. Nonetheless the photograph, whatever lack of family similarity it documented, brought me closer to you. Looking at it, I began to want more and more to see you, I should say to meet you, to sit across the room from you, to

talk to you, Richard. To talk to you. I don't know why I felt this way about you but didn't have the same strong desire to get to know Buck. I'm sure Dr. Jefferson could come up with something! Well, he wouldn't necessarily be right. I just know I wanted very much to meet you. I wanted to know my brother. But although I was fourteen, and older in many ways, when alone with Mother I couldn't bring myself to broach the subject of a visit. I don't know why.

I feel foolish admitting this. It should have been easy to visit. Do you know how far it is to Orofino from Los Angeles? Something over a thousand miles. Then why did we all wait until Mother died before meeting? We essentially were strangers, you, Buck and I. If Mother hadn't willed to be buried in Orofino, would we remain strangers today? What was holding us back from each other?

So Mother died and I took her home to Idaho. What do we ever know about death, Richard? Or even about dying? So many questions! The coffin was on the train, fortunately out of my sight, and I thought a lot about death on the trip north, thought about it while drinking myself into maudlin reverie. Death happens to each of us, we decide, but can this really be the end of our journey? I doubt that my young man's theories about this will last out middle age. Well, I'm not sure I have any theories.

I drank my way to Idaho. And because I was drunk when the train pulled into Orofino, I can't recall whether you were wearing the jacket at the station or not. To tell the truth, I have only a fuzzy recollection of events up to and including the funeral. Too much happened at once for all of us, I think you would agree. Mother was dead; we were meeting. Vaguely I recall that you and Buck shared my anxiety drink for drink. What a sorry lot we must have been for the relatives, husband and two sons staggering under liquor instead of under a more dignified grief. I met lots of relatives at the funeral, didn't I?

I do remember the poker game. It began two or three days after we buried her, I think, at the instigation of

Buck's Indian friend, Gib Hill. You must realize, Richard, what a city boy I am and that the trip to bury Mother provided the occasion for my first encounter with — shall I call it the wilderness? The funeral seems longer ago than a year, doubtless because so much of its presence was drowned in sorrow, in liquored mourning for Mother. Yet there may be no more dignified way to suffer, Richard. There may be no dignified way to suffer at all.

I'm a city boy and the poker game fits right into the romantic Idaho landscape. When I set Orofino against Los Angeles, I can't comprehend Buck's complaints that Idaho is getting too "civilized," that Idaho isn't the same country in which he grew up, that the hills have been stripped of timber. To my eye, the hills around Orofino are covered with more trees than I could find in all of Southern California. And the Clearwater River is getting polluted, Buck complained, and yet the Clearwater is, yes, the clearest river I've ever seen. Too many people moving in? Into Orofino! How many could even find it on a map? For me, Richard, to enter Orofino was to step into a page from the journal of Lewis and Clark.

And as if towering trees, as if foaming rivers and a vast unpopulated landscape weren't enough, you had to show me Indians and poker games! For a while, cynically, I thought the whole affair was a sham. Indians, hard-drinking lumberjacks, two-day poker games — it was all part of a skit you had arranged to impress your city boy of a brother. What is it the cowboys say in the westerns? "Let's pull one on the dude," or something close.

Endings have a way of defining what passed before them, and of course I have no doubts about events now, not about those events I can recall. We were at home, two or three days after the funeral, drinking coffee at last although it was well into evening. I felt out of place, the son who was a stranger, who didn't know his father or his brother. I wanted to know you both, certainly, and had stayed over in order to get to know you. But so far I remained a stranger and I was worried, the way things

were going, that I'd return to Los Angeles one.

Then Gib Hill arrived. His appearance was reason enough to doubt the authenticity of what followed. Los Angeles is the home of the world's weirdest sects, Richard, and Gib's attire reminded me of one of the many costumes a native comes to accept as being part of Southern California's natural landscape. Gib, by dressing the way he did, gave himself away: he was not a "real person." Add together the black cowboy hat, with a red rose in its band; the dark glasses, never removed; the fringed jacket, the faded jeans and the wide black belt with its silver dollar buckle; the black cowboy boots, winged with red eagles on its sides — add them together and you have an actor, a ham, a mere surrogate of an "authentic personality": a Marlon Brando motorcycle-riding cowboy. This judgment was Mother's legacy to me: that damned analyst's point of view!

"Poker game is hatching at The Lumberman's," Gib told Buck. Well, at least The Lumberman's was authentic, I had learned that. Buck had owned the bar and hotel in the forties and Mother, those old Idaho stories went, had dealt black jack there. My mother? The old photographs and stories aside, the woman who raised me in Los Angeles, the woman who gave what little money she could spare to an analyst because she wanted to be "normal," this woman was different from your card-dealer. Yet not as different as I used to think.

We followed Gib to The Lumberman's, where at a back table the poker chips were already up for sale. You were wearing the Idaho jacket, I recall, and its cuffs dropped to your knuckles. The men sitting at the bar were kidding you about the jacket's not fitting as soon as we entered, and I gathered it was an old joke between you. As a matter of fact, you did look a little silly in the jacket. It is one thing for a boy to stomp around the house in his father's slippers, quite another for an adult to do something very nearly the same. You must have been 25 then, for I had just turned 21. And yet our ages seemed to

be reversed, Richard, and I acted like the more mature brother. You answered one old man's kidding by picking him up and carrying him around the room on your shoulders while the others laughed and hooted. To be honest, I was embarrassed. Embarrassed for us both, perhaps.

Buck bought into the game and you wanted in, too, but when you learned that I didn't know how to play poker (I still can see your disbelief), you stayed out, despite my objections, in order to keep me company. We took a table near the game and began what turned into a marathon of drinking. Or at least it was a marathon for some of you.

The poker game intrigued me from the beginning. It was played so theatrically, like a scene in the lowest grade western, which only increased my doubts about the authenticity of the entire affair. Talk about cool characters, the likes of Paul Newman or Steve McQueen! Buck and Gib seemed to be having a contest to see who could push forward the most chips with the least concern. I expected to see money change hands, yes, but I did not expect to see poker pots worth hundreds of dollars. I did not watch in awe for long: I concluded that the game was a sham, just as I had suspected. No one except Hollywood actors can bet a hundred dollars on two pair (I've since played poker myself, Richard) without a flutter of emotion. At any moment I expected the fraud to get the best of Buck, Gib and the others, at which time they would break into hysterics, the joke revealed and on me. I watched the game silently, waiting for the punch line.

You had warned me that poker games at The Lumberman's had been known to run for days on end but I doubted this, too, since I doubted the legitimacy of the game itself. But the game went on, while the bar filled with boisterous spectators who looked as though they were willing to wait for the outcome, no matter how long it took. By the time I drank myself into drowsiness — it must have been three in the morning by then — the game's end was nowhere in sight. Perhaps I then decided that the punch

line was more subtle, that the laughing at me wouldn't begin until morning. You excused yourself to talk to the bartender and returned with a key: we had rooms upstairs. "You're sleeping in Nellie's old room," you told me, grinning. "Nellie was the best looking whore on this side of the Clearwater." Nellie, the prostitute, of course. Of course, Richard. I'm sure I shook my head. You were carrying the joke too far, making it much too melodramatic.

In the morning the game was still in progress. No one had dropped out, though it was evident by the distribution of chips around the table that Buck and Gib were winning. Many spectators had retired. Buck waved as I entered the room. I went to the bar, where soon you joined me. We drank "red dogs," beer with tomato juice in it. After several drinks, you suggested breakfast.

On full stomachs we hiked through the hills behind Orofino. Once, when we had to crawl through a barbed-wire fence, I warned that we might be trespassing. You laughed and went on. You led me to a place with the improbable name of Crazy Man's Gulch, a hollow to which (the story went) Buck escaped as a young man whenever the "high lonesome" got the best of him. I listened as though to a foreign language as you went on to tell me about the gallon jug of whiskey that accompanied him, about the Idaho jacket that was his bed, about the young wife (our mother) left behind. When I suggested that perhaps Buck needed psychiatric help more than Mother ever did, you said, "Hell, we're all nuts. Only Buck likes being crazy. Relishes it." I was not prepared to believe you, Richard. There is no Crazy Man's Gulch in Los Angeles and gallon jugs are filled with Gallo or Italian Swiss Colony. Young wives left behind commit adultery.

Returning after the hike, we began drinking again. The poker game went on, and spectators returned in large numbers, watching with an enthusiasm more proper to a horse race. Slowly players began to drop out, as much from exhaustion as from lack of funds, until only three were left, Buck and Gib included.

Buck was the first of the three to hit a losing streak. After dinner he asked you, "How much money you got?"

"A hundred. Maybe more."

I looked for a sign that you were kidding. But you weren't, for soon you passed him the money.

"Give me the jacket," Buck said.

You took it off and handed it to him.

Richard, what was I supposed to make of all this? Although by then I was beginning to believe that the game was legitimate, only legitimacy being able to sustain itself to the very brink of boredom, as I watched you take off the jacket I found myself with doubts all over again. As before, the scene was lifted from the worst western I could imagine — the passing of the rabbit's foot, the lucky silver dollar, the magic spur, after which the winning streak would follow. Buck put on the jacket and kidded Gib, "Watch out, redskin, I'm wearing the luckiest coat in Idaho." Gib said, "Deal." Was I supposed to believe such dialogue? We don't have similar melodrama in Los Angeles.

Your own reaction puzzled me. You seemed offended that Buck wanted to wear the jacket. Was he an Indian giver, was that it? For Christ's sake, Richard, enough was enough! That's why I begged my departure and went upstairs. You were carrying the joke too far. If you wanted your dude, you were going to have to come upstairs to catch him.

And later, hearing the knock on the door, I prepared for the punch line. Finally! You stood in the doorway, carrying a bottle of whiskey and looking morose.

"Buck dropped out," you told me. "He lost big." Was this the last parcel of bait? Who was hiding in the hallway?

You came in, sat on the bed, opened the bottle and drank from it. I turned down a swig. No Hollywood gestures for me.

"How much is losing big?" I asked.

"He lost what cash we had between us. Big enough. He lost in the jacket, that's what surprises me. He always bragged about never losing in the jacket."

Who could miss this melodramatic springing of the trap? I waited silently and soon there was another knock on the door. Buck let himself in.

"Here's your jacket," he said and tossed the Idaho jacket into your lap. He stopped just inside the doorway, looking ill at ease. You handed him the bottle, he drank.

"What's the matter with you two?" he finally asked. "I'm the guy who lost the silver, I'm the one who should look gloomy. Smile, why don't you?" He turned and walked away.

"Where's he going?"

You replied with an expression that said, Don't you know? Then you remembered that Buck and I were strangers.

"He's going down to get drunk. Gib won, so Gib buys the drinks." You stood up, carrying the jacket. "You coming?"

"Downstairs?" I could hear the festivity below.

"You don't think Buck came all the way up here just to give me the jacket, do you? He wants us down there to amuse him so he doesn't have to think about losing."

I said, "He took Mother's death hard, didn't he?"

You shrugged. "He's got losing to worry about now."

Without further word you tossed me the jacket. I followed you downstairs, Richard, where we would conclude our last drunk together, but it wasn't until the next afternoon, while I was packing, that you explained to me that the gesture of tossing me the Idaho jacket had meant it was mine.

I'M LEARNING TO WEAR the jacket comfortably. Other

coats appear on campus — letterman's sweaters, Army fatigue jackets, leather jackets — but none rivals the Idaho jacket. It's been in every whorehouse and drunk tank in northern Idaho, Buck claims. Is it then too romantic to insist that the jacket is special?

I've changed since wearing the jacket, Richard, that's what I must make clear. Take today, for example. I stopped on my way home from campus to watch the construction that is going on down the block. Another high-rise apartment building is going up, something quick to meet the demands of increasing enrollment, and all day long the clamor and rumble of construction makes studying impossible. Passing by on the way home, I sometimes stop to watch.

Putting up an apartment building is a rather straightforward procedure, I think, one without your Idaho melodrama. There is no mystery about what is going on, even if to a casual observer the purposes of the workmen appear to be random. There are blueprints and guidelines and specifications to follow, and everything is figured out ahead of time on paper.

I'm not sure why I stopped to watch today, or any other day for that matter. I think the building going up is ugly.

But today as I was watching, a middle-aged man joined me. He was a businessman by appearance, or perhaps a professor since we were so close to campus. He watched the men drive nails, a crane lift boards, workers scan blueprints and then he said, but not really to me, "Terrible." He seemed embarrassed to have attracted my attention and, perhaps for this reason, he quickly added, "I'm afraid I'm old-fashioned. I prefer the old homes that used to be here. But you can't argue with progress, can you?" he laughed. And he went along his way, whistling.

I don't know, Richard. I get scared. Is it normal to be twenty-two and scared? Shouldn't I be charging out into the world, lance confidently poised, eager and willing to

carve out my niche of stability? I graduate this year! Sometimes I wish the Idaho jacket fitted me like it fits you. I'd hunch myself down into it and hide.

Am I making any sense? I can't think of "sense" without thinking of Dr. Jefferson and *his* kind of sense. I abhor it, Richard. I'd rather be scared. I'd rather be mad! Today, as the man departed whistling, I turned to the rising building and looked at it as I had never looked at it before. "Terrible," he had said, but so what? Who among us had any control of its going up?

But what if I *took* control? Not by myself really, for I'm quite sure — I can't explain it rationally — that if I hadn't been wearing the Idaho jacket, I'd never have done what I did next. Somehow wearing the jacket justified what followed.

The construction area, of course, is fenced off. A number of doors provide entrances into the working area but above each of them is a sign that reads, DANGER AREA! CLOSED TO PUBLIC. NO ADMITTANCE. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. In the evening, after the workmen go home, children climb the fence and play in the area but during the day both adults and children heed the warning. I always have. But today, Richard, I didn't.

I entered one of the plywood doors and began to traverse the corner of the lot, which would bring me to another door exiting onto the street near my apartment. I bothered no one and entered no area where a board might have fallen on my head, or where I was in any danger whatsoever. I merely walked across the corner of the lot, where building material was stacked, then exited and crossed the street to go home.

A workman was shouting at me before I was thirty feet onto the property. "Hey! This is a limited area!" Others quickly picked up the protest, "This area's off limits!" "Get on the other side of the fence!" "Can't you read the signs?" I walked on my way without turning around and soon heard a voice behind me, which was getting closer. It wasn't until

I was out of the area and crossing the street that the workman caught up. He yelled, "What's the big idea?" I turned, found him standing in the plywood doorway just behind me, smiled and nodded. Then I went on my way, Richard, turning up the collar of the Idaho jacket as I left.

Already my imagination is running wild, and this small incident expands into the following:

I was walking across the lot under a shower of boards and debris, walking under cranes which swung their metal necks menacingly above me, passing by jackhammers which tore the ground from my feet and steamrollers which tried to make me a corner of a parking lot, I was walking through it all, Richard, and I kept walking, walked through it all in the Idaho jacket, through all the bellowing workmen and protesting machines, the clamor and rumble, the violated signs screaming DANGER AREA!, I continued home without a glance behind me, without a remark, I continued nonchalantly on my way.

Do I have the family madness, Richard? Is this the beginning?

THE MAN WHO SHOT ELVIS

Prism International (Fall, 1977)

So here he was, in the casino with hundreds of other tourists, waiting in line two hours before show time, bored, drink in hand, watching his wife shoot craps. Mary was losing and angry but all the more striking for it, her blue eyes intense as she shook the dice in a fist near one ear. She brushed aside a strand of blonde hair that had fallen across her face, still shaking the dice, softly demanding of them *five, five* — she reminded him of a mad Scandinavian queen who had one roll to win or lose a kingdom. For a moment, he looked away, attracted by the ringing payoff of a slot machine, and when he turned back the blonde queen was coming toward him, dethroned and pouting.

"I hate that game, I just hate it," Mary said.

"You love it," said Lester.

"I don't have the luck I have on the machines." She took a sip of his drink. "If you'd loan me five dollars ..."

He gave her twenty, and she was off to get change. It was true, her luck on the dollar slots was phenomenal, more than once her winnings had paid for their weekend in Las Vegas. The only reason she had gone to the craps table at all was because their place in line had brought them next to it. As a businessman, Lester admired the savvy of the hotel's management: make the customers line up for the show in the casino, where they would have things to do while passing time and would spend money passing it. The line stretched past slot machines, twisted around roulette tables to games of craps and twenty-one, then extended back across the red carpet to the slots, a long traffic jam

whose little order was imposed by three young hotel employees, who reminded people that they were in line and therefore should have someone keep their place before drifting away to gamble. Lester was spending money without gambling, on dollar-and-a-quarter drinks before the show began and the price went up to five dollars. More savvy: admission was disguised as a two-drink minimum.

He lost Mary in the crowd. Everywhere he looked — hanging from the ceiling, posted on walls and pillars — were photographs of Elvis and banners with his name. It had been Lester's idea to spend the weekend in Las Vegas, Mary's to see the show at the International Hotel.

They especially needed this vacation since the night he had been robbed. This had happened two months ago, in the parking lot of the bank as Lester walked to his car. He was tired after working late and oblivious to the shadows in the still night. Someone was suddenly in his way, a gun-like protrusion pointing from a pocket, and Lester heard, "Your wallet, man." It was that simple. "Your wallet, man," no more. Lester was about to reply with something automatic, "Good evening," when the sight of the pistol, out of the pocket and real, made him understand what was happening. He quickly handed over his wallet, his gaze never leaving the gun, the authority of which was absolute although the pistol itself seemed fragile in the way it reflected light from a streetlamp. When the man ran off, Lester got in his car and drove home. He had two drinks before telling Mary, who could not understand why he wouldn't call the police. "I had less than twenty dollars on me," Lester explained. "I'll notify the credit card people tomorrow. I won't be liable. Maybe he needed the money. He was black. If he'd been white, I don't think I'd have given him a dime. He would've had to shoot me first. But he was black."

He could not forget the absolute authority of the gun. A few days after the robbery he went into a pawnshop and purchased a pistol and shoulder holster, which he

began to wear everywhere. He felt unmolestable with a weapon. He would feel its weight near his heart and think, I am safe.

They chose a motel on the strip. As Lester mixed drinks in their room, Mary looked through the brochures and coupons that the woman at the front desk had given them. They had the weekend to relax and see a show or two. Mainly they wanted to escape Los Angeles with its robberies.

Mary said excitedly, "Elvis is at the International!"

"Who?" Lester's back was to her, hiding a grin.

"Who! Elvis Presley, you nerd."

"Oh, him. I think B. B. King is supposed to be in town, too. Where's B. B. playing at?"

He turned and gave Mary her drink.

"I simply have to see Elvis while we're here."

"You've already seen him."

"But that was, god, how long ago?"

In 1956 or thereabouts, as Lester recalled the story. Mary, fifteen, had waited in line for five hours to get a front seat in a Miami movie house. She had screamed through the entire show, almost close enough to touch him.

Mary said, "I can go alone tomorrow and we can meet afterwards for dinner."

"If you really want to see that clown, I'll take you myself."

"We can see him, really?"

"There's probably nothing more amusing in town."

"Oh you," and she threw one arm around him, almost spilling their drinks. He could feel the pistol between them, and so could Mary.

"I'm going to take that off," she said.

"Don't stop there," said Lester.

Lester looked around for a waiter from whom to order another drink. Unable to find one, he began to stare at Mary, hoping to catch her eye and beckon her over to save their place in line while he went to the bar. Mary was playing three slot machines simultaneously, engrossed.

"Can I get you a drink?"

It was the man in line behind him. Earlier he had nodded at Lester, who had nodded back; his wife had smiled and Lester had smiled in return. He was expecting them to start a conversation.

"I'm going to the bar anyway," the man told him.

"Thanks," said Lester, reaching for his wallet. "Scotch and water."

"Let me buy." The man had turned to go before Lester could pretend to object.

The woman introduced herself.

"I'm Nancy Waterby. My husband's name is Ralph. We drove down from Medford just to see Elvis."

"Medford."

"It's in Oregon."

She offered her hand, and Lester gently shook it.

"I'm Lester Williams, and that blonde fanatic over there, the one hogging the winning machines, is Mary, who belongs to me."

The woman smiled. Lester wondered at which movie house she had seen Elvis in the fifties.

"This is an unbelievable crowd, isn't it?" Nancy said. "I wish we'd gotten in line much earlier. I don't think we'll be seated on the main floor."

"The dude's not hurting for fans," Lester agreed.

He turned away, pretending to be interested in the craps game. Ralph Waterby returned with the drinks.

"I forgot to ask if your wife wanted anything," Ralph said.

"Oh, I more or less do it heavy for both of us."

Ralph laughed. Nancy laughed. Lester looked at his watch and, as if on command, someone across the casino shouted, "We're moving in!" Lester called Mary, who brought news that she was twenty-four dollars ahead. Their cover charge was covered, Lester noted. Counting Mary's drinks, he would have four to get him through the show. He was no longer sure he'd be able to handle that many.

They were seated at a long table in the first balcony with the Waterbys and two couples who were together and remained aloof. Mary was very excited, squeezing Lester's arm and standing up from the table to get a better view of the massive ballroom into which her idol would descend, perhaps from heaven itself. Lester, too, was impressed: the stage covered the entire width of the ballroom, and a golden curtain just as wide dropped in front of the stage from a height above the second balcony. Naked cherubs flew among clouds on the side walls, above paintings of Greek ruins and imposing figures from some forgotten French court. A waitress handed Lester a souvenir menu with Elvis' photograph on the cover and informed him that the minimum number of drinks had to be ordered at once. Soon there were four glasses lined up in front of him.

Ralph was telling him what a great show it would be.

"What a fantastic comeback he made! After all those lousy movies, what? about three a year through the sixties?, and now this, it's just spectacular. That curtain alone must be worth thousands. This show will be

unbelievable. I wonder when it starts. How can they expect us to sit here waiting?"

Business savvy, Lester knew. And just as he expected, not Elvis but a comedian opened the show, doing his routine in front of the golden curtain. "Folks, they gave me this job tonight because Colonel Parker figured the show needed a sex symbol." The crowd laughed and waited for Elvis. But when the curtain finally rose, the stage revealed a trio of black women, The Sweet Inspirations, who sang a medley of Aretha Franklin songs as photographs of Aretha flashed onto a screen behind them. Yes, somebody sure knows what they're doing, Lester thought. The delay only increased the excitement, and Mary couldn't stop squeezing his arm. Lester slid away one empty glass and moved three full glasses forward, one by one, like customers advancing to his window at the bank. Since being robbed, he greeted customers with an apprehensive glance, trying to discern their motives.

When the curtain dropped again, the crowd hushed. "Oh God, this is it," Mary whispered to him. Without introduction an orchestra began to play, and Lester recognized the theme from the movie, *2001*. The music seemed to come out of every wall. Scattered cheers and shrieks identified those who were no longer able to contain themselves; "This is it!" Mary said again. The movie theme was picked up by a chorus, which like the orchestra was hidden behind the golden curtain unless the voices belonged to cherubs, to French royalty. The crowd floated like a frail bubble. Then the curtain began to rise slowly, the bubble was burst by the quick rhythm of a drum, by heartbeats, and Mary began to scream. Elvis ran onto the stage and came forward to the very edge of it, arms outstretched to his fans as he walked up and down the width of the ballroom for everyone to see. He was dressed entirely in white, his clothes sparkling with jewels. What can that dude be thinking now? Lester wondered. *I am Elvis, this is my body.*

When Lester was sixteen, he decided to become a rhythm-n-blues star. Three friends agreed that this was a great idea, and they immediately formed a group called The Woodpeckers. They spent most of the summer learning songs, rehearsing, building a repertoire, and by the time school started they could imitate a number of popular groups, singing "Sincerely" like The Moonglows and "Gee" like The Crows, "Earth Angel" like The Penguins and "Sh-Boom" like The Chords. They changed their name to The Blackbirds and began to sing at high school dances and talked of cutting a record soon. Lester wrote a song called "Shoo-Do-Be, You Need Me," which everyone agreed was their best number. They recorded this song and a few others on tape, which they left with the secretary of a record company. They would hear from the company soon, they were told.

The record company never contacted them, and graduation ended their dream. One of The Blackbirds went to college on a track scholarship, another joined the Army to flee a pregnant girlfriend, a third disappeared from the neighborhood. Lester, who had kept remarkably good grades for the little time he spent studying, enrolled in Los Angeles Junior College.

Two years later he heard "Shoo-Do-Be, You Need Me" on the radio, sung by a group called The O'Brien Sisters. He knew he had been robbed but it didn't matter, his dream now was to make money in business. He wanted to make a lot of money because his father, a mailman, earned barely enough to support a wife and six children. Lester was determined to do better than this. For a beginning, he wouldn't make the mistake of having a large family.

He graduated from Junior College and transferred to Business School at UCLA, supporting himself with a night janitorial job. He met Mary in his senior year, and they fell quickly in love and were secretly engaged. Anticipating the objections of both sets of parents, they stretched their secret to include marriage in Las Vegas as

soon as Mary came of age. Lester still planned to make a lot of money in business, but while waiting for more specific intentions to occur to him he decided to get his Army obligation out of the way. Mary accompanied him overseas, and from Germany she wrote her parents that she had decided not to be an airline stewardess after all, as a matter of fact she had gotten married instead, and she and her husband were in the Army now, an ocean's length from home. She was sorry to be so sudden and late with the announcement but she knew they would understand and would like Lester because she loved him very much and had never been happier.

It occurred to Lester that it would be the easiest thing in the world to shoot Elvis Presley through the head. He saw no visible security precautions. If an assassin were willing to wait four hours in line instead of two, a front table would put the target within easy range. Even from the first balcony, even from the second, Elvis was closer than President Kennedy had been to that window in the warehouse.

But shooting from a balcony, an assassin would have to be an excellent shot because Elvis never kept still. He sang while doing splits and leaps and karate chops. Using the whole stage, Elvis worked himself into such a sweat that he had to stop after several songs to wipe himself dry with a red silk scarf, which he then threw to the screaming crowd. A flunky brought Elvis a blue scarf, and after three or four songs it, too, was thrown to the fans, and the flunky raced forward with a purple. Lester wondered, What is that man's salary?

He pictured Elvis writhing in pain. Elvis was singing a hit, "Hound Dog" or "Heartbreak Hotel," when the bullet struck him below the navel, above the thigh. He grabbed himself like a man with a hernia, sinking to his knees when he knew he should be making a flying leap, rolling onto his side as the drummer awaited a karate chop to punctuate, blood flowing readily but soaking only the

crotch of his white pants before the advancing crowd, panicked and furious, had them pulled off, then his diamond-studded shirt torn to shreds, his hair portioned out from the roots. Lester quietly slipped out an exit, unnoticed. He waited for the press in the casino but the reporters were skeptical. "I tell you, I did it! I did it because a long time ago they stole my song. They stole my song. It would have been a hit for me but it was a hit for them instead. They stole it."

He worked in payroll in the Army and this, with his degree, landed him a job with a Los Angeles bank after discharge. Lester was soon well-liked as one who paid attention to details: he changed his white shirt daily, he wore only black socks, he never wore a loud tie, when there was extra work to do he worked nights without having to be asked, he learned the first names of the right customers and was formal with the right customers. After two years Lester felt secure in the job, and only then did he tell Mary that she could look for a house to buy. By 1967 no one could say Lester was not a success. He was even successful enough to exercise some independence, wearing wide and colorful ties before his boss began to wear them. At a party his boss told him, in the presence of others, "Lester, you wouldn't have gotten away with dressing like that before you became such a credit to the bank." Lester shocked everyone by replying, "Don't ever call me a credit to anything again. I do my job, period."

As Elvis sang "Love Me Tender," Mary softly wept.

Ralph asked Lester, "Why doesn't he play the guitar?" After the first two songs, the flunky had taken the instrument away. "I wanted to hear him play some more. Play your guitar, Elvis!"

Lester stared at the last drink in front of him. It was going to be a horse race.

Before leaving the motel to see Elvis (and she had insisted they go early), Mary called her sister in Los Angeles to check on the children. They had waited six years before starting a family, and Krista, the oldest, was now five. Krista wanted to speak to her daddy on the phone.

"What's up, sugar?" Lester asked. "You behaving yourself?"

"Yes. Will you bring me a pitchur?"

"What kind of picture? Want a pretty postcard?"

"A pitchur of Elvis."

"Elvis! Where'd you find out about Elvis?"

"Mommy said you are going to see Elvis. I want a pitchur."

"Okay, sweetheart."

As soon as Mary had hung up, he asked, "How did she find out about Elvis?"

"We listen to him all the time."

"You do?"

"Well, you ought to know that."

"Stop brain-washing my daughter."

"Don't be silly. We listen to your records, too."

He was so drunk that he had missed everything, and Mary had to explain.

"There were two of them," she said. "They just jumped up onto the stage and ran at Elvis and before you knew it, pow!, he did a couple karate chops on them. It was fantastic. Police came out from everywhere and hauled the guys off."

Lester, moving along with the crowd, felt like a leaf

floating down the gutter. He couldn't remember finishing the last drink or seeing the end of the show.

"At least they didn't try it earlier. Elvis was doing his last song, so nobody missed anything. I don't think that'll be tried again once people find out he can do karate. It was fantastic."

They emerged from the ballroom, and Lester stopped to take a deep breath.

"Are you okay?" Mary asked.

"I just need a minute. Little dizzy."

"You didn't have to drink mine. We could have left them."

"I'll be okay in a minute."

He concentrated on breathing until his head began to clear.

"I'm exhausted," said Mary. "I've never been to a show like that in my life. I'm just exhausted."

"Yeah, you scream a lot."

"Oh, you. Are you sure you're alright?"

"Much better. Let's go."

But he had to stop again outside on the sidewalk. A universe of blue lights towered above them, silhouetting the International Hotel against the desert sky. He recognized the Waterbys coming toward them.

"Would you folks join us for a nightcap?" Ralph asked.

Lester said, "I've had it."

Nancy suggested coffee.

"We have an early start in the morning," said Lester, stretching the truth.

"Well, it's been great," said Ralph. "What a great show. Here, I'd like to give you my card. If you're ever in

Medford, look us up."

"We'd be so delighted," said Nancy.

Ralph said, "I don't quite know how to say this but Medford, you see, is a little backward in some ways and we've never had the opportunity or pleasure before to — well, what I mean, what I'm trying to say is, we enjoyed being with you. You're excellent company."

"You mean I'm a credit to my race," said Lester.

"Now I didn't mean to —"

"Then I'm not a credit to my race."

"You are! I mean, I didn't think of it that way."

Lester slapped him on the arm.

"We had a ball," he told the Waterbys. "Have a safe trip home."

"You, too," said Ralph.

The two couples shook hands before walking off in opposite directions. At the car, Lester asked Mary to drive.

The morning newspaper explained that the two men merely had wanted to shake Elvis' hand. They were unarmed and a little drunk and intended to shake hands on a bet. Elvis wasn't pressing charges, so the police let the men go.

Getting into the car after breakfast, Lester asked Mary if she believed that's all the men wanted to do.

"I think so. Why?"

"Because it would've been easy if they'd wanted to shoot him."

"What kind of hypothetical situation is that?"

"It's not so hypothetical."

"Who would want to shoot Elvis in the first place?"

"Lots of people."

As the car idled, Lester looked for something to play on the tape deck.

"Who?" Mary wanted to know.

"Jealous husbands."

"Oh God, Les, you're not going to tell me you were jealous last night."

"Because you turned into a thirty-two-year-old teenager? Not me, baby."

"You're being stupid. Nobody wants to shoot Elvis."

"It would be easy to do. I had a gun in there, didn't I? Who would've stopped me?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

He put on a tape of old rhythm-n-blues songs and turned the car toward Los Angeles. He sped across the desert at ninety miles an hour, listening to *his* music as Mary slept, and Elvis was not mentioned again until they were home and Krista ran to him for her pitchur.

THE FIRST STOPLIGHT IN WALLOWA COUNTY

Northwest (September 4, 1988)

Fletch had woken up without an alarm clock at 5:30 a.m., give or take ten minutes, for so many years that neither Sunday off nor a bad hangover could keep him in bed past six. On this Sunday the hangover was worse than usual because he had been lucky playing cards last night at Mel's Tavern, putting together a rare string of winning poker strategies. Twice he drew successfully to an inside straight. At stud, in the largest pot of the evening, he bluffed Jensen into folding three visible kings in deference to his own two aces up, even though he had only a junk deuce down. And more often than not, he folded the two pairs on which he habitually raised — and lost. When the game was over, Fletch walked away from the table almost \$50 richer, most of which he spent setting up whiskey at the Cowboy Bar down Main Street.

Fletch rarely drank hard liquor, which made his first gesture this morning tentative — but right on time. Or so he thought.

The first hint that something was wrong was that the clock read four, not five-thirty. The second was that he could read the time at all. His Big Ben came from a preluminous era when clocks had big hands and little hands instead of radiant numerical displays. Fletch's big hand had not reached the bed lamp yet, and so he shouldn't have been able to read the time. But read it he did.

Fletch's room was located above the selfsame Mel's Tavern responsible for his hangover — or at least that had

financed it. Looking out the window to Main Street, Fletch saw the one thing in the world that should not have been there: a stoplight. A genuine traffic light, swinging lightly in the summer breeze, showing him a devilish green even as it showed Swede's Tavern across the corner a diabolical red. As anyone in northeastern Oregon could tell you, there wasn't a single stoplight in all Wallowa County. Since Joseph was in the county, Fletch must be looking at some alcohol-induced mirage.

Moving in the green glow to the window, he leaned on the windowsill and stared out at the light. He scratched his belly and stared for a long time — until suddenly, impossibly, the green light turned yellow, and the yellow light turned red.

Fletch moved quickly then. He hurried back to bed and pulled the single sheet up over his head. He swore to quit whiskey forever, even to give up drinking beer — and this time for real.

Not an hour had passed before Renford was shaking him. Fletch never locked his door — in Joseph, locked doors were as rare as stoplights.

"You're not gonna believe this," Renford began.

By his usual waking time, Fletch had followed Renford into a growing crowd of men on Main Street, each man staring up at the stoplight with something between outrage and wonder. These were the early risers who started off the day with coffee at Tony's Cafe when it opened at six, workday or not. Each turned silent, as if standing before an inexplicable disaster. The speculation didn't begin until Tony's opened, where coffee cleared the mind.

"It's gotta be Divorak who done it," Fletch suggested, referring to the mayor.

In Joseph, being mayor is not really a job — at least not a full-time, paying one — and in the most recent

election Divorak had won easily by garnering the write-in, sympathy vote. Election Day fell a few weeks after his stroke, and everyone knew that only makeshift work such as politics could keep Divorak out of the fields and away from the hard work now forbidden by his doctor.

To everyone's surprise, Divorak took an immediate liking to the job. He started hanging around City Hall even when there was nothing to do, which was most of the time. Moreover, lately he had been ending rare meetings of city business by yelping like a coyote, as if aiming to outdo the infamous "whoop whoop!" of Portland's mayor, Bud Clark. While no one actually believed that Divorak was trying to get on the Johnny Carson show, as Clark had done, nonetheless a man who yelped like a coyote wasn't entirely to be trusted.

Divorak, for example, stood fully behind the summer re-enactment of the Great Joseph Bank Robbery. At first, this idea for luring tourists from the Wallowa Lake campgrounds into town had been scoffed at, almost universally. The very idea that working farmers and ranchers would volunteer an hour or more in the middle of the day to playact at robbing the First State Bank building, long home to the historic museum, was ridiculous. So ridiculous, in fact, that no one was quite sure how such an idea had actually come to pass, so that all summer — on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays — grown men quit work to dress up like cowboy outlaws, much to the delight of hundreds of tourists (during Chief Joseph Days, thousands) who lined Main Street to watch the five-minute performance. The Great Joseph Bank Robbery was the promotional coup of the summer, and Mayor Divorak had been behind it from the beginning. Such a man was fully capable of putting up a traffic light for the tourists as well.

Such was Fletch's reasoning, and he was close to calling for a vigilante march on City Hall when someone pointed out that City Hall was rarely open — and never on Sunday. Before a consensus was reached on an alternative plan, the mayor himself walked into the cafe, beet-red and

looking like another stroke was in progress.

Everyone started talking at once. The mayor was getting redder and redder, and Fletch worried that soon he would be yelping like a coyote, so he yelled for the crowd to give Divorak its full attention.

The mayor explained that he knew no more about the origin of the stoplight than anyone else. In fact, he had roused his son-in-law, who worked for Power and Light, to get his truck over here right away so they could take the damn thing down. His son-in-law pointed out that it might be the county's doing, in which case the mayor of Joseph was powerless. Because it was Sunday, there was nothing to do but wait until morning, call the county, and find out what was going on. There followed considerable discussion about proper governmental chains of command, all of it speculative.

Fletch was never a man to trade action for discussion, and so he put his own plan to work. Gradually, with knowing nods, men began to slip out of the cafe, climbing into their pickups and driving home. Thirty minutes later the mayor was still holding court, mainly to tourists who eavesdropped over their breakfasts and wondered what all the fuss was about.

Suddenly a gunshot was heard — but too loud and resonant to have come from a single weapon. Mayor Divorak, Peg the waitress, Jimbo the cook, a handful of residents and a multitude of tourists, all rushed out onto Main Street to see what had happened.

Although the early morning breeze had died down, the stoplight was swinging wildly, all of its signals shattered. Below it a large crowd had formed; women stood beside their children, and in front of them was a foreboding circle of men, Fletch and Renford among them — men who, except for the different colors of their billed caps, could not have been told apart, they looked so much alike, cradling their smoking rifles and sporting their wide grins.

It took three red beers before Fletch figured out what had happened. Without a hangover, he would have figured it out immediately; under this morning's affliction, he couldn't think clearly until Vitamin C was back in his system.

"Renford," he said from a bar stool at Swede's. "You know who was responsible for that? Enterprise."

Of course! Having heard it, no one doubted it. No one doubted in at Swede's, or later across the street at Mel's, or at the Cowboy Bar, or at Tony's, where the dinner special was chicken-fried steak. It had to be Enterprise, the county seat, and the motive had to be jealousy.

The Great Joseph Bank Robbery must have had something to do with it as well. The re-enactment was based on an actual robbery on October 1, 1896, when three men held up the Old Joseph Bank. The leader of the gang had escaped with \$2,000, but one compatriot had been killed and the other, a local boy named Tucker, had been captured and sent to prison. After getting out, Tucker returned to Joseph to become a successful sheep rancher and, eventually, vice-president of the very same bank he had helped rob. Of such stuff the West was made, and Enterprise had no story — not even a lie — that could match it.

If this were not humiliating enough, it was the year of two local centennials, and Joseph had raised its blue city banners three days before Enterprise had raised the red county ones. Rivalry between the two towns, which were only six miles apart, was always fierce, but this summer, with all the additional tourists coming for the centennial activities, competition was especially aggressive. Because Joseph clearly was winning the tourist sweepstakes, it would be just like someone from Enterprise to try and downplay the victory by creating a diversion. No one wanted to be stuck with the first stoplight in Wallowa County.

By evening, Fletch had sworn in a posse of sorts to take responsibility for the retaliation. They all agreed they would have to erect a stoplight in Enterprise — and that very night. The trouble began over where to put it.

Fletch wanted to erect it at the corner by the courthouse, across from where all the fancy new shops had gone in. Enterprise had become so gentrified that one could buy a cup of espresso, a cone of frozen yogurt, a scented candle, computer software, a salad with sprouts, a bamboo beach mat, any number of ridiculous T-shirts and strange greeting cards, and who knew what else, all without walking two blocks.

Renford wanted to attack more directly. He had a cousin camping at the lake, he explained, a cousin from California. Let his cousin hang around the taverns in Enterprise for a few days and learn who did it.

"We'll string the stoplight over his driveway," said Renford.

No, no, insisted a sheepman named Hancock. What is it that really separates Enterprise from Joseph? What most symbolizes Enterprise's departure from Wallowa traditions in order to enter the mainstream of progress? Clearly one thing. Enterprise has a Safeway store. Put the damn thing up in front of Safeway, was Hancock's idea.

Too much beer had brought out the intransigence in Fletch's posse, and for the next several hours little progress was made. In fact, they didn't get back on track until the bartender at the Cowboy Bar yelled last call. Then they quickly decided to draw straws among the six sites that had been suggested, and Fletch was drawing up the slips when Mayor Divorak walked in for a nightcap.

"Can you believe these tourists?" the mayor said, grinning. "As soon as my son-in-law got that stoplight down, some joker in a Winnebago pulled over and offered 50 bucks for it. He said his son wanted to put it up in his dorm room back in Portland."

If there was one place worse than Enterprise, it was Portland. By the time the bartender had shooed Fletch and his posse out onto Main Street, the focus of their insults had changed considerably.

"Look at Portland's crime rate," said Fletch. "You can't leave home without locking your door."

"They got drugs worse than L.A.," said Renford.

"Streets full of whores and winos," said the mayor, and he yelped like a coyote.

Others pointed out the lack of mountain-clear water and clean air in Portland, no fresh beef available, all that big city red tape, new freeways opening all the time, traffic you wouldn't believe, and no real beauty, certainly nothing like the Wallowas. Portland was a city that commissioned Beauty and got Portlandia, a copper statue of a scantily-clad lady holding a pitchfork.

They continued the litany of insults while ambling to their separate pickups. Compared to Portland, Enterprise was downright appealing, and so no one objected when Fletch suggested the six-mile drive to Toma's Restaurant, the only place short of La Grande where a fellow could get breakfast on a Sunday night.

The next morning, a working day, Fletch woke up at 5:30 on the money, rolled over and switched on the bed lamp. He was at Tony's shortly after 6, where he joined a table with Renford and others, and over many cups of coffee not one word was spoken about the strange and short life of the first stoplight in Wallowa County.

LESSONS FROM THE COCKROACH GRAVEYARD

Expression (Volume Three, 1991)

THE OLDER I GET, the less I understand women. Their sense of cause and effect, for example. I am opening a beer in the kitchen, prior to preparing tonight's stir-fry, and as I do a cockroach appears on the wall over the faucet. I see it, I probably even see it first, but for the moment I do nothing because the critter is still too close to the faucet to ambush — one move by me and it'll be scurrying into the plumbing. I know this because I've tried it before: cause and effect. And Maggie was there when I tried it, too, screaming as if she'd just spotted a ten-pound rat.

This evening she doesn't scream. When she sees the cockroach, she says, "You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

"What?" I reply.

"You know what. Jesus."

Even though my back is to her, I can sense Maggie moving slowly toward the refrigerator, reaching for the can of Raid we keep up there. I buy Raid because it was the great poet Lew Welch who wrote, "Raid Kills Bugs Dead!" I raise the bottle of Full Sail and tip my head back, drinking deeply, taking in a third of the brew. Then I belch.

"Ahhhh!" screams Maggie, charging forward like a mad bee, spraying Raid at me and the cockroach, though I'm not sure which of us is the primary target. I cuss under my breath and get the hell out of the kitchen, grabbing a full beer from the fridge on my way.

In a couple minutes Maggie joins me in the studio's largest space, the bed-living-dining-room. She looks exhausted. She is as dark as a Mediterranean gypsy but is proud to be Irish and doesn't like it when I start talking

about gypsies in the woodpile.

"Any luck?" I ask.

"He got away into the plumbing." She always refers to cockroaches in the masculine.

I don't get it. Will my beer bottle hit the ceiling if I drop it? Don't women know anything?

EVENING. The stir-fry was average, conversation at dinner non-existent. We've been living together almost three years and haven't talked of marriage for the last two. We still have sex, which is about all we have.

I'm still drinking beer, Maggie has poured another glass of Chablis, and we stare silently at the small black-and-white TV that sits on my trunk. It's one of those television magazine shows, full of scandal and gossip.

My mind is adrift, trying to remember the closing lines of Lew Welch's "Chicago Poem," which for some reason has been on my mind lately. I no longer have a book of Welch's poems. I no longer have books. I met Maggie three years ago after a bad divorce and have been traveling light ever since.

Trying to recall Welch's lines, I don't see it at first. But Maggie does. She has eyes like a hawk. Suddenly she throws her wine glass against the wall, and I jump.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I ask.

"You drive me crazy, pretending you don't see it."

"See what?"

"On the screen!"

She's on her feet, going for the Raid, when I see the dark speck moving across the belly of a woman in her underwear. At first I'm confused, wondering what scandal I've missed, but then I understand that it's a Maidenform ad.

Maggie is a wasteful cockroach hunter, she's spraying the Raid when she's still six feet from the screen, not only wasting spray but warning the cockroach, which now hurries down a thigh to try and escape under a tuning panel. But Maggie is on the critter before it gets to the woman's foot, spraying like crazy, until the room is filled with a mist of Raid.

"All right already!" I shout, standing up. "You don't have to waste the whole can on the thing."

Maggie stops spraying. She turns to me and gently, like a father pitching the first softball to his son, tosses me the can of Raid. Then she grabs her coat and leaves.

I fetch another beer, sit down, stare at the television and try to remember Welch's lines. "Chicago Poem" is a wonderful poem about Welch finally refusing to contribute anything more to the stinking polluted mess that is Chicago. But I can't remember his phrasing.

I'M IN BED when Maggie gets home. She's brought her girlfriend, Martha, to help her move out.

At first I pretend to be sleeping. I'm not surprised, really, I'm just angry she chose to do it this way, at this hour. I keep my eyes closed under the bare lightbulb and listen to them gathering her things in the closet, taking her spices from the kitchen, sorting through the mess that is everywhere for what belongs to her. It's all as clear as day, even with my eyes closed.

Then there is a silence that confuses me. Facing the wall, I open my eyes and see a cockroach not two feet from my nose. I slowly, quietly, roll over and can make out whispered conversation at the small table off the kitchen. I reach for my robe on the floor, slip it on and make my appearance.

Martha quickly gets up and says to Maggie, "I'll wait in the car." Passing me, she gives me a stare that would give Raid competition.

I sit down and Maggie pours another glass of wine.

"I'm sorry," she says, "I just can't take it any more."

"Take what?"

"Oh, Raymond."

"You could have warned me," I say.

"I don't believe you haven't seen this coming."

"We could've talked about it."

"You don't talk, that's part of the problem. Maybe that's all of the problem. You stopped talking when you stopped playing."

I play jazz guitar, or used to. Everything left me

about a year after my divorce. You don't explain these things, you just go with the flow. If a riff doesn't occur to you, it doesn't occur to you.

"For the past year, even longer, we've both just been going through the motions," Maggie says. "I need more than that. So do you."

"Don't tell me what I need," I mumble.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Maggie drinks her wine and stands up. She starts toward the door.

"What if we talk more?" I ask.

She turns long enough to say, "Oh, Raymond," then moves toward the door again. I stand up and follow her.

When she opens the door, I say, "I don't get it. I don't understand you. No warning, nothing."

Maggie turns and starts to say something but stops. She's looking at the wall near the door, where the cockroach I saw earlier is hovering near the mattress on the floor.

When I understand what is happening, I say, "Want me to get you the Raid? One last shot?"

"That's not funny. This is as hard for me as it is for you."

"Is it?"

"Yes, it is!"

I feel bad for making her angry. Maggie takes a deep breath, starts to go, and changes her mind. She takes one step into the room.

"I don't know what you're going to do about it," she begins, "but I know what I'm going to do about it. I'm just going to walk away from it. Maybe some of it will die if I'm not around feeding it any more. Lew Welch, remember?"

I correct her paraphrasing of "Chicago Poem," saying, "Maybe a *small part* of it will die. *Small part*."

"Goodbye, Raymond." She turns and gently closes the door behind her.

I look at the wall. The cockroach is still, as if daring me to go for the Raid.

WE MAKE an undeclared pact, the cockroaches and I. I lay off the Raid, and they don't show up as often any more. I even come to admire them in a way. Somewhere I read that cockroaches would be the sole survivors of a nuclear war. A guy could have a worse role model, if he's interested in surviving.

A couple weeks later I run into Maggie in a bar. She's leaning over a small table, leering at a guy who dresses like a banker. I can't believe it. I can't resist going to the table either.

"Well, looky here," I say.

Maggie sits up stiffly. "Hello, Raymond," she says. "Harold, this is Raymond."

"Hi, Harry!"

Maggie gives me the smile that says, Go away! I grab a chair from the next table but before I sit down an amazing thing happens, Maggie brings out a can of Raid from her purse and points it at me. I start laughing. Then she starts spraying.

I squint, moving forward to grab the can away from her. The banker, Harold, is on his feet, ready to protect the fair maiden or something.

"You can't do that to me," I tell Maggie.

"Raymond, you're even bringing them in on your clothes now. Look, he's dead on the table."

Sure enough, there's a dead cockroach next to the ashtray. I glance at Maggie, who looks as if she's about to cry. I turn and go.

NOW IT'S all-out war. I complain to the manager and tell him if he doesn't get the building sprayed I'm moving, which is a lie, there isn't a cheaper studio in the city.

So I have to do it myself. Me and Welch. I buy cans of Raid a half dozen at a time, attack the critters with a can in each hand, going for broke. I wear a red bandanna over the lower half of my face, looking like a bank robber, spraying behind the refrigerator, spraying under the sink, spraying where the pipes come out of the wall, spraying around the toilet and tub.

The more I spray, the more of them that appear.

Finally, I run out of Raid. Then I run out of money.

IT'S A DUMB GIG, playing popular songs in a seafood restaurant, accompanying a bad pianist, but it pays the rent, it pays for the Raid. Then one night Maggie wanders in. She's alone, which surprises me. She looks great, which doesn't.

I try not to look at her but during the break the cocktail waitress tells me that the pretty girl with the dark features has bought me a drink.

"Long time," I say, sitting down.

"Yes, it has been."

"So how are you doing?"

"Terrible. I miss you."

This takes me by surprise, and I almost choke on my beer.

"Didn't you get my letters?" she asks.

There were three of them, long handwritten analyses of our relationship, the pros and cons, and an indirect inquiry if I'd be interested in sitting down across the table from her to analyze the relationship together. I never answered one. I didn't know what to say.

I reply, "Of course, I got them."

"Had nothing to say, right?"

I shrug.

"I've forgotten how well you play."

I force a smile. "It's embarrassing to be here, really."

"No, I think it's good for you to be here. It's better than not playing at all."

Actually she's right, but I don't respond.

"I've got to get back to work," I say and finish the beer in a long gulp.

THROUGH THE LAST SET, I can't help but wonder why she's still hanging around. Is she trying to tell me something? Maybe she's horny. We managed to do that right most of the time. But as it turns out, she still wants to sit across the table from me.

"I think in a different context we can be very good

for one another," she says. "I know that I love you."

Love. Do I love her? The Greeks had three words for it, *eros*, *fidelia* and *agape*. We'd had the first from the beginning, the second most of the time — and the third? I'm not sure if I could love a woman the way I love my music.

"I've learned a lot from living alone," she says. "I think I can bend for you if you can bend for me. I realize how important your music is to you. Not just as a profession, but as a way to communicate. When we fight in the future, I think you should start whistling jazz to me."

I have to laugh, and as I do she reaches across the table and takes my hand.

"Can you bend at all, Raymond? I don't think I'm asking for much."

"I never did understand what you were asking for," I admit.

"Respect."

The word astonishes me because I've always respected her.

"That surprises you, doesn't it?"

"Frankly, yes."

"I can't live in a hovel," Maggie says. "I'm affected too much by my environment. I know you thought it was all we could afford, since you were out of work, but we could've cut corners and rented a better place, a cleaner place."

"No cockroaches? Good luck. Not in this city."

"Someplace where they spray the building regularly. It's important to do things like that on schedule, you know? Just like it's important to do the dishes every day before they start piling up in the sink. If you ignore little things like that, before you know it everything gets out of hand. Then it's a major project to clean up. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Neither one of us are great housekeepers."

"I'm not saying it's all your fault. I'm saying your environment can affect how you feel, how you behave, your attitude, everything. I never want to live in a place like that again."

I admit that I've been looking around for another place, now that I have a regular paycheck again.

"Maybe we can talk about your moving in with me," she says. "I have a one bedroom."

I say, "Maybe we can go there tonight."

She squeezes my hand, lets it go and smiles.

"Not tonight. I don't want us to get back together for the wrong reasons. I love you, Raymond. I want us to work. I want us to sit down soon and talk about the things that went wrong. And why."

"I was hoping you were ..." I finish the sentence by raising my eyebrows in the way that once was a signal between us.

"I am, Raymond, believe me." She stands up. "I don't know what you're going to do about it, but I know what I'm going to do about it."

She comes around the table, bends down and kisses me on the lips.

"I'll call you tomorrow morning, okay?" she says.

"I'd like that."

"Oh, Raymond."

I don't even close down the bar. Even with money in my pocket I don't buy a new can of Raid. Something has changed. I'm hearing riffs again. I celebrate by taking a cab, not the bus, to a hotel and renting a room. By the time a lone cockroach crawls out from the bathroom plumbing, the room is dark and I'm enjoying the soundest sleep I've had in months.

ESSAYS

...I quickly met my second wife, a brilliant graduate student who liked to brag that she had never met a man who could drink her under the table. Then she met me, and it must have been love at the seventh or eighth pitcher.

From "Liquor and Lit"

CONFESSIONS OF AN OREGON PLAYWRIGHT

From Northwest Variety

I've never had a strong sense of place. Born more or less "rootless" into a Navy family for whom travel was frequent and "homes" like Virginia and Texas merely a temporary stop between tours of duty, for whom relatives in the Delaware Valley country of New Jersey and Pennsylvania were people one visited on occasional holidays--I grew up with a crazy mixed-up accent of speech and a sense of keeping my toothbrush ever at the ready.

My accent had been honed along the beaches of Virginia, where I was born in 1939 at the Naval Hospital in Norfolk, and at George Peabody Elementary School in Dallas, where I began school. No doubt the influence of my parents, with their Pennsylvania Dutch roots, was in there somewhere as well. At any rate, by third grade when we were moving yet again, this time to the melting pot of Southern California, my accent was sufficiently foreign, which is to say sufficiently "southern," that my parents were persuaded that I needed Speech Therapy, which the Pasadena School System gave me *gratis* until I spoke like a human being. This isn't the kind of background that gives one a strong sense of place.

I don't recall hearing a thing about the Pacific Northwest by the time I graduated from high school. Indeed, somewhere along the way, in the frequent change of school systems, I had missed the study of geography and to this day cannot identify the states on a U.S. map, despite my travels. But in 1957, having survived the early years of rock-n-roll to graduate from high school and be accepted at Cal. Tech. (where I expected to become a mathematician or an astronomer, to whom a sense of place is, after all,

astronomical), I became aware of Oregon, to the north, where my parents planned to settle into early retirement, in Medford.

Since today I have something of a reputation as "an Oregon playwright," at this point it would be properly dramatic to confess that it was love at first sight, that I took readily to the woods and wilds of the Northwest, became a great fisherman and hunter, camped out for weeks at a time, learned to survive on regional flora. In truth, my early memory of Medford was that it was terribly boring. There was no jazz station on the radio. No decent bookstore in town. No one seemed to have heard of Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf or any of the other blues artists I was discovering in the late fifties. Medford, and Oregon, must be a fine place to retire since it sure seemed like a boring place to live.

Enjoying the Northwest came later. For reasons too complex to relate here, I dropped out of school in 1959 and joined the Army. It was one of several profound decisions I've made in my life: for three years I received an intense education from my fellow linguists, most of whom were senior to me by five or six years, with Masters Degrees from Berkeley, Yale, Harvard, Chicago and Columbia, graduate students who had joined the Agency ("choice, not chance") a step ahead of the draft. They told me what books to read and became the foundation of an intellectual community I had not been a part of before, not even at Cal. Tech.--and this community, the Army being what it is, had no common geographic roots. Yet one of my senior colleagues, Dick Crooks, was a Northwest fanatic--or to be more precise, a fanatic for the timber and palouse country of northern Idaho.

Dick had nothing if not a sense of place. I was captivated by his deep feeling for "home," and the closer Dick and I became, the more his sense of place became my own. Over German beers and German wine, I could listen for hours to Dick's romantic tales of his northwest Idaho country and its colorful loggers, of drinking and gambling

and whoring and carrying-on in towns like Orofino, Pierce, Riggins. It was Dick who introduced me to the music of Woody Guthrie (twenty years later I would perform a one-man Guthrie show), particularly to the folk poet's songs about the Columbia River. I heard my first logging jokes from Dick. I learned about something he called "the high lonesome" (later a central image in my short story, "The Idaho Jacket").

After discharge, I visited Dick in Orofino, his home town on the Clearwater River, and with Orofino as home base I was given a guided tour through what suddenly became "God's country," full of raw beauty and raw people. I was finishing up my undergraduate studies at the time, at UCLA, with no notion that I would become a writer. But suddenly, thanks to Dick, I seemed to know where I was. The Pacific Northwest offered dramatic contrast to the buzz and frantic growth of Southern California, which was beginning to wear on me. Perhaps I missed the Atlantic Ocean and Texas plains of my childhood and longed for wider spaces. Yet I was attracted to the people as much as to landscape: there was something fundamental, genuine and poetic in the manner of the old loggers (some of them Dick's relatives) we uncovered in hideaway homes and bars. I became "a true believer," and years later versions of these same people would begin to populate my plays.

When I began writing fiction in my late twenties, I began with the technical lack of a sense of place, though I didn't realize this at the time. In my short fiction, this was not a serious problem, but in the novel form, to which I began to devote my energy, my inability to create "place" (a fully dimensional environment in which my characters could live) was a major artistic failure. I could create story and character but no sense of atmosphere or environment: the flesh of my people had no skeleton to hang on, and consequently my characters were vague and undefined. It took me no less than three unpublished novels to get the message that I wasn't a novelist. When one doesn't have a

sense of place, it's easy to get lost. In the meantime, while working on an M.F.A. in fiction at the University of Oregon, I began to write plays. My initial motive was greed—a blessing in disguise. The University was offering a fat Shubert Playwriting Fellowship and, like any beginning writer, a contest was justification enough for writing a play. I wrote my first play in competition for the Fellowship and came in second. The next year I won the Shubert, and consequently was required to get my M.F.A. in playwriting, not fiction. But I had taken an immediate liking to playwriting as well: a play didn't take as long to write as a novel (three failed novels had exhausted me); more importantly, in a play one didn't have to create a sense of physical space. The space was the stage itself, and bringing its physical aspects to life was the job of the set designer. Moreover, the flesh of a character was hung on an actor. Here, then, was a form in which my strengths (storytelling and the creation of character) were not hurt by my weakness (not knowing where I am).

In retrospect, I like to think this was an ecstatic moment of discovery, though I cannot pinpoint when it happened. I suppose playwriting just grew on me, like my love of Dick Crooks' Idaho and, by extension, the entire Pacific Northwest—from the hills I wandered east and west of Eugene, to the mountains I visited in Washington and Montana. I graduated with an M.F.A. in playwriting and moved east, surely ready for playwriting's major leagues: I'd eliminated my major technical weakness as a writer with the help of collaborators, Dick and the set designer and the actor. And if alone I didn't have a sufficient sense of place, they gave me one, and together we were going to write some damn good plays.

In early draft the play had the horrible title *Goodbye, America, I Love You*, and it was the first play, story or novel I had ever set out of the west. Most of my work by the mid-seventies was set in Southern California, where I'd spent much of my youth. Typically my work dealt with the

confrontation of the city Californian with the rural Northwest, a journey matching my own; but never had I told a story set on the east coast. Then I wrote a play set on Maryland's Eastern Shore. My usual thematic matter was there, the dramatic confrontation of urban and rural values, but somehow I was shocked to discover that I had actually set a play in the east. "You're becoming one of us," a friend told me. As much as I admired and was fascinated by the watermen of Chesapeake Bay, who had much in common with Northwest loggers, I obviously was an outsider, an observing stranger. Moreover, for the first time in my life I was gaining a rough sense of place; east coast rhythms and density were swift and compact, and I missed the more open and relaxed texture of the west. I returned in 1977, to Portland, Oregon.

Goodbye, America, I Love You became *The Pardon*, the first of a dozen of my plays to premiere in Portland. It is still the only thing I've written set on the east coast.

On the surface, a sense of place has become important in my work in recent years: the Northwest backdrop is thematically important in plays such as *Country Northwestern* (about the last day in a town being flooded by a dam project), *Christmas at the Juniper Tavern* (the comic confrontation of a logging community with an Eastern guru and his followers), *Waitresses* (a mother-daughter story of small town Oregonians with dreams of Nashville). I've named my northwest territory "Juniper County," and although I set Juniper in Central Oregon, there is a considerable influence of Orofino, Idaho, there as well. Each of the plays above has at least one regional joke I first heard from Dick Crooks. And I've been lucky to find set designers who create my small town taverns and kitchens with convincing realism. With my collaborators, then, I've succeeded in becoming "an Oregon playwright."

But what does this really mean? After all, I don't always write in regional settings: two of my best plays (in

my opinion) have nothing to do with the Northwest: *The Comedian In Spite of Himself* (about the life of Moliere) and *The Sadness of Einstein* (still unproduced as I write, about certain comic possibilities of the new physics). My most successful play, *Christmas at the Juniper Tavern*, draws more from my early 1971 one-act, *The Death of Teng Yen-feng*, than from the Rajneesh phenomenon in Oregon, although I've yet to meet a journalist who believes me when I say this. In fact, I consider my major playwriting influences to come from the Europeans, with their stronger sense of a theater of ideas, than from the naturalistic Americans. The sense of place in *Our Town*^ in which Wilder's dramaturgy cast influences throughout Europe (as Durrenmatt and others have acknowledged), is different from the sense of place in Neil Simon's New York or David Mamet's Chicago, where physical territory can be important. Thornton Wilder wrote of places in the mind, and except for Albee, early Sam Shepard and Arthur Kopit, few of his artistic disciples in the U.S. have gained wide audiences. "The inside of my head is my country," a character of mine sings, and this allegiance is my own.

If this suggests a fragile allegiance to the Northwest, I admit it. The dramatic opposition of things urban and rural, which is so central in my work, can be set in many environments. I have a sense of being "a westerner" but less of being "a Northwesterner." Most of my stories would work in the Southwest, the small communities of Northern California, the Nevada desert, or on an Hawaiian island. I set many of my plays in Oregon because I live here; I like it here, but I claim no special significance for the region, as I make use of it, other than its being a part of "the (vanishing) west."

I'm sure there is a tradition of Northwest literature but I don't feel that I am a significant part of it. That tradition belongs to poets and novelists who grew up here, who hunt and fish (I still don't), who can use a chain saw without endangering life and limb--the kind of people whom I often put in my plays. As "a regional writer" I

suppose I'm something of a spy, "stealing" from the direct experience of others, but like it or not, I find myself called "an Oregon playwright" as if this were especially significant. Indeed, recently a critic wrote that *Christmas at the Juniper Tavern* is "an Oregon classic" but I haven't the slightest idea what this means. To me, the play is philosophical comedy (even a Zen comedy) about the comic clash of Western and Eastern values and versions of reality. Its relationship to the Rajneesh phenomenon is accidental but also fortunate in its timing, in that it gave the play a large audience (perhaps for all the wrong reasons). But "an Oregon Classic"?

People have influenced me more than place. Dick Crooks' Northwest became my own but it was probably the magnetism of Dick's personality that made the difference. Portland, which has been very kind to me as a playwright, is kindest with its people. Portland is not an important theatrical town: without an Equity company, it does not belong to the significant regional theater network in this country. To have a play produced in Portland is, frankly, professionally meaningless, as far as one's "resume" is concerned. But Portland is home to Steve Smith, Gary O'Brien, Peter Fornara, Richard Watson and other theater directors and producers who have supported my work for a decade now. They have helped shape my work but this is not the influence of Portland, it is the influence of living artists who just happen to make Portland their home, as I do. Perhaps I found these collaborators so readily--and the most important thing about theater is that it is a collaborative art--because Portland is theatrically insignificant in the national perspective: any genuine playwright who happens along readily stands out. Indeed, my agent in New York considers a Portland premiere no premiere at all; Portland doesn't count. But here I am, working away because I like the people I work with here. The "residency" relationships I've had with Portland theater companies is the very best way a playwright can work: I usually have a stage even before I begin to write. And the stage is my canvas, not the white paper

that precedes the script. The stage is my canvas, the actors my language, and I've happily found ready access to both in Portland.

There are professional advantages and disadvantages in my situation. I get more work done, and presumably grow more artistically, since I've reduced the anxiety and hassle of finding a production. At the same time, a Portland production is something of a laboratory test--one can find out much about the strengths and weaknesses of a script, but since Portland is not on the professional theater circuit, there is little communication between Portland and the country's regional theater centers. A play done in Seattle or San Francisco can be seen by directors and producers who matter "in the business" of professional theater. This is unlikely in Portland.

Then why don't I move to Seattle? I ask myself this annually. But interestingly enough, when I think of moving, I usually think of eastern Oregon, or the coast, or even Dick's Idaho-- country places where the northwest environment is rural and remote. Perhaps I've come to have a sense of place, after all: a liking for the sound of rivers, wind in the tall trees, the smell of stark desert and white mountain and vast ocean. This place grows on you.

Wherever I am, in Portland or elsewhere, I'll be writing plays set in Juniper County, Oregon, and others that are set elsewhere. I'll continue to set city against countryside, insider against outsider, logger against guru, and (as in a play in progress) folksinger against singing robot. Juniper, I suppose, has become my image of something that is rootedly western, rootedly special, but which is challenged everywhere by new and different values and realities. Space, solitude, individuality, self-reliance--these are the values I associate with the Northwest, as I make use of them as a playwright. But space may be a dinosaur, doomed to disappear, and self-reliance can easily turn into selfishness: these are the

parameters of conflict from which drama emerges.

I don't expect to be living in Portland forever. Professionally, I need a larger theater market; I just don't want to have to move there. What one does, I suppose, is hide out to write, and commute into the large cities for production. So I'm rather searching for a place to hide out in these days. Recently, in fact, Dick Crooks and I returned to Orofino, and the Clearwater River looked pretty good. But last year it was Hawaii that looked pretty good. And next year?

In the last analysis, I'm my father's son, always at sea, the Northwest a port that's been good to me but still not quite home. Perhaps the "high lonesome" of Dick Crooks' loggers and the wanderlust of the sailor are related: toothbrush ever at the ready, the human accent mixed-up and crazy, always a step away from needing additional therapy--but who knows where one may find it?

If this is the same thing as being "an Oregon playwright," that's fine by me.

BIRTHING LITTLE RICHARD

Reflections on the Rise of Rock-n-Roll, Los Angeles, 1950-7

(originally published in Oregon Magazine)

I became a teenager in the right place at the right time. Although you could count on one hand the number of blacks enrolled at Woodrow Wilson Jr. High or Pasadena High School, Los Angeles County had large enough a black population to justify the existence of radio shows that played "the very best in Negro entertainment" around the clock. One such show was Hunter Hancock's afternoon "Harlematinee" on KFVD.

I'd discovered this radio show in Jr. High. In 1952, when I turned 13, I already was part of a growing vanguard of white kids listening to black music, and we were going to change the popular music industry forever. I was on the front lines for the birth of rock-n-roll.

But as a pre-teen and teenager, I didn't look like anyone in "Grease" or on "Happy Days." I didn't even smoke, let alone roll a cigarette pack up the sleeve of a T-shirt. I didn't own a car, let alone a hot rod. My hair was in a butch, not a flat top. Hell, I didn't even date. I was a science nerd -- but boy did I love listening to black music on Hunter Hancock's radio show, from Little Water to Muddy Waters, from The Clovers to The Robins to The Flamingos, from the wailing sax of Earl Bostic to the bending guitar notes of young B.B. "Blues Boy" King.

To this day I can remember Hancock's signature introduction: "From blues to ballads, from bebop to boogie, featuring the very best in Negro entertainment." Late at night, there was a more risqué radio show, "Harlem Hit Pa-

rade" on KRKD, which was hosted by a DJ who called himself "Huggy Boy" and sponsored by an all-night record store, Dolphin's of Hollywood.

In this literal and explicit age, when the life of the imagination is so impoverished that nothing is left to it, anyone under 55 may find it hard to comprehend how risque the lyrics of some early 50s R&B songs were and how titillating they became to white teenagers and pre-teens. Black artists were attracting a growing, white, teenage audience with songs that rattled the walls of decency, and the times they were a-changin'.

In 1951 came "Sixty Minute Man" by Billy Ward and The Dominoes. This bragging confession by a stud included lines like "they call me Lovin' Dan; I rock 'em, roll 'em, all night long, I'm the Sixty Minute Man." This great lover would make women holler "please don't stop!" and his seductive ways would end with "fifteen minutes of teasin', fifteen minutes of squeezin', and fifteen minutes of blowin' my top."

Television was in its infancy, and there was no talk show on which a Dr. Ruth could explicate the meaning of "blowin' my top." Virgin teenagers had to imagine this experience themselves and, believe me, the result was considerably more titillating than anything Dr. Ruth would have to say.

The next year The Clovers released "One Mint Julep." Here we learned that seduction could have unfortunate consequences: "I'm through with flirtin' and drinkin' whiskey, I got six extra children from a-gettin' frisky" and "one mint julep was the cause of it all."

1954 is the pivotal year in the history of rock-n-roll. Most pop music historians credit "Sh-Boom" by The Chords as being the first rock-n-roll single. This song by a black group attracted such a substantial white teenage audience that it was "covered" by a white group, which typically drained the arrangement of all its sensual energy and

began a process of de-sexualizing early black rock-n-roll with white cover records that reached its absurd extreme when Pat Boone started covering the hits of Little Richard.

But in 1954 the sound was still black. That same year in Memphis, Sam Phillips of Sun Records, who had been looking for a white singer with the black sound and black feel, signed Elvis Presley.

To "hip" white teenagers, however, 1954 was most remembered not for "Sh-Boom" or Elvis but for three extraordinary records released by Hank Ballard and The Midnighters: "Work With Me Annie," "Sexy Ways," and "Annie Had A Baby."

In "Work With Me Annie," the lyric "let's get it while the gettin' is good" was considered so dirty, so obscene, that for a time the song was banned from the airways in Los Angeles. This was the situation when I heard Huggy Boy announce on his early morning radio show that, the law be damned, next week at 3 a.m. he was going to play "Work with Me, Annie" on the air!

My Jr. High was abuzz with the news. Would Huggy Boy really dare to do this? Of course, those of us who were hip (and I was one hip nerd) knew the song because we owned a 78 rpm record of it or at least had heard it on the radio before it was banned. And no wonder it was banned: "Annie please don't cheat, Give me all my meat!" My God, who had ever heard anything so sexually explicit on the radio before?

Hank Ballard and The Midnighters, more than any other black group in the early 1950s, had a reputation for being sexual and dangerous. Their songs were full of references to, well, SEX. "Sexy Ways" had the mind-boggling lyric: "In the hall, on the wall; Dance baby dance, now crawl crawl crawl!," followed by so many repetitions of "Oh baby; Do it, baby" that a teenager could have a premature coronary just from imagining the activity being described. Ballard's quivering voice suggested more sexual abandon

than anyone before Little Richard. Hank Ballard and The Midnighters would have made "The Star Spangled Banner" sound sexual.

Despite being banned, "Work With Me, Annie" was so popular -- at the time it was referred to as the Negro National Anthem -- that it inspired a sequel, "Annie Had A Baby." This song was filled with predictions about male-female relationships that many male teenagers would encounter in the very near future: "She sings to the baby instead of me, Clings to the baby instead of me; Now it's clear and it's understood -- That's what happens when the gettin' gets good! Annie had a baby, can't work no more."

And so we spent a long week at Wilson Jr. High in 1954, the tension mounting, as we awaited the early morning when Huggy Boy was going to defy the law and put Annie back on the airways. Would he chicken out at the last minute? One day a rumor spread around school that Huggy Boy had been fired. In my room, I nervously waited up late for his show to start -- and felt incredible relief to hear his usual opening banter, "This is Dick Hugg -- Huggy Boy!"

On the morning in question, I had no trouble getting up at 3 a.m. I often set my alarm for 3 in order to get up and look at the stars with my telescope. Sometimes I would take a portable radio outside with me, listening to Huggy Boy at low volume as I star-gazed. This night, however, I stayed in bed, turning on the show around 2 and waiting for the count-down to the magic hour.

As 3 approached, it became clear that he was going to go through with it; at least, he kept talking about it. And then the hour came, and it really happened: the introductory guitar riff played, Hank Ballard sang "Work with me, Annie" in a voice drooling with sex, and the Midnighters followed with their suggestive chorus, "Ah-oom, ah-oom." Jesus Christ, Huggy Boy was breaking the law just like he said he would!

I wanted to call up one of my nerd friends to make sure he was listening. I wanted to shout at the top of my lungs -- without waking my parents. I wanted to masturbate. Maybe I would have gotten around to the latter if an unexpected sound hadn't come from the radio.

Someone was pounding on a door! Huggy Boy explained that the police were outside, trying to break into his studio! And then there was a crash, a confusion of noise suggesting breaking furniture ... and then the radio show was off the air! Huggy Boy had been arrested, right on the radio!

It doesn't matter that later, as an adult, I realized this was all staged. And good radio theater it was, too. But at the time it all made perfect sense because there was, in fact, something deliciously wicked about listening to the songs of Hank Ballard and The Midnighters. The sizzling abandon in these songs was as different from Patti Page's proper singing about doggies in the window as the chaotic mess in my room was from the perfectly made bedspread in my parents' bedroom. (Of course, no teenager could imagine his parents making love.)

In fact, rock-n-roll was going to clean up its act as it became more and more popular in the late-50s. The infamous gyrations of Elvis' hips were far less risqué than the quivering sexuality in Hank Ballard's voice, but by Elvis -- who burst upon the scene in 1956 after Phillips sold his contract to RCA, where Elvis quickly recorded "Heartbreak Hotel" and became a national icon -- there was such a large, white, teenage audience for rock-n-roll that the less threatening gestures of Elvis caused much more uproar than the raw sexuality of early 50s R&B. Why? Probably because the white audience was small and restricted to large urban centers in the early 50s. By 1955, kids everywhere, from Montana to Rhode Island, were getting off on rock-n-roll, and to some critics this defined a cultural crisis. At more than one radio station, rock-n-roll records were being destroyed on the air.

For me, rock-n-roll was just about over by 1957, and my musical tastes were turning to West Coast Jazz, particularly to the musical partnership of Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker. I wouldn't get interested in rock again until Bob Dylan went electric. But I experienced one last hurrah to the more raw early sounds when a traveling rock-n-roll revue came to my high school during my senior year. Among the headliners was Little Richard.

Little Richard inherited the "most nasty" throne from Hank Ballard. Little Richard was even more dangerous: for one, he looked more dangerous, with his pompadour hair style and constantly sweating brow, and the sexuality in his voice was more like a growl than a quiver. Hank Ballard seduced the audience; Little Richard raped it.

I went to the revue mainly to see Little Richard. He'd recently come out with a new single, "Jenny, Jenny," the only recording on which he'd lost his breath, and I was hoping he'd sing it. Near the end of the program, he did.

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to finish "Jenny, Jenny." Little Richard, who knew as well as anyone why white teenagers had flocked to rock-n-roll, began singing on stage with the microphone between his legs, where it jutted out toward the audience like a long, skinny, silver phallus. He even began stroking it.

Somewhere in the back of the auditorium was our Principal. She was not a fan of rock-n-roll, and the only reason the revue had come to campus was because the campus belonged to the Community College, which we shared while our new high school was being built. When our Principal saw what Little Richard was up to, she did the very thing one might expect from a woman whose highlight of the week was to lead the student body in singing "You Gotta Have Heart" at the end of each school assembly: she turned off the power to the building.

Somehow no riot started. After the show was officially canceled, most teenagers probably went cruising or went home, waiting for Huggy Boy to come on the radio.

I remember sitting in the dark auditorium, marveling at the history I just had witnessed and how lucky I was to have grown up on The Clovers and on Hank Ballard and The Midnighters and how one day I would be talking about seeing Little Richard the night my high school principal turned off his power, and how wonderful it was to be a teenager at this time and place, to participate in the rise of rock-n-roll, even if now Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis were the only performers who retained the forbidden danger of the music's roots.

It wouldn't be until six years later, late on a morning in November, 1963, when I would learn that history has many moods, some of them dark and uprooting, and as the sixties progressed and the assassinations piled up, I began to understand that never again would I live through an historical moment as warmly nostalgic as the birthing of Little Richard.

LIQUOR AND LIT

A Portrait of the Writer as a Drunk

(originally published in Oregon Magazine)

Like many writers of my generation, I studied in the school of liquor and lit. Previous generations of American writers pointed the way. My literary heroes when I was learning the craft in the 1960s were (or had been) hard drinkers if not outright drunks: O'Neill and Saroyan and Williams, Faulkner and Steinbeck and Hemingway, Mailer and Baldwin and Cheever, James Agee. The hard-drinking American writer was a figure of mythic proportions, and by the time I graduated from UCLA I was eager to join his ranks.

But I came both to literature and to drinking relatively late. In high school I was one of those science nerds who didn't date and got A's. My idea of a good time was to get up at three in the morning to look through my telescope and fulfill my obligations as one of the country's younger members of the American Association of Variable Star Observers. It took Uncle Sam to give me an appreciation for liquor and lit.

I joined the Army at the end of a cycle of confusion, a major life crisis at 20. I went from high school to Cal Tech as a math major, but none of my previous math and science teachers had informed me that I wasn't a genius. When I discovered the truth by sitting next to an authentic genius or two at Cal Tech, I was crushed. I wanted to be "a pure mathematician" more than anything else (the mathematician as artist), maybe an astronomer next; I learned

that I didn't have the brains to be a pure mathematician and that professional astronomers rarely look through telescopes. I didn't want to become an engineer, but this appeared to be my destiny if I stayed at Cal Tech. I left with a B average in the middle of my sophomore year and transferred to Berkeley, telling myself I was now a philosophy major.

Berkeley in 1959 was like the Internet in 1994, full of dazzling, chaotic energy. I became a street person in no time at all, finding the street life much more exciting than classes, and for a while I even lived in a tree house I'd built in Strawberry Canyon. I was beginning to drink beer and wine regularly and, for the first time, to read literary books that weren't required in a class.

I ended up joining the Army because I was broke -- and because the draft was hanging over my head. An Oakland recruiter decided I would make an excellent spy, and so he put me in the Army Security Agency. After doing well on a battery of tests, I was assigned to the Army Language School in Monterey, where I was trained as a Russian linguist. This proved to be a major turning point in my life and a strong push toward a career in liquor and lit.

Assigned to a company of Russian linguists in Germany, I found myself surrounded by former graduate students with Masters degrees in Literature and History and Philosophy, majors that would not give them deferments to escape the draft as they worked on their doctorates. They'd joined the Army to avoid being a foot soldier, and they became my tutors. As one of three odd-balls in the company who didn't have a college degree, I became a sort of intellectual mascot, and my colleagues fought among themselves to influence me, one trying to turn me into an historian, another into a psychologist, still another into a writer.

I was still drinking in the minor leagues at the time. My fellow Russian linguists, most of them five years older than I, inspired me to try out for the majors. Shy by nature, but looking up to these older, bright colleagues and want-

ing to join their drinking clique, I discovered a capacity to belt shot for shot with the best of them, far into the night. I may be younger and less well-read, but they couldn't drink me under the table!

And so my Army career was highlighted by heavy drinking and heavy reading in the most stimulating intellectual environment of my life.

When I was discharged and returned to finish college, I majored in English at UCLA. I was drinking regularly by then, although I didn't really consider the one or two six-packs I consumed daily to be "drinking." Drinking was consuming hard liquor, which usually I reserved for weekends. I was a student, after all, with books to read and papers to write. Beer was what you drank along the way because it tasted better than water. A six-pack a day didn't keep me from graduating with honors, Phi Beta Kappa.

After UCLA, I went off to graduate school at the University of Oregon, where more than ever liquor and lit were the engines that drove my considerable energy. I was "someone to keep an eye on" in the English Department, already publishing book reviews in national journals and short stories in literary magazines by the time I arrived. Although my first marriage had failed, I quickly met my second wife, a brilliant graduate student who liked to brag that she had never met a man who could drink her under the table. Then she met me, and it must have been love at the seventh or eighth pitcher.

Everyone, or at least everyone worth knowing, was hanging out at Maxie's tavern near campus, and when it closed many would come over to our house for nightcaps. Literary talk was loud and heated, at least until the guitars and auto harp came out, and a few of us sang folk music as others passed around joints and mellowed out. My generation was too young to be beatniks and too old to be hippies but we prided ourselves on being academic bohemians all the same, seasoned students in the school of liquor and lit.

When I graduated with an MFA in Playwriting in 1974, I had a growing list of publications, the first awards and productions of a playwriting career, and a thirst for alcohol more insatiable than ever. But something was beginning to change. The dark side of alcohol consumption was beginning to reveal itself.

I don't have to tell you what happened next. You already know. Alcohol is our culture's official, legal drug, and everyone knows someone who has abused it. What happened to me over the next twenty years is more or less what happens to every alcoholic. The Japanese have put the progression of the drinking life more succinctly than anyone: first the man takes the drink; then the drink takes the drink; then the drink takes the man.

But why didn't I know about the dark side of liquor and lit when I bought into the curriculum? What was so attractive about the hard-drinking literary life in the first place? Why were so many writers of my generation (and earlier ones) such big boozers?

I first began to look closely at these questions during the year I spent as an in-patient in a VA treatment program. Assigned to work in the medical library, I had a lot of time on my hands and read as much as I could about alcoholism. I found two books about the curious marriage of writing and alcohol abuse in American culture and I devoured each, looking for answers.

In "The Thirsty Muse: Alcohol and the American Writer" (1989), Tom Dardis begins with fascinating statistics: "Of the seven native-born Americans awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, five were alcoholic. The list of other twentieth-century American writers similarly affected is very long; only a few of the major creative talents have been spared."

Dardis points out that similar statistics do not hold true for European writers, suggesting the affiliation between writ-

ers and booze is a particularly American phenomenon (and perhaps one that happened at a certain time as well).

So what's the explanation? Dardis makes no real attempt to find out. Instead he gives us detailed chapters on the sordid drinking lives of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and O'Neill, telling horror stories similar to those one can hear in any AA meeting anywhere in the land.

Dardis concludes: "All four of the writers discussed here suffered tremendous physical and spiritual pain through their heavy drinking. Three of them found their creativity irreparably damaged by their alcoholism; only one escaped from the grip of the disease to discover that its very nature would become his greatest subject." The latter is O'Neill, of course, who sobered up and went on to write his two masterpieces, "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and "The Iceman Cometh."

Donald W. Goodwin is much more helpful in "Alcohol and the Writer" (1988). Although he, too, explores the drinking lives of a number of writers -- Poe, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Simenon, Faulkner, O'Neill, Lowry -- he boldly attempts to explain why such "an epidemic" happened in America in the twentieth century. His chapter "Notes on an Epidemic" even has a subchapter entitled "Causes."

Goodwin lists three reasons why alcohol and the writer go so well together. I'll relate each to my own experience.

"1. The hours are good." No doubt about it, the writing life (especially on a freelance basis) provides considerable time for drinking. Most of my life I've written to deadlines, paid by the project, which gave me lots of wiggle room for fitting in a binge or two. I'd get an assignment or a grant and not expect to be seen for weeks at a time. No one cared if I wrote at three in the morning or three in the afternoon. All that mattered was that I deliver the product

by the deadline. And, to use alcoholic double-speak, I never missed a deadline I didn't get extended.

"2. It is expected." I've already confessed to buying into the myth of the hard-drinking American writer. All my heroes drank heavily, so why shouldn't I? I think the association between writing and drinking has changed in our culture -- or maybe just been transferred. Perhaps in the sixties the hard-drinking writer became the hard-drugging rock star. Same myth, different characters. I look around today and find more coffee shops than bars; maybe that's where young writers meet. I hope so.

"3. Writers need inspiration." I don't buy this one. Alcohol never inspired me. I couldn't write drunk and didn't even try. I wrote with a hangover, of course, but whatever "inspiration" may have come to me while drinking I forgot by morning, and I always wrote in the morning as soon as I could function. I'm one of those writers who believe in perspiration more than inspiration. But writers as distant as Fitzgerald and Stephen King are quoted by Goodwin in support of alcohol's ability to enhance creativity. Not with this kid.

Goodwin next has a subchapter heading called "The Loner Theory." He quotes an interpretation by historian Gilman Ostrander:

"Alcoholism is basically a disease of individualism. It afflicts people who from early childhood develop a strong sense of being psychologically alone and on their own in the world. This solitary outlook prevents them from gaining emotional release through associations with other people, but they find they can get this emotional release by drinking. So they become dependent on alcohol in the way other people are dependent on their social relationships with friends and relatives."

I almost fell out of my chair when I read this. This described my life to the letter. A Navy brat raised primarily by my mother, I became good at math because I learned

arithmetic as early as I learned to talk. Mother took me everywhere and kept me quiet by giving me pages of arithmetic problems to do, which I obediently and quietly solved. In my teens I was obsessed with using my telescope, a solitary activity that usually happened at hours when everyone around me was asleep. Shy by nature, I became gregarious only when under the influence of alcohol (also part of the loner theory), and the barroom became the center of my social universe.

Goodwin goes on to argue that writing and alcohol share something important:

"Writing and alcohol both produce trancelike states. A gift for creative writing may involve an innate ability to enter trancelike states. Being a loner -- shy, isolated, without strong personal ties -- may facilitate trancelike states when it is time to write and encourage drinking to overcome the shyness and isolation when it is time to relax." This described my working-drinking rhythm perfectly.

The loner theory, more than anything else I've found, best explains to me why I was attracted to the drinking life and why drinking fit so well with the writing life. Maybe this doesn't describe the experience of other writers. I'm not making a universal claim for this theory (as Goodwin does), but it describes my own experience as a hard-drinking writer very well.

A former hard-drinking writer, I must add. Today I hold up the model of Eugene O'Neill, who quit in time to do his best work later in life. I hope I have the same luxury.

I consumed my last alcoholic beverages on June 13, 1993, at Jazz de Opus in Portland. I went there on the night before I entered treatment at the VA. I went there with a credit card and a plan.

I sat at a table near the bar and spent the next several hours saying goodbye to some old companions. I began with a glass of Guinness. I next had a light beer with a shot of Jameson's Irish on the side. I added a double shot of Stolichnaya on the rocks before the beer was gone. I switched to a house Gin and Tonic, a breather. Then I ordered a Bombay Blue Sapphire martini, which tasted so good I had another. Maybe the waitress thought I'd finally made up my mind because I stayed with the Blue gin until I was ready to go home.

For a nightcap, I ordered a special drink for old times, a farewell toast to a way of life, a moment I expected to remember forever -- and have. I ordered a B-52. Its layers reminded me of the different periods of my life -- the high school science nerd, the confused mathematician, the Berkeley street person, the linguist-spy-mascot, the ambitious grad student, the less ambitious playwright -- each period clearly set apart from the others. When I raised the small, narrow glass and tipped it, the fragile spectrum dissolved as each color ran into its neighbor to become a drab concoction of spirits, suddenly dark and dreary, just as the periods of my life finally had succumbed to one all-encompassing description, which had become more meaningful than any colorful distinctions between them: I was living the life of a drunk. I belted down the B-52, paid my considerable tab, and left.

One B-52 pilot on one final mission. Over and out.
(But somehow I lived to tell the tale.)

PLAYS

MRS. JONES: What the people expect, they deserve. What they deserve, they get. Always.

From "The Stiff"

THE STIFF

a farce in one act

THE CAST (4M, 2W):

President John Jones, *the leader of the people*

Mrs. Eunice Jones, *his wife*

Chi Chi, *his mistress*

Neck, *the mortician*

Charles, *his assistant*

Dr. Alberts, *the doctor*

THE TIME:

Any time

THE PLACE:

A back room in the Public Hall in a foreign country.

THE SET:

Upstage center is a table on which is a casket. A window, upstage left, looks out upon the square. Entrance into the room is stage right. Modest furnishings: this is the room in which the corpses of public figures are kept before being put on display to the people.

(AT RISE: DR. ALBERTS has his back to the audience, inspecting a body in the casket. Waiting expectantly are MRS. JONES, NECK and CHARLES. Mrs. Jones, who is in mourning, is dressed in black. She holds a black lace handkerchief over her sobs. The doctor turns and moves away from the casket.)

NECK: Well, doctor?

DR. ALBERTS: Your suspicions are correct. I find the organ to be tumescent.

(Mrs. Jones breaks into tears.)

CHARLES: Please, Mrs. Jones.

MRS. JONES: *(struggling)* It's sca— ... scan— ... it's scanda
—

CHARLES: Now, now.

NECK: Perhaps you could give her something.

DR. ALBERTS: Comes, Mrs. Jones. You must try to relax.

(The doctor and Mrs. Jones start out.)

NECK: Thank you, doctor.

DR. ALBERTS: I feel I should be the one thanking you. In my long career I've never seen anything like this before.

MRS. JONES: *(sobbing)* It's scandalous ...

DR. ALBERTS: Come with me. I'll administer a sedative.

(The doctor escorts her off.)

CHARLES: What do we do now?

NECK: I'm not sure.

CHARLES: You could display only half the body. The upper half.

NECK: And compromise my reputation? I didn't get where I am by displaying only half the body. People expect a full deck.

CHARLES: They've been waiting out there for hours. The lines are —

NECK: I know how long the lines are. Let them wait. We can't display the body as it is.

CHARLES: Of course not.

NECK: We've got to get rid of it.

CHARLES: Perhaps if ...

NECK: If what?

CHARLES: If we dismembered ... it was just a thought.

NECK: I do not mutilate bodies. The entire body will be viewed intact or not at all. I have my reputation to think of.

CHARLES: It was just a suggestion.

(A pause.)

CHARLES: Perhaps it will go away.

NECK: Perhaps.

CHARLES: We can wait and hope. We can pray.

NECK: Yes, we can pray.

(They pray. Then they approach the casket and look at the

body.)

NECK: No luck.

CHARLES: They must be getting impatient out there. The lines started forming as soon as his death was announced.

NECK: I know, I know.

CHARLES: He certainly is popular. Even dead. I suppose because he was so average. According to the polls, there was never a more average man.

NECK: We have to think of something.

CHARLES: At least Mrs. Jones noticed the problem before the doors were opened. If the people had been let in before anyone noticed ...

NECK: If you want to thank Mrs. Jones, send her flowers.

CHARLES: I'm sorry.

NECK: We have to think of something.

CHARLES: Yes.

NECK: I must have done something wrong.

CHARLES: Do you think so?

NECK: Perhaps I was nervous without knowing it. I've never prepared a President before. Something inconsequential could have slipped my notice, and consequently have become — consequential. If I had somehow erred in draining all the blood, for example. Perhaps such an error would explain it.

CHARLES: That might be an explanation.

NECK: On the other hand, the blood measured five point three quarts, which is average.

CHARLES: Then that must not be it.

NECK: Perhaps it has even happened before. I'm much too busy to read all of the literature. New findings are always

popping up. A premature ossification, for example. I've heard rumors of such a thing.

CHARLES: That might be an explanation.

NECK: On the other hand, then one would presume that the organ would ossify in its normal state.

CHARLES: Then that must not be it.

NECK: Unless, of course, he died while the organ was ...?

CHARLES: You don't think he died like that?

NECK: Suppose he did. Followed by premature ossification ...

CHARLES: Sounds unlikely to me.

NECK: There's one way to find out. I'll question his wife.

CHARLES: About that?

NECK: It's a delicate matter, I know. But we must find out. It could be the explanation. Get Mrs. Jones.

CHARLES: But the doctor was going to give her a sedative. She'll be resting.

NECK: A sedative will make the matter less delicate. Get Mrs. Jones.

CHARLES: Yes, sir.

(Charles exits. Neck moves to stare at the body. Mrs. Jones and Charles enter.)

MRS. JONES: You wanted to see me?

NECK: Yes, ma'am. Please sit down.

MRS. JONES: The doctor suggested I nap until the matter is settled.

NECK: This will only take a minute. Charles, perhaps you would leave us alone.

CHARLES: Of course.

(He exits.)

NECK: Madam, I don't want you to think that I'm being overly personal. But this matter is highly unusual, as you know. I have never seen anything like it in all my years as Public Mortician. Nor has Dr. Alberts seen anything like it, as you heard for yourself. So the explanation, which we must find before correcting the difficulty, is likely to come from unexpected directions. Therefore, we must follow every clue. However delicate.

MRS. JONES: What is it you want to know? I'll help in any way I can.

NECK: Very good. You are standing up admirably.

MRS. JONES: Please be quick. I'm very tired.

NECK: Certainly. Mrs. Jones, were you near your husband when he died?

MRS. JONES: Yes.

NECK: How near?

MRS. JONES: Pardon me?

NECK: Did he die, by chance, in bed?

MRS. JONES: Yes. How did you know?

NECK: A wild guess. Now madam, this will seem to be none of my business, but there is something else I must ask you.

MRS. JONES: Simply ask it.

NECK: When your husband was in bed, just before he died ... were you by chance ... making love?

(Mrs. Jones breaks into tears.)

NECK: I know the matter is very personal, madam. But it might be the clue we need. If you were making love, you see, and if he died with ... the way he is now, madam ... and if premature ossification occurred, which is not unheard of ... then, you see ...

MRS. JONES: We haven't made love in ten years.

NECK: Oh.

MRS. JONES: We've had separate bedrooms for fifteen.

NECK: I see.

MRS. JONES: I tried to get him interested. God knows, I tried. But always without success. Always without ... that happening. And now for him to respond while dead ... is God so cruel?

NECK: Take your nap, Mrs. Jones. You've been helpful.

MRS. JONES: How can we show the body?

NECK: We'll think of something.

(Mrs. Jones exits. Charles enters.)

CHARLES: Well?

NECK: They haven't slept together in years. As far as she's concerned, he was impotent.

CHARLES: Without meaning to sound crude, sir, if that's impotence, many a man would embrace it.

(Dr. Alberts enters.)

DR. ALBERTS: What did you say to her? She's more upset than ever.

NECK: We're trying to find out the cause of this, doctor.

DR. ALBERTS: Yes, I can see why you'd want to.

NECK: Perhaps you have an explanation.

DR. ALBERTS: If I did, it would revolutionize medical theory.

NECK: We have to get rid of it before we show the body.

DR. ALBERTS: I suppose you do.

NECK: Not only would it be highly irregular to show him like this, I would be held personally accountable for an utter disregard of decorum. The people would eat me alive.

DR. ALBERTS: Perhaps you exaggerate.

NECK: Never under-estimate the seriousness of a breach of decorum.

DR. ALBERTS: I wish I could be of more assistance. Unfortunately, the reproductive system is not my area of specialty. And I do have to get back to the hospital.

NECK: We appreciate your coming. A second opinion is always useful in a case like this.

DR. ALBERTS: I can report without qualification that the corpse has an erection.

NECK: Thank you very much, Dr. Alberts.

DR. ALBERTS: Glad to be of help. Oh yes — Mrs. Jones is resting in the lounge.

(He exits.)

CHARLES: What do we do now?

NECK: We think of something.

(Charles goes to the window.)

CHARLES: They don't look very patient to me.

NECK: I can well imagine.

CHARLES: You don't have to imagine — you can come see for yourself.

NECK: I prefer to imagine!

(A pause.)

CHARLES: Perhaps if ... ?

NECK: Well? If what?

CHARLES: We covered it with flowers.

NECK: I have never heard of displaying flowers in the crotch.

CHARLES: But it would cover it up.

NECK: Only as a last resort. Flowers in such a place would be too irregular. What would the reviewers think?

CHARLES: It was just a suggestion.

NECK: On the other hand, if we folded his hands over it ...

CHARLES: I don't think so, sir. Without meaning to sound crude, if I saw such a thing, I'd think he had been playing with himself.

NECK: But you think flowers would work? I wonder.

(Chi Chi enters, dressed as a nun.)

NECK: May I help you?

CHI CHI: Is that him?

NECK: If you mean the body of the President, it is. The

services will begin directly, sister. Please wait in the auditorium.

CHI CHI: Oh. I'm ... Miss Jones. His sister.

NECK: I didn't realize.

(She starts toward the casket but is intercepted by Charles.)

CHARLES: Maybe you shouldn't look just yet.

NECK: The viewing comes later, Sister Jones.

CHI CHI: But I want to look now.

NECK: If you looked now, consider how anticlimactic the formal viewing would be. All that inspiring oratory for nothing. We'll be starting very soon — please.

CHI CHI: Oh, all right. But I wish you'd hurry.

(She exits.)

CHARLES: I didn't know he had a sister.

NECK: Nor did I.

CHARLES: Do you smell something?

NECK: Sweet?

CHARLES: Sort of.

NECK: I can't put my finger on it.

CHARLES: Did she strike you as peculiar?

NECK: Not as peculiar as our friend. Our responsibility, I'm sorry to say.

(Mrs. Jones enters.)

MRS. JONES: Did the nun perform the rites already?

NECK: No, ma'am.

MRS. JONES: Where's Dr. Alberts?

NECK: He returned to the hospital. You shouldn't be up, madam.

MRS. JONES: I was lying down in the lounge when I felt as if someone was staring at me. When I opened my eyes, the doctor was there. Then he vanished. I thought perhaps he wanted to see me about something. Or was it all my imagination?

NECK: Your imagination, I think.

MRS. JONES: I can't sleep.

NECK: It would be difficult, yes.

MRS. JONES: But I do feel better. I'm very much in control of myself now.

NECK: I'm pleased to hear that.

MRS. JONES: I've even found an amusing side to everything. This is exactly something John would do. He was always trying to be different. I suppose because he was so average. Lately he had taken to fads. Mysticism. Meditation. Trying to control his heartbeat with his mind.

NECK: Trying to control his heartbeat?

MRS. JONES: Mind over matter, and all that. He would get in this ridiculous position, what do you call it? With his legs crossed, the way they do in the East. Japan, I suppose it is. He had taken to talking about Japan in his sleep.

NECK: You heard him?

MRS. JONES: Now and then, when I would stop by his bedroom to see if ... yes, sometimes I'd catch him talking about Japan in his sleep. His next vacation, perhaps. I take it everyone sits cross-legged over there, with blank expressions on their faces. He would sit that way for hours

and not say a word, hardly seeming to breathe. He claimed it improved his circulation.

NECK: Mrs. Jones, we've thought of a way to display the body.

MRS. JONES: You can get rid of it?

NECK: We can hide it. We can cover it up with an arrangement of flowers.

MRS. JONES: Flowers? There?

NECK: Yes. Especially if you publicly arrange them yourself. The people would regard it as erotic tenderness. They'd grant you a certain flair for intimacy. They would love you for it. And then they would pass by the body and see only the flowers, nothing else.

MRS. JONES: You know how that must hurt me.

NECK: I'm sorry, madam. This is no time for delicacy.

MRS. JONES: If there's no other way ...

NECK: There's no other way.

MRS. JONES: Then it must be done.

NECK: Bravo, madam. Come. You have bouquets without end to choose from. The people have mourned your loss with an unprecedented run on floral shops. You pick the flowers, and Charles and I will do the rest.

(They all exit. A beat.)

(In the casket, Jones sits up and looks around. He wiggles a bit, stretching, getting comfortable. Hearing someone, he gets back down.)

(Chi Chi enters and approaches the casket.)

CHI CHI: (*seeing his erection*) Boopy, shame on you!

(*She giggles. Jones sits up.*)

JONES: What are you doing here?

CHI CHI: I wanted to see how you look as a corpse. And really, boopy.

JONES: Nothing's going as planned.

CHI CHI: I can see that.

JONES: I couldn't help it. I keep thinking about you.

(*He grabs for her.*)

CHI CHI: Hands off. You're supposed to be dead.

JONES: Lock the door. It will solve everyone's problem.

CHI CHI: You're supposed to be on display.

JONES: They refused to show me like this.

(*Chi Chi giggles.*)

JONES: It isn't funny.

CHI CHI: I think it's cute.

(*Dr. Alberts enters. Hearing him, Jones starts to get back down in the casket, then sees who it is.*)

DR. ALBERTS: It's only me. (*To Chi Chi*) What are you doing here in that ridiculous outfit?

CHI CHI: I wanted to see how he looked as a corpse. No one stops a nun from going where she pleases.

DR. ALBERTS: You haven't helped matters, Mr. President.

JONES: I tried my best.

CHI CHI: He couldn't take his nasty mind off me.

DR. ALBERTS: They're getting flowers. This plan is to ... of course, you already know about that. You were here.

CHI CHI: I don't know.

DR. ALBERTS: You shouldn't be here in the first place.

JONES: Leave her alone. There's nothing to be done about it now.

DR. ALBERTS: You and your powers of meditation. I thought you could control your bodily processes. You're lucky another doctor didn't get the case and pronounce you alive.

JONES: My blood pressure would have fooled them.

DR. ALBERTS: Your erection wouldn't!

CHI CHI: You really should be ashamed of yourself, boopy. Having those thoughts in a coffin ... I'm not sure I appreciate that.

DR. ALBERTS: Get back down before they come in with the flowers.

CHI CHI: What are the flowers for?

JONES: They're hiding my problem with a bouquet.

CHI CHI: How darling!

DR. ALBERTS: Get down! (*Jones does*) And you get out of here. We don't have all —

(Neck and Charles enter with a large bouquet of mums.)

NECK: Doctor, Sister Jones. Is something the matter?

DR. ALBERTS: Not at all.

NECK: I thought you had to return to the hospital.

DR. ALBERTS: I phoned in. They don't need me, so I thought I might be of use here.

CHARLES: We solved the problem.

DR. ALBERTS: Mrs. Jones told me. I ran into her in the lounge. I congratulate you.

CHARLES: My idea.

DR. ALBERTS: I think it will work.

NECK: I'm sorry you had to be exposed to this, sister. It is highly irregular, I assure you.

CHI CHI: I think it's a cute idea.

NECK: You do?

DR. ALBERTS: *(to get Chi Chi out)* We'll leave you to your business ...

CHI CHI: Only I think roses would be more romantic.

(The doctor exits, getting Chi Chi out of there.)

CHARLES: She's right.

NECK: Be grateful we talked her out of skunkweed.

CHARLES: It's remarkable, isn't it?

NECK: What?

CHARLES: The whole idea of it. I mean, one doesn't think of such a thing happening to the President. At least, I never have. As average as he was, I still put him up on a pedestal. Can you imagine the President going to the john with the Sunday paper on the morning after? Imagine having to use the toilet next and having the place stink to high heaven —

by the President! He always seemed above all that. Even though I knew he was average.

NECK: If you ask me, he's one of a kind. Let's give him the flowers and move him out.

CHARLES: I can't imagine him being impotent. It must have just happened with his wife.

NECK: The flowers.

(Charles approaches the casket with the bouquet.)

CHARLES: Well, old sport, we have to hide you from the public.

(He playfully flicks the hidden erection with an index finger and Jones immediately sits up, grabbing his crotch in pain.)

JONES: AARGH!

CHARLES: Be Jesus!

NECK: Mister President!

CHARLES: *(falling to his knees)* Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done —

JONES: Stop that! I've not risen from the dead. I'm quite alive.

NECK: I was led to believe ... I myself prepared the body ...

JONES: It wasn't me.

NECK: I would have sworn it was.

JONES: That's only because I'm so average I look like anyone else. How do you suppose I got elected President? Everyone thought they were voting for themselves.

CHARLES: I always said you were a regular chap.

JONES: Too regular.

NECK: But the lines outside, Mr. President. Dr. Alberts pronounced you dead. It was in the papers. The public is waiting outside to view the body.

JONES: Don't worry, they'll get to see the body. Just give me a minute. Why on earth did you do that?

CHARLES: I'm sorry, I did it without thinking. I was overcome that even the President, even the corpse of the President —

NECK: Imbecile!

JONES: It doesn't matter now. Only, gentlemen, I'm afraid you're going to have to be sworn to secrecy about this.

NECK: I'm a man of ethics, Mr. President.

JONES: How much?

NECK: Half a million.

JONES: Split between the two of you. No bargaining. Remember, I'm still Commander-in-Chief.

NECK: (*to Charles*) Seventy-thirty.

CHARLES: Forty-sixty.

NECK: Sold.

JONES: Dr. Alberts will make the arrangements.

NECK: He also knows?

JONES: He's in love with my wife. He expects to marry her. Unfortunately, he's not her type. But he won't know that til I'm long gone.

NECK: The matter appears to be very complicated.

JONES: All you have to know is that I'm dead. Now put those flowers on me and ...

CHARLES: It's gone, Mr. President.

NECK: It must have been the blow.

JONES: Do we still need the flowers?

NECK: I'm not sure. Your wife —

JONES: Please — the widow Jones.

NECK: She will be expecting flowers.

JONES: Then we'll have flowers. Let's get moving, the people have been waiting for me long enough.

NECK: There was nothing we could do, Mr. President.

JONES: I'm not blaming you.

DR. ALBERTS: *(off stage)* It's the wife's prerogative to choose the flowers!

CHARLES: Someone's coming!

(Jones gets down in the casket. Chi Chi enters, carrying a bouquet of roses, followed by Dr. Alberts.)

CHI CHI: The President deserves the best. Roses.

DR. ALBERTS: You are being difficult.

NECK: Doctor? Sister Jones?

CHI CHI: Use these.

DR. ALBERTS: Mrs. Jones would not approve.

JONES: *(sitting up)* Chi Chi, what is it now?

NECK: Chi Chi?

CHI CHI: I'm not going to let you have less than roses. Especially down there. It's gone!

DR. ALBERTS: I've had enough of your go-go dancer, Jones. It was quite satisfactory to go along with this so you could run off to Japan with her, but when she begins getting in the way, ruining our cover, that's another matter entirely. I pronounced you dead. My reputation is at stake.

JONES: Chi Chi, please. Let the Widow Jones have her way. She's in mourning.

DR. ALBERTS: You'd better straighten this out, and quickly. The people won't put up with waiting out there much longer. They'll be storming the hall.

(He exits.)

NECK: Can he be trusted?

JONES: Of course. If I'm not dead, my wife is not a widow. Let's dispense with the flowers and get moving.

CHI CHI: But flowers is a darling idea. It just should be roses.

(The doctor hurries in.)

DR. ALBERTS: Your wife is coming!

JONES: Please. The Widow Jones.

(He gets down. Mrs. Jones enters with a bouquet of skunkweed.)

MRS. JONES: Are we ready?

NECK: We found a way to correct the matter after all, madam, and flowers won't be necessary.

MRS. JONES: But I want flowers. I want these.

NECK: Skunkweed, madam?

MRS. JONES: I've changed my mind about mums. They suggest mummies.

DR. ALBERTS: But skunkweed is hardly appropriate.

MRS. JONES: On the contrary. Where did the roses come from?

DR. ALBERTS: The sister was paying her respects.

MRS. JONES: Is it the roses I smell?

CHI CHI: It's called Burning Desire. You like it?

MRS. JONES: Who are you?

CHI CHI: Oh. His sister.

DR. ALBERTS: She means the Lord's sister, of course. I believe it's time to open the doors ...

MRS. JONES: I want a moment alone with my husband.

NECK: We are pressed for time, madam.

MRS. JONES: I won't be long. I have that small right, don't I?

NECK: Of course.

MRS. JONES: *(to Chi Chi)* Perhaps you would stay.

DR. ALBERTS: I'm sure the sister has urgent business elsewhere.

MRS. JONES: I would find it comforting if she stayed for just a moment.

CHI CHI: Okay.

NECK: Please be quick, madam. The people have been waiting for so long to pay their respects.

(All exit but the women and Jones down in the casket.)

MRS. JONES: I feel I must make a confession.

CHI CHI: Sure.

MRS. JONES: Are you really wearing perfume? I didn't think it was allowed.

CHI CHI: Oh. Well, only on special occasions. I mean, since he was President and all. What is it you want to confess about?

MRS. JONES: I have been unfaithful to my husband.

CHI CHI: Really?

MRS. JONES: Many times.

CHI CHI: I guess only the first time's the rough one.

MRS. JONES: Sometimes in this very room.

CHI CHI: Far out.

MRS. JONES: With Charles, the mortician's assistant. We've been seeing each other for years. In this very room.

CHI CHI: Sounds pretty kinky. Were dead bodies in here?

MRS. JONES: (*ignoring this*) I want to be alone with my husband now.

CHI CHI: What for?

MRS. JONES: To pray, of course.

CHI CHI: Oh. Well, sure. But I think they're in a hurry.

(*She exits. Mrs. Jones speaks to the casket.*)

MRS. JONES: And so we are alone at last, my darling. Do you know how long it's been? How long I've had to share you — first with them, the people, your constituency? Who elected you because you are so average. And later sharing you with your fads, your beloved meditations and mysticisms. And all along I still loved you. Charles is nothing. Charles is itching a scratch. I still love you, and this is why I must kill you. Even though you're already dead, I must kill you. For once, you must not get the last word. The coda will belong to me.

(She removes a knife from her person and approaches the casket.)

MRS. JONES: You'll never know I'm doing this. But I'll know. God, if he cares, will know. The final rejection belongs to me.

(She raises the knife and looks down at the body. Dr. Alberts enters.)

MRS. JONES: You've lost your erection!

DR. ALBERTS: Eunice, don't!

(The knife starts down as Jones grabs her hand. There is a struggle and the doctor joins in. Breaking free, Mrs. Jones thrusts wildly and stabs the doctor. He falls. Mrs. Jones thinks she has stabbed her husband.)

MRS. JONES: John, forgive me! Forgive me!

(Neck, Charles and Chi Chi enter.)

NECK: What happened?

MRS. JONES: I murdered my husband —

(She sees Jones sitting up, quite alive.)

JONES: Hello, Eunice.

MRS. JONES: But I thought —

JONES: Dr. Alberts looks dead to me.

NECK: The doors have been opened! The people expect oratory and a view of the body!

JONES: Then let's put the doctor in the casket.

NECK: It won't work, Mr. President. They expect you.

JONES: But who am I? The man who the polls called more average than anyone. Help me with the body.

NECK: There's too much blood. It will compromise my reputation.

JONES: We'll cover him with flowers. Everywhere but the face. They'll want to see the face.

NECK: Your face.

JONES: An average face. One is as good as another.

NECK: But what about you?

JONES: I am dead. This is my body.

NECK: But our arrangement ... ?

(Jones begins to scribble a note.)

CHARLES: What about my forty percent?

JONES: I'll give you something for the bank.

CHI CHI: Is it still to Japan, boopy?

MRS. JONES: Boopy? You and my husband? With a nun, John?

JONES: She dances. I'm sorry, Eunice. I tried to make it as painless as possible.

CHI CHI: He kept thinking about me in the coffin. You think you're kinky.

MRS. JONES: I would call it something else.

JONES: (*handing the note*) Take this to the bank.

NECK: Very good, Mr. President.

JONES: Come on, Chi Chi.

MRS. JONES: Chi Chi?

CHI CHI: Sayonara!

(Jones and Chi Chi exit.)

NECK: Well, Charles, let's give the people their body.

CHARLES: I hope they don't notice the difference.

NECK: Perhaps we should cover the face as well. Just to be on the safe side. The eyes should suffice. Easy now ...

(The doctor is put into the casket.)

MRS. JONES: Charles?

CHARLES: Yes, ma'am?

(They regard one another. A beat.)

CHARLES: Do you want me to come back?

MRS. JONES: No. We can come back later. First I must make my appearance. I must show my grief.

NECK: The people would expect grief, madam.

MRS. JONES: What the people expect, they deserve. What they deserve, they get. Always.

(All exit and BLACKOUT.)

THE HALF-LIFE CONSPIRACY

a play in two acts

*First performed at the New Rose Theatre in Portland, Oregon,
on February 25, 1983. Directed by Gary O'Brien.*

THE CAST (3M, 3F, in order of appearance):

Cynthia Moore, *a director with the Portland Community Players;*

Joe Barge, *President of the Players;*

Ann Barton, *an actress with the Players and Cynthia's
lovemate;*

Robert Olson (Todd Westlake), *a playwright and TV
writer, Cynthia's ex-husband;*

Bill Stevens, *an actor with the Players;*

Willow Stevens, *his wife, an actress with the Players.*

THE TIME:

The present (an election year), summer:

Act I: FRIDAY. i: *The Reception* (6 p.m.); ii: *"Half-Life," a
one-act play by Robert Olson*

Act II: SATURDAY. i: *The Cast Party* (1 a.m.) ii: *Fallout*
(3:30 a.m.)

THE SET:

The deck of Joe Barton's home in the west hills area of Portland, Oregon, overlooking the skyline of the city. For *I*,
ii: the stage of the Portland Community Players.

ACT ONE

1/ The Reception (Friday, 6 p.m.)

(AT RISE: CYNTHIA is alone on the deck, pacing. Inside, beyond the sliding door, we hear the vague sounds of a party going on. CYNTHIA is visibly nervous about something. The sliding door opens and JOE appears long enough to say:)

JOE: He's here!

(He leaves. ANN comes out onto the deck.)

ANN: It might help if you screamed at me.

CYNTHIA: And why would I want to do that?

ANN: To clear the air between us before you meet him.

CYNTHIA: Ann, what difference does it make now? You and your activist friends have made your decision and who gives a damn what the director has to say about it?

ANN: No one's going to disrupt the play. We're just after support.

CYNTHIA: It politicizes everything. It's like adding a political prologue to the play, taking a position—

ANN: You can always make an announcement before curtain: "The demonstration outside the theater blah blah in no way reflects the opinion of the Portland Community Players blah blah."

CYNTHIA: I may ask Joe to do exactly that.

ANN: I think you're being paranoid over nothing.

CYNTHIA: You didn't clear it with me, and you certainly didn't clear it with Robert Olson. He may not appreciate his play being used that way.

ANN: We're not "using the play." It's like passing out leaflets at a supermarket.

CYNTHIA: I know goddamn well what you're doing. It's not as if we haven't argued about this before. You can't leave well enough alone.

ANN: Well enough?

CYNTHIA: You know what I mean.

ANN: Cynthia, there are a significant number of misguided people in this community who want to pass a law that affects the way I live my life and—

CYNTHIA: This isn't the time or place. He may come out here any minute.

ANN: You're nervous about meeting him.

CYNTHIA: I've never had to deal with the playwright being around before. What if he doesn't like it?

ANN: He'll love what you've done. By the cast party, you'll be higher than a kite.

CYNTHIA: After you get done with our image, I may never be allowed to direct for the Players again.

ANN: We've been in a rut. If what I'm doing is controversial, maybe it's good for us.

CYNTHIA: The play's controversial enough without all your bleeding hearts out there—

ANN: Your life will be affected as much as anyone's if this—

CYNTHIA: I said I don't want to discuss it.

ANN: Which makes you an ostrich with your head in the sand.

(At the tail end of this, JOE enters with OLSON. There is an immediate shocked moment of recognition between CYNTHIA and OLSON before each quickly recovers; the audience doesn't have to see this, it will learn soon enough.)

JOE: I'd like you to meet Cynthia Moore and Ann Barton.
Robert Olson.

OLSON: Hello.

JOE: Ann plays Mary, and Cynthia's your director.

ANN: I've been looking forward to meeting you.

CYNTHIA: Yes, so have I.

OLSON: I've been looking forward to seeing the play.

CYNTHIA: I hope you like what we've done with it.

JOE: Can I get you a drink, Robert?

OLSON: Bourbon and water, if you have it.

CYNTHIA: *(quickly)* I'll get it.

(CYNTHIA leaves and ANN quickly follows behind her.)

ANN: I need a refill myself. So nice to have you here.

OLSON: Thank you.

(And the women are gone.)

JOE: (*not sure what has happened*) You'll have to excuse us. We're all pretty nervous about having you here.

OLSON: I'm pretty nervous myself. So — how long have you been having the contest?

JOE: This is actually our first year.

OLSON: Really? The way you advertised, I thought it had been around for a while.

JOE: We advertised more than we should have. We were flooded with scripts.

OLSON: I can imagine. Frankly, I'm surprised you chose "Half-Life." Community theaters usually favor bedroom comedies and musicals.

JOE: We usually do ourselves. But we're more adventurous in the summer: it finally stops raining, and everyone stays outside anyway. Who cares what the hell we do?

OLSON: I'm delighted to be here. Thank you for choosing my play.

JOE: I wasn't on the selection committee. I play the newscaster voice at the end.

OLSON: Then you get the last word.

JOE: My first curtain line.

(*There's an awkward silence.*)

JOE: You write for television.

OLSON: Pays the rent.

JOE: What show?

OLSON: "Heart Song".

JOE: I don't know it.

OLSON: It's a soap.

JOE: Fascinating.

OLSON: What is?

JOE: The pressure. Having to write every day like that.

OLSON: There're five of us. I write the Tuesdays.

JOE: I'll watch next Tuesday then.

(CYNTHIA returns with OLSON's drink.)

CYNTHIA: One bourbon and water.

OLSON: Thanks.

CYNTHIA: More arrivals, Joe.

JOE: Time to play host.

OLSON: This is your place?

JOE: Mine and the bank's.

OLSON: I like your view. I didn't realize Portland had a skyline.

(Joe exits.)

CYNTHIA: Jesus Christ.

OLSON: That was my line.

CYNTHIA: Todd, what is this? I disqualified you. I thought I did.

OLSON: I'm not sure what you mean.

CYNTHIA: "Roses for the Road."

OLSON: You have "Roses"?

CYNTHIA: How many scripts did you enter, under how

many pseudonyms? Didn't you read the rules — only one script per playwright?

OLSON: I only sent "Half-Life." My agent must've sent "Roses." I'm impressed, he's usually lazier than that.

CYNTHIA: The committee wanted to do "Roses for the Road" and once I saw your byline — Todd Westlake's byline — I had a hell of a time talking them out of it. The last thing I needed was seeing you again. So how many pseudonyms do you have?

OLSON: Only Robert Olson. But if you think I would've sent anything, knowing you were involved. I thought you were still in San Francisco with what's-her-face. What was her name?

(No reply.)

OLSON: What'd you do, break up?

(No reply.)

OLSON: Cheers. Charming way to spend a weekend, winning a play contest. Travel expenses, room and board, a small honorarium. Not to mention all the fascinating people you meet.

CYNTHIA: We'll just have to get through the weekend as best we can.

OLSON: You really wanted to do "Roses"? I told my agent to burn it. It was so bad I started writing under Robert Olson. Start all over, more or less. Cheers.

CYNTHIA: Obviously your agent didn't burn it.

OLSON: Doesn't say much for your taste, wanting to do "Roses." But then there's no accounting for taste, is there?

CYNTHIA: (*distracted*) What?

OLSON: I said, there's no accounting for taste. I was referring to "Roses for the Road."

CYNTHIA: I know what you're referring to.

OLSON: Though it's a principle one can apply more widely. To more personal matters. To sexual preference, and so on.

CYNTHIA: I get the reference, Todd, and I'm not going to talk about the past with you.

OLSON: When I asked if you'd broken up, I was referring to the present — to your happiness.

CYNTHIA: I'm goddamn happy!

OLSON: Good. Cheers. So how do you two like Portland after San Francisco? It must be quite a change. Isn't this where they have that ballot measure against gay rights and —?

CYNTHIA: Todd, we have to—

OLSON: Robert Olson. I mean, if we're going to go through with this little charade, then you have to remember your lines. I'm not Todd Westlake. I'm Robert Olson.

CYNTHIA: I just don't want to argue about anything.

OLSON: I was referring to you calling me Todd.

CYNTHIA: So I'm sorry!

OLSON: Accepted. Cheers.

CYNTHIA: I don't believe this. Five minutes with you — after five years — and suddenly I feel like everything's my fault. I haven't done anything!

OLSON: I have an idea. Let's start over.

(*A pause.*)

OLSON: Hello, I'm Robert Olson. You must be the one

directing my play. I'm so much looking forward to seeing it.

CYNTHIA: Shut up. Just pretend you've never seen me before.

OLSON: There's no invisible lady like an ex-wife. Excuse me — invisible *person*.

CYNTHIA: Just cut the crap.

(BILL and WILLOW enter.)

BILL: Bobby, I'd like you to meet the wife. Willow, Robert Olson. She plays Heather.

WILLOW: I'm so excited to meet you!

OLSON: You play Heather? How interesting.

WILLOW: "Interesting" usually means disapproval.

OLSON: No, not at all. I just didn't think of Heather being so attractive. Nice casting.

CYNTHIA: Thank you.

WILLOW: And I thought I was nervous before.

CYNTHIA: Will you be coming inside soon? People are anxious to meet you.

OLSON: In a bit.

CYNTHIA: If you'll excuse me...

(CYNTHIA exits.)

WILLOW: Bill told me you write for a soap opera.

OLSON: "Heart Song."

WILLOW: You're kidding! I watch it every day.

OLSON: I just write the Tuesdays.

WILLOW: I know it's not fair to ask — but is Priscilla going to get a divorce?

OLSON: Not on Tuesday.

WILLOW: I love the actor who plays Morgan. He's so evil and sexy.

OLSON: He gets killed in a car accident.

WILLOW: Oh, no!

OLSON: He got cast in another series, so we have to kill him off. On Tuesday, I hope.

BILL: I meant to ask you on the ride from the airport, but there's actually a lot of ad-libbing and improv on the soaps, isn't there?

OLSON: Mostly when actors forget their lines. Actually we develop a lot of the scenes with some theater games we play.

(Joe enters.)

JOE: There are some folks who are anxious to meet you, Robert.

OLSON: And I need a refill. Stay put, I can find it.

(He goes.)

JOE: He seems like a regular guy.

BILL: The first thing he asked at the airport was why wasn't it raining. Then he wanted to know if St. Helens was likely to erupt while he was here. How the hell am I supposed to answer that?

WILLOW: Did you get to tell him about your script?

BILL: I couldn't get a word in. You know what else he said — he'd never been to the Northwest before. He sets a play in Portland and has never been here.

WILLOW: The setting isn't all that central to the action.

BILL: That's the under-statement of the year. Nothing's central to the action. The situation in "Half-Life" is phony from top to bottom. We should've stuck with "Roses for the Road."

JOE: It's good for us to do something avant-garde.

BILL: Avant-garde is a synonym for "it stinks." Who can believe the premise? Even if Iraq did get a bomb, even if it used it, who can believe all the rest of that crap?

WILLOW: I can imagine it happening just the way he wrote it.

BILL: Come on, if Portland was being evacuated, would you hang around to play a parlor game? No way.

JOE: He's here, the play opens tonight, and the audience will tell us what they think soon enough.

BILL: Pardon the pun, but it's going to be one hell of a bomb.

WILLOW: I certainly hope you don't take that attitude on stage with you.

BILL: Don't worry about me, I'm a pro. You want some coldcuts or something?

WILLOW: I'm too nervous to eat.

BILL: Glass of punch?

WILLOW: Nothing, thanks.

(BILL exits.)

JOE: *(cautious)* I hope we can agree that I deserve an explanation.

WILLOW: Something came up. I couldn't get away.

JOE: You might have phoned. A quick trip to the market, a coin in the phone slot.

WILLOW: I didn't think of it.

JOE: I don't think that's the reason.

WILLOW: You're right.

JOE: Well?

WILLOW: I didn't come because I feel guilty as hell.

JOE: You've felt guilty from the beginning.

WILLOW: It's getting worse. That's why I'm not seeing you any more.

JOE: I don't believe that.

WILLOW: You will.

JOE: You're involved as deeply as I am. And as voluntarily, I might add.

WILLOW: You aren't married, and you don't have children.

JOE: Oh yes, let's not forget the children. We ought to bring Olson out here, this sounds like an audition for his soap opera.

WILLOW: That doesn't make what I'm telling you false.

JOE: Willow, I know how much you care for me.

WILLOW: No. You don't know me at all.

JOE: I see. Then whose fault is that? I haven't been dreaming these past few months. When I'm told something, I believe it. You have told me some very sweet things.

WILLOW: Joe, I'm still fond of you but—

JOE: "Fond" of me? Jesus.

WILLOW: It was a bad time for me. I needed to feel

wanted.

JOE: How the hell am I supposed to react to that?

WILLOW: We'll always be special friends.

JOE: That's fucked, Willow. That's really fucked.

(OLSON returns.)

OLSON: Someone asked me for an autograph. I feel like a celebrity.

JOE: If you think it's bad now, wait till the cast party.

OLSON: By then I'll be drunk enough to handle it. Cheers.

(ANN enters.)

ANN: I see you escaped your admirers.

OLSON: Caught in the act.

WILLOW: If you'll excuse me, I have some errands to run before call. I hope we've done your play justice.

OLSON: In your case, I'm sure I have nothing to worry about.

JOE: Excuse me.

(WILLOW and JOE exit.)

ANN: They're having an affair. Everyone knows but poor Bill.

OLSON: I'll bet he knows.

ANN: No, he thinks she's having an affair with Dean Pill. Pill's the drama critic for the paper.

OLSON: Her reviews must be spectacular.

ANN: She even deserves some of them.

OLSON: Adultery's become the norm, hasn't it? That may make soap opera the dramatic form for our times.

ANN: Is that Robert Olson speaking — or Todd Westlake?

OLSON: Oh my. You're an investigative reporter disguised as an actress. I take it Cynthia told you.

ANN: No, I recognized you myself as soon as you walked out onto the deck.

OLSON: Have we met before?

ANN: No. I'm the dyke from San Francisco.

OLSON: The dyke. I remember.

ANN: You've changed since then. Your play shows it. To tell the truth, I'm as shocked as Cynthia that you're here. That you wrote "Half-Life."

OLSON: I thought all of you preferred "Roses for the Road."

ANN: I didn't. But it was the first round favorite. Cynthia vetoed it, and I led the charge for "Half-Life." I still can't believe you wrote it. You didn't seem to be in that kind of space five years ago.

OLSON: Well, I had this extraordinary experience, you see — my wife left me for a dyke in San Francisco.

ANN: You've recovered nicely. Better than Cynthia has, actually.

OLSON: Don't tell me: she still has a soft spot in her heart for me.

ANN: She's still afraid of herself.

OLSON: I don't remember seeing any fear when she moved out.

ANN: She still hasn't really "come out," you know. Not in Portland. She didn't like the San Francisco scene; she

prefers being "discreet," as she puts it. She's afraid being openly gay will lose the business clients.

OLSON: Still in Public Relations?

ANN: Oh yes. And I doubt if anyone in Portland has the slightest suspicion that she's gay. Which is becoming a problem, to tell the truth. You've heard about our Ballot Measure 13?

OLSON: The anti-gay legislation.

ANN: Exactly, though the backers don't call it that. Cynthia's afraid to take a public stand against it. She gets angry when I do.

OLSON: I'd really love to exchange Cynthia stories with you but it feels too much like being at work.

ANN: She's living two lives.

OLSON: I live at least that many. Don't you?

ANN: I live in a community of growing homophobia. I see no advantage to burying my head in the sand.

OLSON: Then everybody here knows you're gay?

ANN: No, they don't. So far I've gone along with her. I'm not sure I can for much longer.

OLSON: Maybe she has a point about your clients.

ANN: Then we should be more selective.

OLSON: Does Cynthia know you're telling me all of this?

ANN: No.

OLSON: Why are you?

ANN: Why not? We're here.

OLSON: That sounds a little macho, like mountain-climbing or foreign policy.

ANN: I love Cynthia very much. It hurts me to see her denying who she is.

OLSON: If you got rid of your homophobic clients, maybe

you'd go broke.

ANN: I've never understood why gay fidelity should raise eyebrows when heterosexual infidelity in the business world is commonplace.

OLSON: That sounds so logical it *has* to be wrong.

ANN: I wish there was something constructive that we could all get out of this.

OLSON: Our conversation?

ANN: The surprise of your appearance.

OLSON: If you're asking me to help you get Cynthia out of the closet, no thanks.

ANN: You might at least become friends again.

OLSON: Takes two to tango, and I don't think she's interested.

ANN: There's a rally against Measure 13 tomorrow. Maybe if you'd come, she'd see you've changed and would come as well.

OLSON: Going to a rally with a hangover is a little much — and I plan to have a hangover.

(CYNTHIA enters.)

CYNTHIA: It's getting close to call, Ann.

OLSON: I've just been invited to a rally tomorrow.

CYNTHIA: My, haven't we been busy?

ANN: He knows who I am.

CYNTHIA: And how on earth could he have learned that?

ANN: *(to Olson)* Think about it .

(ANN exits. OLSON: is grinning.)

CYNTHIA: I fail to see what's so amusing.

OLSON: Opening night jitters. We used to spat every opening night, remember? And now you two are spatting.

CYNTHIA: We are not spatting.

OLSON: Could've fooled me.

CYNTHIA: It has nothing to do with opening night.

OLSON: Damn.

CYNTHIA: I beg your pardon?

OLSON: I was hoping marriage had nothing to do with gender.

CYNTHIA: What did she tell you?

OLSON: That coming out is bad for business.

CYNTHIA: Christ.

OLSON: Exactly — look where it got him.

CYNTHIA: As far as the weekend is concerned, you don't know either of us. I wish I could trust you.

OLSON: You can.

CYNTHIA: Even when you're drinking?

(OLSON looks at his watch.)

OLSON: I was wondering how long it would take you to bring up my drinking. I think you just set a record. Congratulations. Cheers.

CYNTHIA: Just be Robert Olson, who has never seen us before.

OLSON: Olson in the flesh. So how do you like the play?

CYNTHIA: I liked it better before I found out you wrote it.

OLSON: That's the "biographical fallacy" — that's what the whatchamacallits would say. What are they called? The assholes with all the answers?

CYNTHIA: The reviewers?

OLSON: Ah, the reviewers. The critics! They'd say, Don't confuse art with life.

CYNTHIA: There are certain parallels, Todd — Robert!

OLSON: And differences as well. You left me before the planet gets nuked. Gets nuked again, I mean. Funny how we forget we've already nuked it.

CYNTHIA: Then the play isn't about our marriage?

OLSON: No.

CYNTHIA: What's the source of all the anger?

OLSON: You sound like a critic.

CYNTHIA: Then questions aren't allowed? How convenient for you.

OLSON: If you don't know the source of the anger, then why the hell are you directing the play?

CYNTHIA: I do know the source of the anger.

(JOE and BILL enter.)

JOE: Time to get to the theater.

CYNTHIA: We're on our way.

(She exits. As OLSON starts out, he is stopped by BILL. JOE waits behind.)

BILL: Bobby, wait a minute. Let me run a scenario by you before it gets too crazy. There's this alcoholic, right? He's

really into the hard stuff but he never touches a drop until after five. Then he'll do a fifth a night, practically. During the day he's a well-respected high school principal. His wife is head of the PTA, the whole shot. A real Jekyll and Hyde situation. A high school principal by day but by night, when he's been drinking, he can go after the old lady in a way that makes "Virginia Woolf" look like a romance. Now it turns out the wife is having an affair with the guy's best friend. The principal doesn't suspect a thing but it does let us sympathize with him despite the booze and violence because, you know, she's really doing a number on him. And with his best friend.

OLSON: We sympathize with him.

BILL: You got it! That's really important. Maybe he also had a leg shot off in the war or something. Whatever. Anyway, it's a night when the principal is having some teachers over for a party and naturally the best friend is there, too.

JOE: We're running late, Bill.

BILL: Don't worry, I'm giving Olson a lift. So it's late in the party and most of the teachers have gone home. The principal's hitting the sauce heavy. Meanwhile his wife and best friend are out on the deck alone. Nothing heavy, just a little touchy-feely. And the principal decides to go out for some fresh air, not knowing they're out there

(They have exited, lights fade to BLACKOUT.)

2/ "Half-Life," a one-act play by Robert Olson (8 p.m.)

(The set is an interior. With the house lights still up, JOE comes forward to speak to the audience.)

JOE: Good evening. If you've read your paper at all this week, then you know that the setting for tonight's play is a terrorist act leading to a limited nuclear war that requires an emergency evacuation of Portland — and that in this tense moment, a man's wife admits that she has taken another woman as a lover. In this context, you might suppose that the picketing against Ballot Measure 13 going on outside the theater tonight is somehow connected to and even endorsed by the Portland Community Players. This is not the case. What happens outside on a public sidewalk is their business, and what happens here inside the theater is our business — and, I might add, our only business. Thank you.

(A pause.)

JOE: "Half-Life" by Robert Olson is the winner of the first annual one-act play competition sponsored by the Portland Community Players. When he isn't writing prize-winning plays, Mr. Olson is a writer for the daytime television series, "Heart Song." He has informed me that he writes each Tuesday episode. We've very excited about sharing this original and provocative new play with you, and we have the pleasure of having the playwright in the audience as our guest of honor. Robert, would you stand up and take a bow?...Are you out there, Robert?...I guess he's still back stage with the cast. At any rate, Robert Olson — along with our cast and director — will be available right after the play to respond to your questions about "Half-Life." I think you'll find that this is very different material for the Players, and we think that's good. Without further ado, then — oh yes, I want to remind you that our regular season continues next weekend with a brand new production of Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*. This is the fifth time we've had the pleasure of bringing you this masterpiece by the master of comedy, and we have an all-

new cast for you. So don't forget *The Odd Couple*, opening next weekend and continuing for ten weeks. And I should add that "Half-Life" will also be performed tomorrow and Sunday. And now, without further ado, the world premier of "Half-Life" by Robert Olson. Thank you.

(BLACKOUT.)

(LIGHTS UP on HEATHER. She is waiting, nervous. Three scripts rest on a coffee table. Heather's purse leans against a leg of the table. MARY rushes into the room.)

MARY: *(played by ANN)* What are you doing here? Didn't you hear the news?

HEATHER: *(played by WILLOW)* I heard it.

MARY: It's a zoo out there.

HEATHER: I know. Where's your husband?

MARY: In the garage. He's loading the camp gear.

HEATHER: Get him.

MARY: You can't be serious. Are you all right?

HEATHER: What a fucking question. Are you?

MARY: I don't know how I am. It's so crazy out there.

HEATHER: You expect to go camping?

MARY: Everyone's evacuating. Haven't you been listening to the radio?

HEATHER: You saw the traffic. You expect to go somewhere? We're going to retaliate and this thing will escalate until . . .

MARY: But it's safer south. Isn't it?

HEATHER: The winds have been east out of Seattle.

MARY: There was an announcement to evacuate. Everyone's going south. We have to do something, for Christ's sake.

HEATHER: I know. That's why I'm here.

MARY: Why *are* you here?

HEATHER: To find out if you've told him yet. You haven't, have you?

MARY: Heather, this is hardly the time to discuss it.

HEATHER: I can think of no better time. It's rather a last chance to do anything, don't you think? Surely we've retaliated by now — whoever the hell did this has allies who have retaliated in kind — this is the grand final escalation we've all been waiting for. I should think today is the most existential moment in human history. It's now or never, love.

MARY: You're right. I haven't told him.

HEATHER: Will you tell him now?

MARY: You mean — *now*?

HEATHER: The most existential moment in human history: now.

MARY: He's packing the camp gear. I'm supposed to be packing clothes and getting our — toothbrushes.

HEATHER: Your fucking toothbrushes.

MARY: One can't give up. It's not necessarily the end.

HEATHER: Mary, the proverbial button has been pushed. So much for the end of the Cold War, hey? Welcome to the New Holocaust, where everybody gets to play.

MARY: So what do you think we should do?

HEATHER: I'll kill myself before I let this madness kill me. It would be considerably more dignified.

MARY: It's not necessarily the end.

HEATHER: Do you think we're not retaliating? Do you

expect North Korea to stay out of this, and all those republics in Russia with names no one can pronounce — who are sitting on tons of nuclear weapons? Look at history. Look at how any world war starts. Face it, the game's over, Mary. The dinosaurs have won. Male aggression has won. They're taking the planet with them.

MARY: It's just so hard to comprehend.

HEATHER: On the contrary, extinction is the logical conclusion of the male way of doing things. You read *Power and Patriarchy*.

MARY: It all seemed so theoretical.

HEATHER: When the theory's right, the consequences are predictable. The miracle is that it took men so long to blow us all up.

MARY: Don't you have an instinct to survive? Despite everything?

HEATHER: My instinct is to die with dignity. Get your husband.

MARY: Why?

HEATHER: I brought some scripts for us to read.

MARY: What are you talking about?

HEATHER: Male consciousness raising. Have you forgotten already?

MARY: You actually wrote some scripts?

HEATHER: We did talk about it.

MARY: But that was just — thinking aloud and fantasizing. I didn't expect you to go through with it.

HEATHER: But I did — even before the shit hit the fan. It's now or never, love.

MARY: John will never go along with something like that.

HEATHER: With proper persuasion he will.

(She takes a pistol from her purse.)

MARY: This is crazy.

HEATHER: I didn't nuke Seattle, love. Get John.

MARY: I don't see the point of this.

HEATHER: The point is doing it.

MARY: You're serious.

HEATHER: Very. I also have the gun. The power of the male archetype. Get your husband.

MARY: Is the point to embarrass him?

HEATHER: He won't be embarrassed. He'll be outraged.

MARY: So we read the script. Then what?

HEATHER: Then I'm on my way to find dignity. I hope you'll come with me.

MARY: I don't think I can do that. Not like this.

HEATHER: I love you, Mary.

MARY: I'm — very confused about how I feel about you.

HEATHER: Get him.

MARY: Can I talk to him alone first?

HEATHER: I don't think I can trust you. Call him from here. Then you can talk where I can see you.

MARY: Fine. You have the gun.

HEATHER: Incredible, isn't it? With the male archetype, you can get anything you want. Except what matters.

MARY: You're not acting like anything matters.

HEATHER: Death with dignity matters.

(JOHN enters and stops as soon as he sees HEATHER with the gun.)

JOHN: (*played by BILL*) Give her what she wants, Mary. We don't want any trouble.

HEATHER: Give him a script.

(*MARY hands JOHN a script.*)

JOHN: What the hell is this?

MARY: Please do as she says. It won't take long.

JOHN: You know her?

MARY: She's a friend from school.

JOHN: (*to Heather*) You do know what's going on out there, don't you?

HEATHER: You'll read the part of Wifey.

JOHN: I'll do what?

HEATHER: We're going to stage a reading, and you're playing the role of Wifey. Mary is Hubby, and I'm the Narrator. Shall we begin?

JOHN: Look, I know it's hard to handle, but what's happening out there is real.

MARY: Do as she says, John.

JOHN: Iraq or somedamnbody has nuked Seattle and it's time to get the hell out of Portland!

HEATHER: The sooner we begin, the sooner you can join the lemmings rushing south.

JOHN: Get fucking serious.

HEATHER: I am very serious.

JOHN: She's a friend of yours?

MARY: Please. It won't take long.

JOHN: You want me to read a play? A fucking play!

(HEATHER fires a round from the pistol up in the air.)

JOHN: *(quickly)* So what do you want me to do?

HEATHER: Read the part of Wifey. I'll begin the narration. "The Habits of Hubby," a skit in search of peace, in endless movements *ad nauseam*. The First Habit: Hubby is Horny."

(A pause.)

HEATHER: The next line is yours.

JOHN: I don't understand the point of this.

HEATHER: Read your line.

JOHN: Why are we doing this?

(HEATHER gestures with the pistol.)

JOHN: Okay, just point that thing the other way.

HEATHER: "The First Habit: Hubby is Horny."

JOHN: *(as Wifey)* "Please, dear, I just put on my face."

HEATHER: Use a high voice.

JOHN: What?

HEATHER: I want you to sound like a woman. Use a falsetto.

JOHN: For Christ's sake— . . . okay, okay. Can we start over?

HEATHER: "Hubby is Horny."

JOHN: (*in falsetto, which continues below*) "Please, dear, I just put on my face."

MARY: (*as Hubby, in a deep voice*) "I'm not interested in your face."

JOHN: "We'll be late to the party."

MARY: "I won't take a minute."

JOHN: "You never take a minute, dear."

MARY: "Fastest gun in the west."

JOHN: "Maybe when we get back."

MARY: "I'm in the mood now."

JOHN: "But I'm not."

MARY: "Just a quicky, for Christ's sake."

JOHN: "I'm dressed, I just put on my face—"

MARY: "You're never in the mood."

JOHN: "You know that's not true."

MARY: "Who the hell brings home the bacon around here? Who works his goddamn ass to the grindstone while you sit around watching soap operas? I can't even get a little satisfaction around here."

JOHN: "We can put out some candles when we get home. Make it romantic."

MARY: "Candles in July? Are you crazy? Frigid bitch."

HEATHER: "The Second Habit: Hubby Needs Understanding."

JOHN: (*normal voice*) Can I say something?

HEATHER No. "Hubby Needs Understanding."

MARY: (*deep voice*) "Hi, Carol. Enjoying the party?"

JOHN: (*high voice*) "Frankly, no. How about you?"

MARY: "I've been better."

JOHN: "Where's Nancy?"

MARY: "Around. Is that a new dress?"

JOHN: "Just something I picked up on sale."

MARY: "Dynamite. Really. Mike is a lucky guy."

JOHN: "Tell him that."

MARY: "You always look so sharp."

JOHN: "Keep talking, I love it."

MARY: "Really. You always have a certain aura. A certain presence. A certain— . . . oh, I can't explain it. I think you're great!"

JOHN: "Thanks, I needed that."

MARY: "It's so easy to talk to you. Nancy hasn't the foggiest notion who I am. Not really. It's like living in a vacuum."

JOHN: "I didn't know. You two always seem so happy."

MARY: "The mask we put on. I guess I'm bending your ear."

JOHN: "I don't mind."

MARY: "Do you find it stuffy in here?"

JOHN: "A little."

MARY: "Let's go out on the deck."

HEATHER: "The Third Habit: Hubby Makes His Move."

MARY: "It's great to be with someone you can talk to."

JOHN: "I know what you mean."

MARY: "That dress is a knockout. You have an incredible figure."

JOHN: "I work at it in the gym."

MARY: "It pays off."

HEATHER: Now he tries to feel your left breast. You fight

him off.

JOHN: (*normal voice*) How long does this go on?

HEATHER: He tries to feel your left breast.

JOHN: We have an emergency going on out there!

HEATHER: Your line, Mary.

MARY: "Your breasts are incredible."

JOHN: (*high voice*) "Please don't . . ."

MARY: "You don't know how lonely I've been."

JOHN: "Stop it, please."

MARY: "You turn me on."

JOHN: "Let's go back inside."

HEATHER Finally he reaches inside your dress and feels your left breast.

MARY: "My God."

JOHN: "I had cancer."

MARY: "Jesus, I didn't realize, I—"

JOHN: "I had an operation."

HEATHER "The Fourth Habit: Hubby Helps With The Housework."

JOHN: (*normal voice*) Look here.

HEATHER "Hubby Helps With The Housework."

JOHN: I want to say something! Would you please point that somewhere else?

HEATHER "Hubby Helps With The Housework."

MARY: (*normal voice*) Please read your lines.

JOHN: I won't put up with this.

HEATHER "Hubby Helps With The Housework."

JOHN: What do you, hate men?

HEATHER I'm not going to wait forever.

JOHN: So how many habits do we have to go through? If you expect me to take this personally, you're full of shit. I help with the housework! Tell her, Mary. I help with the housework all the time.

MARY: You seldom help with the housework, John.,

JOHN: I take out the garbage! We're in a goddamn war out there! Who has time for housework?

HEATHER "Hubby Helps With The Housework."

JOHN: I'll tell you this, you won't see any women on the front lines out there. Put that in your pipe and smoke it.

HEATHER "Hubby Helps With The Housework."

MARY: Maybe we can move on.

HEATHER "The Fifth Habit: Hubby Would've Won The Game If He'd Been Coach."

JOHN: So pull the trigger. I dare you.

MARY: *(to Heather)* I think you've made your point.

HEATHER "Hubby Would've Won The Game If He'd Been Coach."

MARY: *(prompting)* The Sixth Habit . . .

HEATHER "Hubby Is Laid Flat By A Mild Cold."

JOHN: *(to Mary)* Will you get her to stop this?

HEATHER "Hubby Goes On The Wagon For Three Days."

JOHN: Goddamn it!

HEATHER "Hubby Should've Known Better Than To Let A Woman Balance The Checkbook." "Hubby Taught Her How To Boil An Egg." "Hubby Could've Predicted It."
JOHN: I quit!

HEATHER "The Tenth Habit: Hubby Could've Predicted It." "Hubby Could've Predicted It." "Hubby Could've—"

JOHN: Predicted what?

MARY: (*deep voice*) "I knew the Cowboys would blow it." "I know the sonofabitch would back off his campaign promises." "I knew he had his hands in the till." "I knew that marriage would never last."

JOHN: What is the point of all this?

(*No reply.*)

JOHN: WHAT IS THE POINT OF ALL THIS?

MARY: (*to Heather*) I think it's time for us to go.

HEATHER (*aiming the pistol at John*) "Hubby Could've Predicted It . . ."

MARY: Heather, no!

(*Mary grabs the gun: a struggle, which John joins in — and he ends up with the pistol.*)

JOHN: Now!

MARY: John, please— . . .

JOHN: Now, goddamn it, it's my turn!

MARY: Try to understand.

JOHN: Understand?! Who is she? What kind of power does she have over you?

MARY: She had the gun.

JOHN: Yeah, well, you seemed to be enjoying yourself. So what the hell are you trying to prove? That men are assholes?

HEATHER: How perceptive of you.

JOHN: Are you fucking serious? Do you think all that shit, all those clichés about how men are the assholes of the

universe, has anything to do with what's going on out there? Seattle's been nuked! Do you comprehend that? We're in a nuclear war out there! We're talking about the survival of this country here! Try doing that without men.

HEATHER: Yes, survival is precisely what we're talking about.

JOHN: (*getting crazier*) The shrinks predicted this. The human mind can handle only so much — and then it cracks. Goddamn women, you think the world is all rainbows and roses. You don't perceive reality.

HEATHER: I know what reality is.

JOHN: Then you should know what's happening out there!

HEATHER: Masculinity.

JOHN: What?

HEATHER: Masculinity is happening out there.

JOHN: I don't see any cunts volunteering for the front lines, I'll grant you that.

MARY: I'm not a cunt, John!

JOHN: Let me put it this way: you have strange friends.

HEATHER: At least I accept reality — meaning, that the game's over.

JOHN: The hell it is. We recovered after Pearl Harbor and we'll recover again. Whoever did this, we'll bomb them back to the Stone Age!

HEATHER: How masculine of us.

JOHN: Who the fuck are you?

HEATHER: Someone who is leaving. It's been swell.

(She starts away.)

JOHN: Like hell, you're leaving.

MARY: I'm leaving, too, John.

JOHN: I have more to say here!

MARY: There's no point in saying anything. I'm leaving you. I've been trying to get the nerve to tell you for weeks. Don't pretend you're surprised.

JOHN: She did this?

MARY: Not really.

JOHN: It's those classes you've been taking, isn't it? All that anti-male propaganda you've been reading? Give an inch and they take a mile.

HEATHER: Woman as nigger: perfect.

JOHN: I paid for those fucking courses you're taking, sweetheart.

MARY: There's nothing to discuss, John. Good luck to you.

(The women start away.)

JOHN: So that's it. How long has this been going on?

(No reply.)

JOHN: *(after them)* I asked how long you've been a dyke! How long have you been queer?!

MARY: I don't want to talk about it, John. Goodbye.

JOHN: I'm not afraid to use this!

(Mary is the first to exit.)

HEATHER: Don't act like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

(She exits.)

JOHN: *(after them)* Mary, you get your ass back here!

(He holds the pistol out with both arms, G-man style.)

JOHN: I'M NOT AFRAID TO USE THIS!

(He fires. A scream. He fires again, repeatedly, until the chamber is empty. He looks at the gun. He drops it.)

JOHN: Jesus Christ . . .

(He goes to a radio and turns it on. He finds the news. He listens as the lights start down.)

NEWSCASTER: *(voice of Joe)* ...Iraq taking credit for the strike, and North Korea claims to have sent missiles into Europe. Retaliation by the United States has been immediate with missile attacks on Iraq, Siberia and North Korea. Unless the U.S. accepts an immediate cease fire, Moscow has threatened to ...

(BLACKOUT.)

(A pause. The STAGE AND HOUSE LIGHTS COME UP together. All the actors, as well as JOE, CYNTHIA and OLSON, are sitting casually about the set.)

JOE: (*to audience*) Any other questions?

(*A beat.*)

BILL: (*responding to question*) Let me tackle that one. That's something that went through my mind as well. He blows his wife away — I mean, I do — because, you know, she's been cheating on me — with a woman, no less. She's gay, and this is real, real hard for me to take.

CYNTHIA: He *believes* she's gay, is the point.

JOE: In the back row . . . ?

(*A beat.*)

ANN: Oh, maybe I've gone to bed with her once. I really haven't come out or anything. I'm in a process of deep personal change. Obviously I've been influenced by Heather, and by the courses I've been taking. But suddenly the unthinkable has happened, it may really be the end of the world — the most existential moment in human history, as it's put — and obviously I have to go through changes quicker than I would otherwise.

JOE: Your question, sir?

(*A beat.*)

OLSON: I don't know how to respond to that. I don't think of it as a political play. I think it's very realistic, that it can literally happen that way. I think the end of the Cold War makes for a more dangerous world, not a safer one, because now enemies are more invisible. It's nothing I can prove. It's just how I feel about things. There's no accounting for taste.

CYNTHIA: The context is what's important, like Ann said. What's happening outside makes the rules of ordinary behavior irrelevant. Everybody is acting through a crisis.

OLSON: I don't think you need any special context to explain their behavior. The context is on the front page of the newspaper every day. The world's as dangerous as ever — every day, every minute. We live on borrowed time.

JOE: The woman in the corner?

(A beat.)

OLSON: Sure, I'll answer that. I'm not gay. Why should it make a difference?

JOE: The lady in the hat . . .

(A beat.)

OLSON: I hear you — you don't like the "f-word." Again, what can I say? That's the way people talk.

JOE: Go ahead, ma'am.

(A beat.)

OLSON: But consider my point of view. I mean, here's a play set in a nuclear crisis, the beginning of a nuclear war, that tries to speak to the dynamics of why such things happen, and you're worried about a very popular if maligned little four-letter word pronounced "fuck." What the hell kind of hierarchy of obscenity is that, lady?

CYNTHIA: Robert, I think she's only suggesting that you could have made your point without using — the "f-word."

ANN: Fuck. Are we all afraid to say fuck here?

OLSON: *(to Ann)* Thank you. *(To the audience)* The point is: war is more obscene than saying "fuck." But here we are . . .

JOE: *(to woman in audience)* Go on.

(A beat.)

OLSON: I think that's a rationalization. If you don't like the play, fine, but don't give me that crap about f-words and melodrama and contrived situations. You dislike the play for the same reason you dislike turnips or horseradish or oral sex or whatever the hell it is you dislike. It's a matter of taste, not of reason, it's—

JOE: The gentleman in front . . .

OLSON: Wait, I'm not done yet! This is important. Reason isn't calling the shots out there. Anything can happen out there. Your so-called reason, looking at the world for motivations and causes, builds an edifice that hides what's really happening. It's pretty hairy out there, you know? I mean, we're going to end up blowing up the planet over an obsolete myth!

JOE: The gentleman in front . . .

(A beat.)

WILLOW: My character is definitely gay and radical. How would Heather make sense otherwise?

OLSON: She doesn't have to be gay and radical to make sense. Sense of what? Heather could be a conservative heterosexual and still pull off something crazy like that. Are you telling me you've never met a weird conservative heterosexual? The point is, all these labels and categories don't work. They hide what's really going on. People are more mind-boggling than we give them credit for. We fall

victim to our own categories.

CYNTHIA: The masculine style that's brought up in the play — is this one of the things we fall victim to?

OLSON: Of course. But, hell, that's just a part of it. We fall victim to our mode of thinking rationally. We fall victim to language itself. You know, in Zen, language isn't supposed to say anything. In Zen, language is a bulldozer one uses to push all the garbage out of the way. Reality's between the lines, in the silence.

BILL: I was going to say something, but . . .

OLSON: The language is insufficient to express the feeling.

BILL: You must love being a writer!

JOE: Anyone else?

OLSON: One more thing, and I'll shut up. Sure, we want answers. But what's to be done out there? Kierkegaard said that there are two ways: to suffer; or to be a professor of the fact that someone else suffers. In my humble opinion, we've got too many fucking professors. Sorry for the f-word, lady.

(He quickly exits as Joe tries to cover with:)

JOE: I'd like to thank Robert Olson for . . . being with us tonight . . .

(Joe applauds, the others join in, as lights come down to BLACKOUT.)

ACT TWO

1/ The Cast Party (1 a.m.)

(Party sounds. AT RISE: OLSON and WILLOW are alone on the deck, dancing to a country song that OLSON is making up on the spot. He sings with an exaggerated twang and is pretty high.)

OLSON: *(singing)* He's cheatin' on she
And she's cheatin' on he
And you're cheatin' on me
And I'm cheatin' on thee
So it's plain, don't you see
Since she's cheatin' on he
And he's cheatin' on she
That we're cheatin' on we

(He does a very bad country yodel.)

OLSON: Yodel-lay-he-oh A-lay-he-oh A-lay-he

WILLOW: *(stopping the dance)* I hate country music.

OLSON: Run that by me again.

WILLOW: I like Bach. I hate country music.

OLSON: A Bach freak? You live in Oregon and you're a Bach freak?

WILLOW: Where do you think you are? West Gulch?

OLSON: The Pacific Northwest! The land of lumberjacks and fishermen and cowboys! That's why I nuked it, you're so close to the mythological center of things. But look there: you have a skyline. The skyline of a city. Almost.

WILLOW: There was a letter in "Dear Abby" recently—

OLSON: You watch "Heart Song" and read "Dear Abby" — my kind of girl.

WILLOW: A couple from the Midwest had moved to Portland and was surprised at how progressive the city is. For example, the woman met a lesbian at work who was very open about who she was. That had never happened to her in Ohio.

OLSON: All things are relative. To dear Albert. Einstein. Cheers.

WILLOW: For the first time in her life, she found herself being friends with a lesbian.

OLSON: Well, election day will take care of that . . .

WILLOW: You mean Measure 13? Oregonians aren't behind that. It's all the people moving in from out of state.

OLSON: Really?

WILLOW: California. Utah. Lots of Mormons are moving here.

OLSON: Well, let's put another Measure on the ballot and keep those fascists out.

WILLOW: I didn't say they were fascists. It's a very confusing issue when you study it. Bill's probably voting Yes but I'm not sure how I'm voting yet.

OLSON: You don't want to vote No and cancel his vote, do you?

WILLOW: I can make up my own mind, thank you very much.

OLSON: My kind of woman.

WILLOW: You confuse me. On the one hand, there's

something very cynical about you. But other times you seem to be having so much fun.

OLSON: I have a theory. Behold the stars!, twinkling happily away. More than we can see in L.A., as a matter of fact.

WILLOW: Aren't they lovely?

OLSON: They don't exist.

WILLOW: Well, I certainly see them up there.

OLSON: They are not shining. Poof!, the stars have vanished, to the twinkle. However: since, to toast dear Albert once again, since their little twinkles take so long to get to our own untwinkling hunk of hot rock, we don't know they're dead yet. So here we are, writing love songs and poetry and fascist ballot measures in a universe that no longer exists. Cheers.

WILLOW: I see what you mean — some cosmic explosion may already have happened, for all we know.

OLSON: Precisely! In fact, there are no more stars anywhere, in any firmament. All gone! And like you say, we won't find out that cosmic fact for thousands of years. Or until tomorrow.

WILLOW: That's very pessimistic.

OLSON: On the contrary, I toast stars that don't exist! I'd say there's a bit of good will there.

WILLOW: Your play is pessimistic.

OLSON: Neutral. Ironic but neutral.

WILLOW: Ironic how?

OLSON: We have the audacity to blow up a universe when we're the only pigeon-hole left who hasn't gotten word of the Grand Cosmic Finale. I told you, the stars are gone. Poof! Not a twinkle left in the sky — we're just very late getting the word. Ironic, yes? But a far greater irony would be to keep on living in the universe as if it still existed! That would give us the last laugh.

WILLOW: You're pulling my leg.

OLSON: Literally, that would be a pleasure.

(BILL and JOE enter.)

OLSON: "The Twelfth Habit: Hubby Runs Off With The Leading Lady."

(He rather whisks Willow away.)

JOE: I'd say he's taken quite an interest in her.

BILL: He's not the only one.

JOE: If you brought me out here to recite your litany about Pill—

BILL: I didn't.

JOE: It's your fifth drink obsession.

BILL: I've finally got it figured out. It's not Pill.

JOE: How can you believe Willow's having an affair with anyone?

BILL: I live with her. I know.

JOE: So if it's not our renowned drama critic, who is it?

BILL: I have a very clear idea about that.

JOE: The suspense is killing me.

BILL: Think about it. Joe.

JOE: This is all your active imagination inspired by alcohol.

BILL: Really think about it. It's so goddamn obvious. It hit me when I was telling Olson the plot of my script. It's like I knew subconsciously all the time and was writing it down,

while consciously I suspected Pill.

JOE: So who is it?

BILL: As soon as you hear the name, you'll know I'm right.

JOE: Did you drag me out here to tell me or not?

BILL: I want to be sure I'm right. I'm going to confront her with it.

JOE: And when does this little soap opera take place?

BILL: Soon.

JOE: Not here, I hope.

BILL: The culprit's here.

JOE: This is still my castle, buddy, and a little scene like that is something I can very well do without. I'm telling you, she's not having an affair. I'd give odds.

BILL: She is, but it ain't with Dean Pill.

JOE: I don't want a scene. I mean it.

BILL: Don't worry about it.

(He starts off.)

JOE: Where are you going?

BILL: To find Willow.

(ANN and CYNTHIA meet BILL at the sliding door.)

BILL: Help yourself, I was just leaving.

JOE: *(following Bill)* Great party!

(The men are gone.)

CYNTHIA: Well?

ANN: I can't do this any more.

CYNTHIA: Good. Then stop. What did all that marching around really accomplish tonight? Nothing. You lost as many votes as you may've gained.

ANN: I don't mean that. The opposite, in fact. I feel like Mary in the play. I can't avoid looking in the mirror any longer.

CYNTHIA: So what is it you feel like doing?

ANN: Being who I am. Telling everybody here who I am. Telling everybody here who we are together.

CYNTHIA: Looking in the mirror means you have to play show-and-tell?

ANN: I think it does, yes. Otherwise I'm living a lie.

CYNTHIA: Everybody makes compromises. Suddenly you tell everybody here and . . .

ANN: And what?

CYNTHIA: I can't believe we're talking about this. Ever since Todd got here, I feel like I'm in a soap opera.

ANN: (*hamming it up*) "I can't be discrete a minute longer. I have to drop the mask. I have to show the world who I really am: Ann Barton, Diesel Dyke!"

CYNTHIA: That's not funny.

ANN: We've become very different, haven't we?

CYNTHIA: Perhaps so. I thought we'd resolved this in San Francisco.

ANN: To your satisfaction, not mine.

CYNTHIA: You chose to come to Portland with me.

ANN: Because I love you. I'm just not sure how much I love myself any more. There are people out there who want to

burn us at the stake, Cynthia — how can you just let that happen?

CYNTHIA: I think that's political paranoia. No one wants to burn anyone at the stake.

ANN: It starts with something like this, a harmless sounding law, a little restriction here and there, no gays in public office, no this, no that, the next thing you know—

CYNTHIA: Ann, somebody can come out here any minute.

ANN: What are you afraid of?

CYNTHIA: What about our livelihood? The business world is a very conservative environment.

ANN: We've been through this a hundred times. Who needs clients who are bigots?

(OLSON enters.)

OLSON: Ta da!

CYNTHIA: You look polluted.

OLSON: Scorn rolls off my back — because, for a brief moment, I've been in love with Willow. Unfortunately, her husband has just claimed squatter's rights. Robert Olson is crushed. But don't worry, my ex! I feel a second wind coming. For one quick private moment, Todd Westlake breathes deeply . . . and I'm quickly back into my disguise.

CYNTHIA: Please stay in it this time.

OLSON: Are you two spatting again?

ANN: We were, as a matter of fact.

CYNTHIA: Jesus Christ . . .

OLSON: We share heroes! To J.C. Cheers.

ANN: I think the play went very well. Don't you?

OLSON: Except for those idiotic questions at the end.

ANN: You made it clear enough you didn't like them.

OLSON: I was hoping I did.

CYNTHIA: Joe tells me you're leaving tomorrow.

OLSON: "Heart Song" calls.

ANN: When does your plane leave? I was hoping you'd speak at the rally.

CYNTHIA: By all means, speak at the rally. I'm sure you and Ann have much in common.

(She starts away.)

OLSON: Fetch the cast! I want to toast the cast.

ANN: A splendid idea. I'll get them.

(She exits. OLSON and CYNTHIA are alone.)

OLSON: Don't say it. You think I'm drunk. But I'm not! I'm the guest of honor. I'm the author of "Half-Life." And I am merely — high.

CYNTHIA: I hope you—

OLSON: Sshh! Mum's the word. You thought I forgot. Mum's the word! From now till the end . . .

CYNTHIA: And what's the end?

OLSON: Sleep.

CYNTHIA: Passing out.

OLSON: Same difference. The end justifies the means. *(saluting, singing)* "Oh, say can you see? By the dawn's early light..."

CYNTHIA: I'm sincerely sorry to see you like this. You have a talent that deserves better. "Half-Life" is a thought-

provoking play. I'm glad we did it. Too bad you had to make such an ass of yourself afterwards.

OLSON: (*toasting*) The Seventeenth Habit: Hubby Is An Asshole.

(*The others come out onto the deck: ANN, BILL, WILLOW, JOE.*)

OLSON: The invasion of the body snatchers! I fabricate from the swills of my insomnia a family of friends to whom you, and you alone, give flesh and bone. A toast to my cast! To actors! To body snatchers everywhere!

BILL: Hear-hear!

(*They all drink.*)

OLSON: (*mock seriousness*) I suppose you all wonder why I asked you here tonight.

BILL: It's morning, Bobby.

OLSON: To play a game! We all love games, don't we? Why else are we in theater but to play games? Well, this is the "Heart Song" game. This is one of the games we play in Hollywood. I don't play it, the actors play it. I watch it. All the writers watch it. The actors play it and then we steal their best lines and rush to the office and plagiarize.

ANN: It's a theater game?

OLSON: It's the "Heart Song" game. It's a game for soap operas. What is soap opera? A drama of deceit. Therefore, it is the purest form of drama in our time. This is a game about deceit, and at the studio we call it, "The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing But." I think it would be fun to play it. Anybody too chickenshit?

CYNTHIA: Perhaps some of us have had too much to

drink.

OLSON: Don't be a goddamn mother hen. You're going to play, and they're going to play, and even I'm going to play. I've never played it before. I only watch and steal lines.

JOE: So what are the rules?

OLSON: Let me illustrate. I am "it" and I pick someone. Eenie meenie miney moe. Willow!

WILLOW: What do I do?

OLSON: I'm trying to explain. I'm "it" and I pick you. I then make up a sentence that begins with "If ..." I put in everything before the comma and you complete the rest of the sentence. You can do so truthfully or falsely. We try to figure out which. That's the point of the game.

JOE: We'd better have a dry run.

OLSON: I am "it." Willow: "If I were to commit adultery . . ." By "I", I mean you. "If I were to commit adultery . . ." You finish the sentence.

ANN: This could get pretty heavy.

OLSON: A game of deceit. "The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing But."

WILLOW: I can complete the sentence any way I want?

OLSON: The human imagination is limitless.

WILLOW: Okay. "I'd commit adultery with—"

OLSON: Repeat the whole sentence.

WILLOW: "If I were to commit adultery, I'd commit it with Tom Cruise."

OLSON: Do any of you body snatchers want to challenge that?

BILL: Yeah. What if Cruise isn't willing to go along?

WILLOW: I was stating a preference.

OLSON: Anyone else? Then we believe her? It's Willow's

turn to be "it."

CYNTHIA: This is very exciting, isn't it?

OLSON: It depends.

ANN: On how honest we're willing to be.

OLSON: Thank you. Willow?

WILLOW: I can ask anyone?

OLSON: Anyone.

WILLOW: Ann: "If I were to play Mary again in another production of 'Half-Life' . . ."

ANN: That's easy. If I were to play Mary again, I'd play her the same way — as a woman embracing her true self for the first time.

BILL: I have a question. If everyone tells the truth, how does anything happen?

OLSON: It doesn't. Interest in this game is based on deceit.

ANN: I'm "it." Cynthia.

CYNTHIA: Since we're all going to tell the truth, and nothing happens when we do, why don't we play something else?

ANN: I need a second to phrase it right.

CYNTHIA: I think we should be mixing with the others. They'll think we're hogging the guest of honor to ourselves.

ANN: Cynthia: "If I were to marry . . ."

CYNTHIA: If I were to marry . . .?

ANN: Right.

CYNTHIA: If I were to marry, I wouldn't marry you.

BILL: That's great! You're it.

ANN: I challenge that.

BILL: How the hell can you challenge? She'd have to be queer.

OLSON: Ann challenges you.

CYNTHIA: So how am I supposed to defend myself? Whom I marry is my business and if you don't believe me, what can I possibly say that would change anyone's mind?

JOE: *(to Ann)* She has a point. She'd have to be gay to marry you.

CYNTHIA: And even if I was gay, I certainly wouldn't marry my business partner. You know what they say about business and pleasure.

OLSON: Nicely done! Ann?

ANN: I guess that answers my challenge. Nice job.

OLSON: Cynthia is "it."

CYNTHIA: Robert: "If you were to rewrite 'Half-Life' . . ."

OLSON: If I was to rewrite "Half-Life" . . . that's heavier than it sounds.

BILL: I'd set it in Los Angeles! Sorry.

OLSON: If I were to rewrite "Half-Life," I'd try to think of an ending that was less of a self-fulfilling prophecy. I'd try to think of something so he wouldn't blow them away. I don't know if I could find anything I could believe but at least I'd look harder for it.

CYNTHIA: Challenges?

OLSON: Then I'm "it." Ann.

ANN: Yes?

OLSON: "If I were gay . . ."

BILL: Oh boy.

OLSON: You'd be surprised at the insights into their characters that the actors come up with. After we play the game, we improv situations and they come to that with more depth, more dimension, as a result of the game. Makes for a goddamn tidy script.

ANN: And you like tidy scripts.

OLSON: The tidier the better.

ANN: If I were gay . . . ?

BILL: You wouldn't marry Cynthia either!

CYNTHIA: I'm going to get a drink.

(She exits.)

ANN: It's really not fair to pass in this game, is it?

OLSON: There's no need to pass. When in doubt, lie.

ANN: I see. Okay: "If I were gay, then I'd be who I already am."

(A pause.)

BILL: Well, I challenge.

OLSON: Ann?

ANN: Don't challenge, Bill.

BILL: "When in doubt, lie."

ANN: But it's the truth. I'm gay.

JOE: You're not serious?

ANN: I am very serious. Hey, lighten up, it's okay, I don't bite. I've been gay for as long as I can remember. 'Bout time I fessed up, don't you think? Why are you all looking at me like that?

BILL: I think you're pulling our leg.

ANN: Fine. Think whatever you want.

OLSON: I believe you.

ANN: Thank you, Robert. It's nice to be accepted for who I am.

WILLOW: I believe you, too.

BILL: Come on!

(CYNTHIA returns. An awkward pause.)

CYNTHIA: Did I miss something?

ANN: Robert Olson's little game has inspired me to admit that I'm gay. I hope this won't jeopardize our business relationship.

CYNTHIA: No, of course not.

BILL: I still think you're putting us on.

WILLOW: That's because you're homophobic. I'm getting a drink.

(She exits.)

BILL: *(after her)* Hey, I have a couple friends who are queer!

ANN: I think I can use a drink myself.

OLSON: Let me escort you.

ANN: I'd like that.

(OLSON and ANN exit.)

CYNTHIA: *(nervous)* Why should it affect our business relationship? But what a surprise! Aren't you surprised?

BILL: I still think she's putting us on. She's always had a weird sense of humor.

CYNTHIA: Who can say? If you'll excuse me

(She exits.)

BILL: No way. I've acted with her for two or three years now. She flirts with me.

JOE: I think I believe her.

BILL: I acted with her in *I Do, I Do*. I kept wishing I did, I did. If she's queer, what a waste.

JOE: Ready for a drink?

BILL: In a minute. I have an apology to make.

JOE: Oh?

BILL: It's Pill, after all. I mean, it was. Willow confessed everything.

JOE: She did?

BILL: She and Pill have been doing their little number for about three months but she broke it off last week. She's been trying to get the courage to tell me.

JOE: But you were so sure it wasn't Pill.

BILL: I guess because I'd been sure it was him from the beginning and couldn't stand living with it any longer. The truth is, I'd decided it was you.

JOE: You've got to be kidding.

BILL: In my script, it's the guy's best friend. Maybe I started confusing art and reality. Sorry about that.

JOE: Well, forget it. Did you tell Willow you thought it was me?

BILL: Didn't get a chance to. I told her I knew she was having an affair, and that for a long time I thought it was with Pill, and she just came out and confessed everything. Anyway, it's out and it's over. We can pick up the pieces.

JOE: I'm happy for you.

BILL: How about that drink?

(They exit. A pause. ANN and OLSON enter.)

ANN: You don't like any rough edges, do you?

OLSON: "The truth shall set us free." Which is probably a crock.

ANN: I feel relieved. Free, if you will.

OLSON: I feel sorry for Cynthia.

ANN: Yes.

OLSON: Discretion has its place.

ANN: So does honesty.

OLSON: There's a book that's a favorite of mine. *Pygmies and Dream Giants* by Kilton Stewart. Stewart lived with a tribe on some island, in the South Pacific as I recall, and the tribe had never experienced war in their society. Besides being an anthropologist, Stewart was something of an amateur shrink, so he tried to find out just what it was about their society that negated war. To make a long story short, he discovered that these pygmies believed their dreams.

ANN: I'm not sure I follow.

OLSON: Literally. If they dreamed it, it happened. It literally happened. Dreams were just as real as action. Dreams *were* an action. For example, if one pygmy dreamed of seducing another pygmy's wife, it was as real as committing adultery. It *was* adultery. So he'd wake up feeling guilty as hell, and get his ass over to the other pygmy's hut and say, Look, man, last night I made it with your old lady, and I'm sorry as hell about that, so here's my fattest pig and three chickens and a couple gallons of home brew, so let's call it even, okay? In their dreams they did any damn thing they wanted but always woke up guilty as hell, so instead of war you had all these pigs and

possessions being passed around all over hell, and nobody blew anybody away.

ANN: When women had dreams like that, did they also give away family property?

OLSON: I don't remember if Stewart recorded any dreams by women.

ANN: We do dream.

OLSON: As I recall, he concentrated on male dreams.

ANN: Same old patriarchy.

OLSON: It's interesting reading, all the same. I've always wanted to mention that book in a play.

ANN: Why haven't you?

OLSON: The critics would kill me. They'd say, "Book reviews are not dramatic. Book reviews are boring." Ideas aren't supposed to be interesting in their own right. Least of all, to a playwright.

ANN: I take it the critics aren't kind to you.

OLSON: They used to love me, when I wrote fluff like "Roses for the Road." A columnist once called me "one of L.A.'s most precious natural resources." Three years later I didn't even make his list of the 200 most interesting writers in town.

ANN: What does it matter what the critics think?

OLSON: Spoken like a woman who just came out of the closet.

ANN: Thanks for inspiring me to do that.

OLSON: Maybe I can thank you for something some day.

ANN: You already can.

OLSON: Then, thanks.

ANN: "Half-Life" didn't win the contest.

OLSON: Against my better judgment, I'll say, "go on."

ANN: There's no way a community theater would take a chance with material like that. After Cynthia vetoed "Roses for the Road," the committee wanted to do another piece of mush. So I took it upon myself to write you that you'd won — and then all I had to do was convince Cynthia to convince the committee.

OLSON: You made the decision alone?

ANN: The theater was in a rut. I thought your play had something important to say about masculinity. Fortunately, you wrote back so enthusiastically about winning that no one had the heart to take the prize away. So here you are.

OLSON: And Cynthia went along with you?

ANN: She made all the difference in the world. For a while, it looked like the committee was going to disown both of us. She really got behind the play in the end. Of course, she didn't know you were Robert Olson.

OLSON: Hubby Plays Guinea Pig . . . I wish you hadn't told me.

ANN: "The truth shall set us free."

OLSON: "Don't take any wooden nickels." Or something.

ANN: Let's go inside and dance.

OLSON: You expect to find a partner?

ANN: I want to dance with you.

OLSON: You do?

ANN: That's why I asked you.

OLSON: Won't Cynthia be jealous?

ANN: She has to live her own life.

OLSON: I'm a lousy dancer.

ANN: You really do wish I hadn't told you.

OLSON: Delusions of grandeur are so invigorating.

ANN: You're still a hero to everybody else. Only Cynthia and I know the truth.

OLSON: And, alas, myself.

ANN: Consider it grist for the mill. You can write a play about all this.

OLSON: I wouldn't know where to begin.

ANN: A playwright wins a contest . . . he comes to a strange city to see the premiere only to discover that his play is directed by his ex-wife . . . who left him for a San Francisco dyke . . .

OLSON: No, for a most interesting woman indeed. But later to discover that actually he didn't win the contest at all.

ANN: See? Sounds like Hitchcock already.

OLSON: I don't like it.

ANN: I'm serious, I think this material has real possibilities.

OLSON: There's no accounting for taste.

(They exit to BLACKOUT.)

2/ Fallout (3:30 a.m.)

(JOE and CYNTHIA are alone on the deck. The background noise of the party is gone now. We hear a car driving away below.)

CYNTHIA: I hope Bill's not driving.

JOE: Willow, I think.

CYNTHIA: They should be fine then.

JOE: Yes, they'll be fine.

(A pause.)

JOE: We were having an affair.

CYNTHIA: I know. You said "were."

JOE: We ended it tonight.

CYNTHIA: I'm sorry. Or is that condoning adultery?

JOE: You know how these little theater flings go.

CYNTHIA: You still care for her.

JOE: Yes.

CYNTHIA: Then I am sorry.

JOE: I guess you have your own problems. Ann.

CYNTHIA: Ann? Well, that's hardly my problem.

JOE: A thing like that can hurt your business.

CYNTHIA: Then we'll have to find more tolerant clients.

JOE: I was surprised but then when I thought about it, it made perfect sense. I don't recall ever seeing her with a man. In a dating situation, I mean.

(A pause.)

JOE: Nor you.

CYNTHIA: I'm a workaholic. You've been directed by me enough to know that.

JOE: You never suspected, sharing a house with her and all?

CYNTHIA: Never. I don't see much of her other than at work. We each have our own floor.

JOE: That's good.

CYNTHIA: Actually I've been thinking of moving closer in. The drive is getting to me.

JOE: I don't blame you. I've never liked the suburbs.

(A pause.)

JOE: May I ask you a personal question?

CYNTHIA: The answer is no, I'm not gay.

JOE: Wouldn't matter if you were.

CYNTHIA: The real answer, of course, is that it's none of your damn business. And I do date men, as a matter of fact.

JOE: Anyone in particular?

CYNTHIA: A pilot for United. Given both of our schedules, we don't get to see one another more than once or twice a month. But then I've always believed in quality in a relationship, not quantity. Anything else you want to know?

JOE: Sorry, I was curious.

CYNTHIA: Being in business with Ann, I'm sure I'll be asked that question quite often now that she's come out of the closet, so to speak. People are so damn nosy.

(ANN enters.)

ANN: Cynthia, can I speak to you a minute?

JOE: I was just leaving. Where's Olson?

ANN: Stretched out on the floor in front of the stereo. He

found your dixieland tapes.

JOE: Pretty drunk out tonight.

(He exits.)

ANN: I'll move out right away.

CYNTHIA: No, I'm moving out. I want to live closer in.

ANN: I don't mind if—

CYNTHIA: I mind.

ANN: Whatever you want.

CYNTHIA: I want that you take the car home. I'll get Joe to give me a lift later.

ANN: You're spending the night here?

CYNTHIA: Please don't say you fear for my safety. Alone with a man and all that.

ANN: I don't feel like I owe you an apology, Cynthia. I did what I had to do.

(A pause.)

ANN: Can we still be in business together?

CYNTHIA: I hope so.

ANN: I could take my vacation.

CYNTHIA: Perhaps you should.

ANN: We ought to be able to work together.

CYNTHIA: I should think so.

ANN: I still care for you.

(A pause.)

ANN: I'm really not an extremist, you know. I won't do anything to embarrass the business.

CYNTHIA: I hope not.

ANN: I think you're quite safe. There may be a few suspicions at first, since we live together and all, but you're very good at creating whatever impression you want.

CYNTHIA: It's a present nuisance but, yes, I'm sure I'm safe.

ANN: You're a very good actress.

CYNTHIA: The keys are in my purse. In the livingroom.

ANN: Thanks.

CYNTHIA: You'll have to step over Todd.

ANN: Perhaps.

CYNTHIA: You two seem to have hit it off.

ANN: Better than I would have thought.

CYNTHIA: I didn't know you could dance so well.

ANN: I haven't danced in years. I like dancing again.

CYNTHIA: Will you be taking a vacation then?

ANN: To San Francisco, I think.

CYNTHIA: Of course.

ANN: Sure you can handle the load alone?

CYNTHIA: Summer's our slow time.

ANN: Then I'll leave Monday.

CYNTHIA: Fine.

ANN: I understand you a little better now, I think.

CYNTHIA: Then something's been accomplished.

ANN: Being who I am, I understand better who you are.

Can't you say the same?

(A pause.)

ANN: Cynthia? Can't you say the same?

(They embrace. They are still embraced when OLSON enters.)

OLSON: Hubby needs a lobotomy.

(The women move apart.)

OLSON: What is it about marriage that fights become the excuse for making up? I mean, you two might as well be married, right?

CYNTHIA: *(to Ann)* The keys are in my purse. If you see anyone in San Francisco . . .

ANN: I'll give them your best. See you back at the office.

OLSON: You're leaving?

ANN: Keep writing plays. Bye.

(She exits.)

OLSON: Where's she going?

CYNTHIA: Home.

OLSON: Alone?

CYNTHIA: I think I'll go lie down.

OLSON: Wait a minute. Listen, I know I turn into some kind of a halfass loudmouth when I'm drinking but, seriously, is there anything I can do?

CYNTHIA: I don't think so.

OLSON: You're breaking up, aren't you? Well, I have prior service. A real vet at breaking up. Not only you, I've lived with three ladies since us and broke up with every one of them. I've got experience. Know what I learned?

CYNTHIA: What did you learn?

OLSON: If you're the one being left, it's best to leave town. If you're the one moving out, it's best to throw the whole damn mess, I mean the actual labor of moving, into the lap of a good friend. Which are you?

CYNTHIA: I've been wanting to move closer in for some time now.

OLSON: How much furniture do you have? I'll help you move out.

CYNTHIA: Be serious.

OLSON: I am serious. I'll rent a damn truck and move you wherever you want to go. Into storage if you have no place to stay.

CYNTHIA: I thought you were flying right back.

OLSON: I'll get a later flight. Two hours sleep and I'm raring to go. What do you say? I'm one hell of a truck driver.

CYNTHIA: Why do you want to get involved?

OLSON: We used to be married, for Christ's sake. We had some good times.

CYNTHIA: Yes, there were some good times.

(A car drives away below, ANN going home alone. CYNTHIA is about to lose it..)

OLSON: Don't worry about it. Ann has to live her life. You have to live yours. Discretion has its place.

CYNTHIA: (*bittersweet*) Discretion . . .

OLSON: It's the best I can do on such short notice. I also think it's the truth.

CYNTHIA: I hated it in San Francisco. Every time we went into a gay bar, I sat in terror, worrying that one of our clients would walk in. Then one night one did — a woman whose PR we handled. The way she looked at me, so . . . so knowingly. I didn't want her to know anything about me. I didn't want to make a statement about my sexuality. Why does sexuality have to be political? It's so — personal. Maybe sex belongs in the closet, like a special part of the wardrobe saved for special occasions.

(*A pause.*)

OLSON: Ann told me about how "Half-Life" got done. I appreciate your support when it counted.

CYNTHIA: I'm sorry you had to find out.

OLSON: "The truth shall set us free" and so on. So what do you say? Let me rent a truck. I love driving truck! It's so goddamn macho I can't stand it. I'll turn up some country music on the radio and haul your furniture all goddamn day.

CYNTHIA: Let's talk about it when I can think straight.

OLSON: I'm staying at the hotel, the what's-it's-name. Joe knows. Give me a buzz when you're ready.

CYNTHIA: I'm going to lie down.

OLSON: I have to get a taxi.

CYNTHIA: I'll call one. Let's have a late breakfast and talk about moving me out.

OLSON: I'm one hell of a macho truck driver, lady.

CYNTHIA: I'm sure you are. Goodnight, Todd.

OLSON: Sshh! Mum's the word.

CYNTHIA: Mum's the word.

(She exits. OLSON stares out at the skyline. Then he looks higher, to the stars in a clear sky.)

OLSON: Twinkle, twinkle,

Little star,

How I wonder,

What you are ...

(JOE enters.)

JOE: Taxi shouldn't be long.

OLSON: You goddamn stud.

JOE: Pardon me?

OLSON: I heard about the number you're doing with Willow.

JOE: Oh that. That ended a while back.

OLSON: How so?

JOE: You know — variety's the spice of life. Time to move on to better things.

OLSON: Better than Willow?

JOE: Surely you're not a one-woman man. Not in Hollywood.

OLSON: For me to know and you to find out.

JOE: Or maybe you're gay. Every time you turn around these days, somebody you know turns out to be gay.

OLSON: If I was a woman, I'd be gay.

JOE: That's a little convoluted . . .

OLSON: You and Willow. I think I'm jealous.

JOE: We got together when we played the leads in "Barefoot in the Park." You know how those things happen. The play ended and, well, frankly she bores me now.

OLSON: You played the newscaster, you can always fuck the radio.

JOE: I'm doing quite well, thank you.

OLSON: A real stud.

JOE: No complaints.

OLSON: View like this ought to get them in the mood.

JOE: It doesn't hurt.

OLSON: You ever make it with Willow out here on the deck?

JOE: For me to know and you to find out. Will I be seeing you again before you leave?

OLSON: I'm having breakfast with Cynthia. Then I think I'm going to drive truck.

JOE: Drive truck?

OLSON: What the hell's wrong with driving truck?

(OLSON begins to make the sounds of driving truck — the engine roaring, shifting gears.)

JOE: You'll be able to see the taxi from here. Goodnight.

(OLSON still plays driving truck. JOE exits. OLSON

suddenly gestures toward the stars, his voice trailing off as if he's sending his truck out into the universe.)

OLSON: Twinkle, twinkle,
Little star,
How I wonder . . .

(OLSON stares out at the skyline.)

OLSON: How I wonder . . .

(Suddenly OLSON makes the noise of a great explosion and his arms reach forward, then trace the rising outline of a mushroom cloud. The gesture is almost sensuous, as if he were tracing a woman's figure. When the cloud has risen, OLSON is looking up at the stars.)

OLSON: And it came to pass that all the stars in the firmament had ceased to shine. But how was anyone to know?

(OLSON looks up at the stars. Slow fade to BLACKOUT. THE PLAY IS OVER.)

CHRISTMAS AT THE JUNIPER TAVERN
a play in two acts

First performed at the Wilson Center for the Performing Arts in Portland, Oregon, on January 5, 1984. Directed by Steve Smith.

Produced for public television, winner of ACE award.

THE CAST (4M, 5W):

Stella, owner of the Juniper Tavern, a no-nonsense woman.

Frank, an unemployed mill worker, a Korean vet, a little lost.

Rex, an unemployed log truck driver, imaginative, a little crazy.

Margie, his wife, not too smart.

Sheriff Billy of Juniper County, more heart than brain.

Ann, a young woman, searching.

Joy, her mother, a college professor, bright and cynical.

Swami Kree, guru of the Kree cult.

Ma Prama Rama Kree, his personal secretary, protective, suspicious.

THE TIME:

Christmas, 1979.

THE SET:

The Juniper tavern. A bar, tables. A jukebox. A Christmas tree with presents under it. Stage right to restrooms. A telephone on the wall. A door behind the bar leads to a storage area.

Two other areas must be defined: a neutral playing area; area for car interiors.

“Song of the Swami” by Lynne Fuqua.

Logging poems by Fred Ross.

ACT ONE

Scene One

(AT RISE: Frank and Stella are waltzing to an instrumental version of "Silent Night" on the jukebox. The mood is romantic; it could be Saturday night, they could be dancing to "Waltz Across Texas." The music stops.)

FRANK: Want me to put in some more quarters?

STELLA: Sit down a minute. You look antsy.

(Frank sits down at the bar. Stella goes behind it.)

FRANK: Not enough sleep.

STELLA: You look antsy and you dance antsy. What's on your mind, Frank?

FRANK: *(to change the subject)* You mad I woke you?

STELLA: I thought maybe you had something important to talk about.

FRANK: I'm hardly awake. You pouring yet?

(She pours him a beer.)

FRANK: Seems like I sleep less when I'm laid off than when I'm working.

STELLA: I wonder why.

FRANK: Maybe I am antsy.

STELLA: So it's just being out of work that's bothering you?

FRANK: Hell, I don't know. What do you mean, I dance antsy?

STELLA: All stiff, like you don't want to be here.

FRANK: Why'd I wake you if I don't want to be here?

STELLA: That's what I'm asking, Frank.

(He doesn't reply. A pause.)

FRANK: You want to exchange gifts before you open?

STELLA: You oughtn't've gotten me anything, being out of work.

FRANK: Hell, it's nothing like I wanted to get.

STELLA: You want to exchange presents or you want to tell

me what's bothering you?

FRANK: You sure are persistent this morning.

STELLA: Whichever you want, Frank.

FRANK: I came by, Stella because — hell, it's Christmas.

STELLA: Let's open presents.

(As Stella starts for the tree, there's a loud banging on the front door of the tavern.)

REX: *(off stage)* Stella! Merry Christmas in there! Hey, open up, will you?

(Frank tips his baseball cap knowingly to Stella, then goes to answer the door. Stella comes downstage, the lights change to a spotlight on her and she speaks to the audience.)

STELLA: Some folks say it's a sin to open up on Christmas Day. Whoever thinks that can take a flying you-know-what at the moon.

You see, we got people here in Juniper, the tavern's the only home they know. Or it's the only place they can really relax and have a little fun. This is especially true with the mill closed like it is. Half the men in Juniper work at the mill, or depend on the mill being open, which means most ain't been working for almost a year now, and there's nothing to do at home but stare at the bills piling up.

I lowered my beer prices when the mill closed down. It's the least I could do. Just like that sign I put up outside. There's folks who think I did that for the publicity but I didn't ask no reporter to come snooping around about it. I put up that sign because it was needed. Ever since that religious cult took over the old Thompson spread, 15 miles

out on Old Ranch Road, tourists speed by here like Juniper's as worthless as a eunuch in a whorehouse. They just want to hurry out to the ranch so they can stare at all the blue shirts and at that Swami's 26 Rolls-Royces. The only reason I put up that sign was to protect my customers: SLOW DOWN, GODDAMN IT! DRUNKS CROSS HERE!

(LIGHTS UP on tavern, with Rex and Margie entering.)

REX: This a private party?

STELLA: Not any more. What's your poison?

MARGIE: Beer and tomato juice for me. Rex?

REX: Frank and I will be right back.

MARGIE: Don't you go running out on me on Christmas morning!

REX: I gotta get your present. Be back in a jiff.

(Frank and Rex start out.)

MARGIE: *(after them)* What're you talking about, present? Rex!

(They exit.)

MARGIE: We can't afford no presents. The Sage Tavern isn't open this early, is it?

STELLA: We got the only drink in town today.

(Stella gives Margie her beer and tomato juice.)

MARGIE: Bet he's got a bottle hid in the pickup. He's been drinking for three days. Didn't get in till five this morning.

(A pause.)

MARGIE: Frank spend the night upstairs?

STELLA: No, he woke me a couple hours ago.

MARGIE: Did he ask you?

STELLA: Even if he was fixing to, I don't think he'd pop the question this early in the morning.

MARGIE: Rex gets romantic after drinking all night. I'll bet they was together last night.

STELLA: May be.

MARGIE: He's gonna ask you one of these days. You know you got your bags packed.

STELLA: I think Frank's too set in his ways to marry.

MARGIE: The engagement can't last forever, Stella. You either get hitched or break up. Something's gotta break the monotony.

STELLA: We're not engaged.

MARGIE: Time he spends upstairs, it's the same difference.

STELLA: We have a nice arrangement.

MARGIE: For him.

STELLA: For me, too. We both need a little room.

MARGIE: That's what Rex says. Then he stays out drinking all night.

STELLA: You know how men get when the mill's closed. Happens every recession. But the mill's gotta open up

sooner or later. It always does.

MARGIE: I don't know how much longer I can stand it. Our benefits end next month. We're already dipping into savings.

STELLA: Don't fret about it on Christmas. Have one on me.

(She turns a glass upside down in front of Margie, marking her for another drink.)

MARGIE: I wonder if he really got me a present. We made a deal not to exchange gifts this year. That son-of-a-bitch.

STELLA: If he got you something, you tell him he has fifteen dollars on credit right here — a gift certificate.

MARGIE: You don't have to do that.

STELLA: I know. Come on, cheer up. I'm feeling Christmasy. Look here, a card from Fred Ross came yesterday.

(She hands Margie a Christmas card.)

MARGIE: Didn't he go to the valley looking for work? Rex heard he ended up in Junction City.

STELLA: The postmark don't show through too good.

MARGIE: Postmark doesn't mean a thing any more. My sister in Rock Springs? I got a card from her, the postmark said Gopher.

STELLA: Maybe she mailed it in Gopher.

MARGIE: She can't stand Gopher. If she needs a bigger store than Rock Springs, she drives to one of the malls in Eugene. The post office just took away Rock Springs' postmark and gave them Gopher. Post office don't give a

damn if folks don't want a Gopher postmark on their letters. Criminy.

STELLA: If it's more efficient that way, maybe the price of stamps won't go up.

MARGIE: My sister hates Gopher!

STELLA: Fred sent a poem with the card.

MARGIE: That's Fred.

STELLA: It was published in *Logger's World*.

MARGIE: Fred Ross got published in a magazine?

(SHERIFF BILLY enters. He is in uniform.)

BILLY: Merry Christmas, all.

STELLA: Merry Christmas, Billy.

MARGIE: Fred Ross published a poem.

BILLY: So?

MARGIE: So whoever expected Fred Ross to publish a poem in a magazine?

STELLA: Right here in *Logger's World*.

BILLY: Let me see that.

(Stella gives Billy the poem.)

BILLY: I'll be damned.

MARGIE: Think he got paid?

BILLY: Respectable magazine like *Logger's World*? He's a damn fool if he let them have it for nothing.

STELLA: Read it out loud.

BILLY: There here is one of my favorites:

(reading) There's an empty seat on the crummy,
Where used to sit Hook Jack.
In a little bungalow in the suburbs,
There's a new widow dressed in black.

It happened last Thursday afternoon;
There was nothing anyone could do.
The puncher ran into a hang-up
And jerked the mainline in two.

So Old Jack is in Logger's Heaven,
And many stories have been told
About the cold brooks that trickle by the wayside,
And the streets are paved with gold.

We know when at last we join him,
He'll have the layout made,
And with his coffee jug beside him,
He'll be sitting in the shade.

Then Old Jack will rise,
This logger big and strong;
"I been through a whole pot of coffee!
What took you guys so long?

Up here they only fly one choker
And there's four men on the crew.
You don't have to wear your hard cats,
And your cork boots are shiny and new.

The crummies are all air-conditioned,
The side rods never come round.
The yarders all have mufflers
And never make a sound.

There's no such thing as Monday
And you'll all get paid every day.
The cookshack door is always open
To feed each and every stray.

Sometimes I think it's almost too easy
For a high-ball logging man,
Who gave all those years of his life
In pursuit of the silver strands.”

(A pause.)

BILLY: I can almost hear Fred reciting it himself.

STELLA: Fred must be doing good enough.

MARGIE: Bet he didn't get paid enough to get drunk on.

BILLY: *(reciting from memory)* His hickory shirt was
glazed with dirt

As he stepped up to the bar.
“Gimme a shot of your rotgut whiskey
And the butt of an old cigar.

I'm in from the cold where the vine maples grow
And the dogwoods bloom in the spring.
I've been in the woods for thirty years
And I haven't accomplished a thing.”

Jesus, Fred Ross can write! (*He raises his glass to make a toast.*) Merry Christmas, Fred, wherever you are.

STELLA: It was a nice present, seeing Fred get a poem published. I miss him around here.

BILLY: I got a present for you myself.

(*He hands her his ticket book.*)

STELLA: I know it's easy to get your quota of speeders these days.

BILLY: This ain't just another speeder. Look at the car make.

STELLA: A Rolls-Royce. You mean ... ?

BILLY: Nailed the Swami himself!

STELLA: You mean he was driving?

BILLY: He's such a con-man, he don't have to do diddly-squat. One of his blue shirts was driving. They was pushing eighty.

MARGIE: You can't touch the Swami if he wasn't driving.

BILLY: I still nailed him with a fat fine.

MARGIE: Big deal. If he can afford twenty-two Rolls-Royces —

STELLA: Twenty-six. He got four for his birthday last month.

MARGIE: He can damn well afford a speeding ticket.

BILLY: Twenty-five Rolls-Royces. That's why he was speeding, trying to catch a car thief.

STELLA: Somebody stole one of his cars?

BILLY: Ain't that something? (*Toasting*) Merry Christmas!

STELLA: Merry Christmas!

BILLY: I stopped by to enjoy it while I can. I'm the poor son-of-a-bitch who's supposed to find it. Hell of a deal.

MARGIE: Since when it is your job to chase car thieves?

BILLY: This county is my jurisdiction and if it happens in Juniper County, then yours truly is on the case. I chased rustlers, I can damn well chase car thieves.

MARGIE: Rustlers, hell.

BILLY: You take a man's goat, that's rustling, same as a cow — makes no difference if Rex was drunk or sober.

MARGIE: Rex won that damn goat at cards.

BILLY: That's not what Luke said.

MARGIE: One man's word against another. You can't question the damn goat.

BILLY: If he won it at cards, why'd he give it back so easy?

MARGIE: Because I don't need no goat chewing up my lawn!

BILLY: Anyway, I imagine they're halfway to Portland by now. You can't hide a Rolls-Royce around here. I'll check out the countryside and that ought to take care of it as far as I'm concerned. I got to play Santa Claus at the hospital later anyway.

MARGIE: Don't you get tired of doing that every year?

BILLY: I like it. Hell, I can play Santa with my eyes shut.

STELLA: Billy being Santa Claus is practically an institution.

(Frank enters.)

MARGIE: *(quickly)* Where's Rex?

FRANK: *(avoiding the question)* Billy ... thought they'd give you the day off.

BILLY: I get off pretty quick now. Gotta put on my Santa suit.

MARGIE: Where the hell is he, Frank?

FRANK: Stella, I'm buying the house a Christmas drink.

BILLY: I'll take a rain check. Frank, would you believe I have to look for a Rolls-Royce? That poor damn Swami, somebody took one of his Rollses and now the poor son-of-a-bitch is down to twenty-five. Some folks carry bad luck in their pocket.

(He exits.)

MARGIE: Where's Rex, Frank? I don't like the look on your face.

FRANK: He's ... outside.

MARGIE: Why don't he come in? He got a present for me out there?

FRANK: Sort of.

MARGIE: That son-of-a-bitch. We made a deal.

(Billy returns and makes a slow cross to the bar. All eyes are on him. He leans on the end of the bar.)

BILLY: You think that Swami plays cards? I hope so. Rex is out front, relieving himself on the front fender of a Rolls-Royce. Now, Frank, if you know anything about this, I'd be obliged to listen.

FRANK: Don't know what to tell you, Billy.

BILLY: The way I figure it, you were playing poker over in that ashram. And the Swami, being a foreigner, it was duck soup, right? Ain't that what happened, Billy?

FRANK: Sure, Billy, you got it exactly.

BILLY: That's what I figured.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Two

(LIGHTS RISE on MA in the neutral area. She wears the blue clothing of the Kree cult and speaks to the audience. Her accent is from India.)

MA: You Americans are full of contradictions. I was educated in your country and know something about you. On the one hand, you represent the ideal of freedom in the Western world. And then you come in droves to stare at the Kree because we are different from you.

What has happened to this country? The United States is the land of religious freedom. This is what I was taught at your great University, UCLA. America was founded by men who fled religious persecution in England. Then why are

the Kree being persecuted?

There are so many rumors about us. No, we are not fanatics out to take over the world. We wear blue for religious reasons, not military or political ones. Blue is the color of the holy sky and the immortal ocean.

No, we do not have sex orgies on the ranch. We are building an ashram, which means we work hard for twelve and fifteen hours a day. Who has energy left over for a sex orgy?

As the Swami's personal secretary and PR officer for the Kree, I have to deal with questions like this all the time. For example, I'm often asked, Why does the Swami have so many Rolls-Royces? What kind of a question is this? Why did your Hollywood star Joan Crawford have so many pairs of shoes? And why did Elizabeth Taylor have so many husbands?

Let me explain about the Rolls-Royces once and for all. The Kree do not dismiss the material world. It's not the ultimate reality but it is something we pass through according to our karma. So we believe in having a good time while visiting in this incarnation.

We have a great need for vehicles on the ashram and so what better investment can we make than a Rolls-Royce? You Americans, who gave the world capitalism, should understand this. We bought Swami four new cars for his birthday, to celebrate the end of his one-year vow of silence.

(LIGHTS RISE on Rex in a Rolls-Royce.)

FRANK: *(voice off)* Rex? We'd better get while the gettin's good.

REX: Hang on, partner!

(Frank enters.)

REX: You're not gonna believe this. Which hand?

FRANK: You counted the cars. Let's get out of here.

REX: He's got twenty-six of them Rollsies, Frank. And look here — each one has the keys in it. Ain't that a Christian for you?

(The focus returns to Ma.)

MA: Oh yes, I saw them steal the car. They were too drunk to be very careful. As it happens, I was working on the books upstairs. We had bought two more Rolls-Royces for Swami for Christmas. Of course, Christmas is not a religious holiday for the Kree. We celebrate Swami's birthday, not Christ's, but we realize that Christmas is the most important American holiday, the time when you give the most expensive gifts, so we wanted to be good neighbors by recognizing Christmas ourselves. We knew we could surprise Swami with two more cars. He wouldn't even be celebrating Christmas, except maybe to eat fruitcake. Swami loves fruitcake.

(Focus on Frank and Rex.)

FRANK: Twenty-six Rolls-Royces. Why do you suppose he has so many?

REX: Pussy. He can't drive but one himself, can he? I hear it's a regular sex orgy out here. It ain't nothing but twenty-five ladies he's trying to keep happy with them cars, Frank. Goddamn, if I knew religion was like this, I'd've gone to Sunday school.

FRANK: You counted the cars. Let's get the hell out of

here.

REX: You take the pickup. I'll be right behind you.

FRANK: What do you mean, you'll be right behind me?

REX: Look at them — twenty-six Rolls-Royces! It's better than harps and angels, Frank. I may never get this close to heaven again.

FRANK: Now don't do something crazy, Rex. You're in enough trouble at home as it is.

REX: This is going to get me out of trouble at home, good buddy.

FRANK: What is?

REX: When I drive up in one of these here Rolls-Royces.

FRANK: That's car theft.

REX: I'm not stealing it. I'm borrowing it. I'm going to let Margie take a ride in it. That'll be her Christmas present.

FRANK: She don't want to ride in a stolen car.

REX: Listen, I know Margie. Hell, the day I drove up in my pickup — when it was new, I mean — Margie can turn into quite a woman when she wants to. We did it in the drive-in in that new pickup not ten hours after I put down the payment.

FRANK: That was a long time ago.

REX: That's what I'm saying. Margie ain't done nothing crazy since then.

FRANK: You wake up Margie at this time of the morning, she ain't gonna be interested in no car ride.

REX: We'll hide the sum-bitch in the garage at Steve's Texaco. I still got the keys from when I was working on Margie's Chevy. Then when Stella opens at seven, we'll drive it over to the tavern and give everybody a ride.

FRANK: I don't think this is gonna help you with Margie, Rex. It's gonna make things worse, is what it's gonna do.

REX: You don't know what a new car does to that woman.
And a Rolls-Royce — goddamn!

(LIGHTS FADE on them and RISE on Ma.)

MA: When I saw they were taking the car, I phoned Swami.
"We'll give them a head start," he said. "This is only
sporting. Then we'll catch them. It'll be like the Grand
Prix."

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Three

*(LIGHTS RISE in the tavern. Stella is behind the bar.
Frank and Margie sit on stools, Rex standing near
Margie. Billy sits at a table.)*

REX: At least go out there and sit in the goddamn thing.

MARGIE: I have no desire to sit in a "hot car."

REX: It's Christmas, for Christ's sake.

MARGIE: I don't see what Christmas has to do with it. I
hope you're not implying that's my present.

REX: Come on, Margie — it's the season to be merry. When
else are you gonna have a chance to ride in a Rolls-Royce?

BILLY: Whatever you two plan to do, ride or sit, I can't get
off duty till I wrap this little deal up.

REX: She'll ride in it, just give me a minute.

MARGIE: I'm not gonna take a ride.

REX: You're getting old, Margie.

MARGIE: You're a fine one to talk — Mr. Limp.

REX: Now you just shut up about that!

MARGIE: There is nothing in this world that's gonna get me into that car.

(Ann enters. She is a young woman, hesitant, perhaps shy.)

ANN: Excuse me. Isn't that Swami Kree's car outside? The license plate says BLUE 7 ... blue for the Kree.

REX: You a friend of his?

ANN: I came to join the ashram.

BILLY: *(getting up)* I'll phone and see if they can get somebody over here for the car.

(He goes to the phone and will call.)

STELLA: You want something to drink?

ANN: Then Swami Kree isn't here?

STELLA: No, honey. One of his cars broke down outside and Billy's trying to get a blue shirt to come for it now. If you hang around, maybe you can follow them back to the ranch.

ANN: I'll have a seven-up.

(Ann sits at a table. Rex joins her.)

REX: So you're gonna join the Kree ...

ANN: If they'll take me.

REX: Why wouldn't they take you?

ANN: To live on the ashram, I mean. It's pretty competitive. Especially now, when they're still building.

REX: So you have to get on the Swami's good side to live on the ranch or what?

ANN: You have to demonstrate your faith.

REX: How do you do that?

ANN: (*reluctantly*) Lots of ways.

REX: Hey, Swami hangs around here all the time. That's why his car's outside. You're among friends.

ANN: I wrote him a song. "The Ballad of the Swami."

(*Stella brings the seven-up to the table.*)

STELLA: That's fifty cents, honey.

(*Ann pays. Rex notices that she has an impressive bankroll of cash.*)

REX: I thought you might be a songwriter. I'm a songwriter myself. One can always spot another, you know?

ANN: It's the only song I've ever written. I'm not even sure I wrote it — I sort of found it in my head and put it down on paper.

REX: No kidding?

ANN: Is the ladies' room through there?

STELLA: That's why it says restrooms on the door.

ANN: Excuse me.

(She goes to the ladies room.)

REX: You catch her roll of bills?

STELLA: Sure did.

REX: A little weird to boot.

MARGIE: If she wants to join the Kree, why isn't she wearing blue?

STELLA: I think you have to be accepted first.

MARGIE: I haven't worn jeans since they took over the ranch.

STELLA: That's going a little too far, don't you think?

MARGIE: I don't want no tourists thinking I'm a Kree.

BILLY: *(returning from phone)* The Swami's still looking for his car. If he ain't here in an hour, they'll send a blue shirt over.

STELLA: He's coming here?

BILLY: They think he drove over to Madras. He'll see the car outside if he comes back this way.

REX: Maybe he'll buy the house a round. After all, we found his car. Right, Frank?

FRANK: Say what?

REX: We were out cruising, enjoying a little whiskey, when we ran into those kids joy-riding in his Rolls. We sent them home to Redmond where they belong. Hell, I'd be grateful as hell if I was the Swami. I'd give us a reward, is what I'd do.

FRANK: I don't think he's interested in giving us no reward.

REX: Why not? We returned the car and reported it to Billy first thing, just like the law says we should do. Right, Billy?

BILLY: I agree with Frank. You take a rich man, he's twice as stingy as you or me who ain't got shit.

REX: Hey, what's a little reward to the Swami? His followers are giving him money all the time. That girl has a bankroll on her that won't quit. Stella saw it.

STELLA: She's not poor.

REX: All you have to do, Billy, is say Frank and me reported the stolen car to you. Maybe you can add that in Juniper County a reward is usually appropriate under the circumstances.

MARGIE: What circumstances? That you're flat-ass broke because you've been on a three-day binge? And the house payment's due in a week. And you ain't working.

REX: Hey, did I close down the mill? Am I volunteering to go off benefits next month?

BILLY: I don't know, Rex.

REX: It'd be like the Swami giving us a Christmas present.

MARGIE: More like you getting one.

REX: Giving, getting, what's the difference? It's still Christmas.

(A pause.)

REX: Ain't it still Christmas?

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Four

(LIGHTS RISE on Swami Kree in the neutral area. He is wearing a blue robe and a blue cowboy hat. He clears his throat.)

SWAMI: *(to audience, with accent from India)* Excuse me. Speaking still feels strange to me. It's not easy to talk after a full year of silence. Not the least problem is — what to say?

How do you like my hat? It was a special gift for my birthday. To tell the truth, I prefer it to the four Rolls-Royces I received. If you've ridden in one Rolls, you've ridden in them all.

This is my first cowboy hat. Where we are building the new ashram, this was once a big ranch, full of horses and cattle and working cowboys. So naturally it is appropriate for me to wear a cowboy hat myself. When in Oregon, do as the Oregonians do.

I want to be a good neighbor. For the past year I had nothing to say, I didn't speak a single syllable to anyone. What a good neighbor I was then! Now it's more difficult. Speech is so complicated.

I realize there are many questions in your mind about me. Who am I to have attracted so many thousands of followers around the world? Why am I building my new ashram in Oregon? Why do I let my students buy me so many new Rolls-Royces? Why did I take a vow of silence for an entire year? Who do I like in the Super Bowl?

Perhaps some of these questions can be addressed in time. For now, I must rest my voice. I wanted to show you my new cowboy hat. It makes me feel very good, wearing it. I feel like an Oregonian. I feel like a good neighbor.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Five

(LIGHTS RISE in tavern. Ann returns from the ladies room and takes a table. Rex joins her.)

REX: Like I told you, I write songs myself.

ANN: I'm really not a songwriter. "The Ballad of the Swami" just happened.

REX: You must've been inspired.

ANN: What kind of songs do you write?

REX: *(on the spot)* Oh, you name it ... country songs, love songs ...

MARGIE: *(to trap him)* Why don't you sing us one?

REX: I don't think the lady is interested in no —

ANN: I'd love to hear one.

MARGIE: The lady would love to hear one.

REX: Course, I usually have my band behind me ...

ANN: You play guitar?

REX: Oh, sure.

MARGIE: You still have that old clunker upstairs, don't you, Stella? Maybe he'll play the guitar for us.

STELLA: Sure do. You want it, Rex?

REX: If I'm gonna sing, I'll sing acapeller.

MARGIE: I can't wait to hear one. You know, we've been married eight years and he's never sung to me once.

REX: Not without the band, she means.

ANN: Will you sing one of your songs?

REX: Sure. Let's see ...

(Stella comes over to serve the table and slips Rex the published poem by Fred Ross.)

BILLY: Hard to get inspired this early in the morning.

REX: Actually, I'm the songwriter, not the lead singer.

MARGIE: We'll make allowances.

(Rex looks at the poem.)

REX: This one here got published. *(He starts singing, making up a country tune as he goes, a sad, maudlin ballad.)*

There's an empty seat on the crummy,

Where used to sit Hooker Jack.

In a little bungalow in the suburbs,

There's a new widow dressed in black.

(He stops.) Hell, that's too sad for Christmas. I'd rather hear your song about the Swami.

ANN: I'd be embarrassed ...

REX: Hey, you're among friends. Really. The Swami has lunch here all the time. He loves Stella's chili.

ANN: I thought people around here resented the Kree.

REX: Who told you that?

ANN: That's the impression I got from the TV.

REX: You know how they exaggerate. Doesn't make a good story unless it's negative. We'd love to hear your song about the Swami. *(To the others)* Well, wouldn't we?

BILLY: I'm all ears.

STELLA: You don't have to sing unless you feel like it, honey.

REX: Frank'll even play piano. *(Looking around)* Where's the piano?

STELLA: I sold it last summer.

REX: I didn't know that. You know that, Frank?

FRANK: She sold it on June 17th.

STELLA: Are you still mad at me about that?

FRANK: I'm the only one ever played it.

REX: *(to Ann)* Guess you have to sing acapeller. Unless you want Stella's guitar.

ANN: No. Only place I've ever sung it is in the shower.

REX: Any time you're ready ...

ANN: It's just about how I feel about the Swami. I think I must've written it in a previous incarnation.

REX: Never wrote one like that myself.

ANN: Well ... *(closing her eyes, singing)*

Blue is the sky

Blue is the sea

Blue is the color

Of eternity

Deep blue the night

Pale blue the morn

Clothed in this hue
I'll be reborn

(Chorus:) Swami, please hear my plea
I know my path
Lies with the Kree
Swami, I'll give all I own
To live in your light
Never alone

(New verse:) You come from a land—

(Rex interrupts with applause.)

REX: That was great! Wasn't that great? He'll love it.

ANN: I hope so. I'm pretty nervous about singing it to him, actually.

REX: For a song like that, you should get a whole suite in that ashram.

ANN: I just want a room like anybody else.

BILLY: Sort of like a dormitory, is it?

ANN: It was in India. My sister lived in Swami's ashram in Bombay. I visited her just before she passed into her other life.

REX: Her other life?

ANN: Her incarnation in Bombay ended when she was hit by a car.

(A pause.)

MARGIE: How many people are fixing to live on that ashram out there?

ANN: Lots, eventually. Maybe five thousand.

STELLA: Five thousand! The population of Juniper ain't but fifteen hundred.

BILLY: If they all drank, you'd do a hell of a business.

ANN: Oh, the Kree can drink. It's not against Swami's teachings.

REX: Then how about a beer on me?

(Margie, disgusted with Rex's flirting, storms to the ladies room.)

ANN: When do you think Swami'll be here?

REX: You said in about an hour, didn't you, Billy?

BILLY: That or a blue shirt will come by to pick up the car.

REX: You got time for a beer then.

ANN: I prefer white wine.

REX: You got it. On my tab, Stella.

STELLA: (*"What tab?"*) Merry Christmas.

REX: I'm Rex.

ANN: I'm Ann. I don't have my Kree name yet.

REX: I noticed you all had funny names. Well, I don't mean funny. Just different.

ANN: When we embrace Swami's teachings, we get a new name and a new birthday. It's starting a whole new life, actually.

(Frank starts slowly toward the men's room.)

STELLA: How long was your sister in India?

ANN: Almost a year. She loved it there but I think she'd've liked it here better. It's exciting to be at the beginning of something. If they accept me ...

REX: I think the Swami will love your song.

FRANK: *(singing)*Swami!

How I love ya!

How I love ya!

My dear old Swami!

(He exits to men's room.)

REX: Great sense of humor.

ANN: Humor is very central in Swami's teachings.

BILLY: Twenty-six Rolls-Royces shows one hell of a sense of humor.

(Ann's mother, JOY, enters the tavern. She looks weary.)

JOY: Hello, Annie.

ANN: Oh, God ...

JOY: I'd like a beer, please.

STELLA: Henry's?

JOY: Fine.

(A pause.)

JOY: I saw your car outside.

ANN: Mother, there's nothing to talk about. I know what I'm doing.

JOY: We can still visit, can't we? When I looked at the calendar this morning, it said Christmas.

(A pause.)

JOY: Merry Christmas.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Six

(LIGHTS RISE on Swami and Ma in the back seat of the Rolls-Royce.)

MA: They must've lost us.

SWAMI: I'm not lost, Ma.

MA: Shall I tell Shrivaroma to turn back?

SWAMI: We're almost to Madras. I like that truck stop with the vegetarian omelet.

MA: *(to the "driver")* We're continuing to Madras, Shrivaroma! *(To Swami)* I should've called security as soon as I saw them.

SWAMI: No matter. Everything flushes through the toilet.

MA: Which reminds me: the plumbing in the main hall

should be operative next week.

SWAMI: And the printing presses?

MA: This has been the greatest challenge, getting water for the printing presses.

SWAMI: Dig wells.

MA: We are.

SWAMI: Where there's a well, there's a way. *(He chuckles.)*
I'll have to remember that for my lecture tonight.

(We hear SIRENS, a police car behind them. The cars stop and Billy walks up.)

BILLY: *(to imaginary driver)* Your license ...

(He sees who is in the back seat.)

BILLY: Well, looky here. A little early for joy riding, ain't it, Swami?

MA: It is never too early to be joyous.

BILLY: That may be so, ma'am, but the fact of the matter is, this here stretch of road is posted at fifty-five and I clocked you doing almost eighty. That means I'm gonna have to write your driver here up with a ticket. I know it's early and there ain't no more traffic than jobs in a lumber mill, but the law's the law.

MA: Give me the ticket.

(Swami puts on a blue nose plug.)

BILLY: Swami, I hope that there nose plug ain't supposed

to imply how you feel about an officer of the law doing his duty.

MA: Swami is very sensitive to scent. He has several allergies. Nothing personal, but it's your after-shave. Please write the ticket.

(Billy begins to do so.)

BILLY: He don't talk for himself?

MA: He's resting his voice.

BILLY: Maybe it's none of my business, ma'am, but when I found the Swami here stuck in a ditch last month, sitting in the back seat all by himself, and I asked him if he needed any help, it would only have been neighborly to reply.

MA: I don't know the incident you mean.

SWAMI: We did get stuck in a ditch, Ma. The others went for help.

BILLY: You remember me coming by?

SWAMI: Of course. But I was on a vow of silence at the time.

BILLY: You remember me banging on your window, trying to get your attention?

SWAMI: Of course.

BILLY: Waving my arms around?

SWAMI: Yes.

MA: A vow of silence is very strict.

BILLY: You made a face at me. You stuck out your tongue.

SWAMI: I wanted you to leave. It was embarrassing, the way you were carrying on.

MA: Officer, all this is beside the point. We were speeding because we were chasing a car thief. Someone stole one of

Swami's Rolls-Royces.

BILLY: Why didn't you speak up?

MA: It was taken about thirty minutes ago. The license number is BLUE-7.

BILLY: They probably headed for Portland, ma'am, but I'll see what I can do. Here's your ticket.

MA: Can I write you a check?

BILLY: You have to mail it to the courthouse. I'll do my best to find your car, Swami. Well, Merry Christmas.

(He leaves.)

MA: Still to Madras?

SWAMI: Of course. I want to wear my new cowboy hat into the truck stop.

MA: On to Madras, Shrivaroma! And watch your speed!

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Seven

(LIGHTS RISE in tavern. Frank has returned from the rest room.)

ANN: Can I use your ladies' room to change clothes?

STELLA: You can use it for anything your little heart desires, as long as you clean up after yourself.

(Ann starts for the exit.)

JOY: Annie?

ANN: There's nothing to talk about.

JOY: I'm not here to change your mind.

ANN: You tried to change Cindy's.

JOY: I thought we could spend some time together on Christmas.

ANN: Swami is coming here to pick up his car. I have to change clothes.

JOY: They're going to let you live on the ashram?

ANN: I don't know.

(She exits to fetch a suitcase from her car outside.)

JOY: You have another Henry's?

STELLA: Kegs and cases.

(Margie returns from the rest room.)

MARGIE: Your girlfriend leave?

REX: *(to Joy)* My wife has a great sense of humor. Margie, this is Ann's mother.

MARGIE: You joining the blue shirts, too?

JOY: No. Just came to say goodbye.

MARGIE: That bad, huh?

JOY: That bad.

STELLA: I can sympathize with you, lady. Must be tough.

JOY: I lost Cindy and now I lose Annie. There's nobody else to lose ...

FRANK: Maybe she'll be happy.

JOY: I think the word is ecstatic. You walk around grinning like an idiot all day. You've been saved!

FRANK: I had a cousin converted to a Catholic. Didn't change a hair on his head that I could tell.

JOY: This is different. They even give you a new name, a new birthday. My first daughter, Cindy, lived in an ashram in India run by this same Swami Kree. This guru. Swami Cretin. She died over there.

STELLA: I'm sorry.

JOY: You have your own problems. They'll control the town before they're through. They'll move in until they outnumber you. They'll take over city hall. They'll make it so you're glad to sell out and leave.

FRANK: Ain't much worth saving, with the mill closed down.

JOY: They'll buy the mill and manufacture small statuettes of the Swami, suitable for attaching to the dashboard of a Rolls-Royce.

(Ann enters with her suitcase and crosses to the rest room as the others silently watch.)

JOY: The Swami is really coming here?

REX: Within the hour. Right, Billy?

BILLY: Him or one of his blue shirts, to pick up the Rolls.

JOY: What's it doing out there?

REX: I stole it, ma'am.

JOY: You're kidding.

REX: Nope. I was a little under the influence.

JOY: You just went out there and drove off with it?

REX: We're gonna tell the Swami some kids took it. Maybe we'll get a reward out of the deal.

JOY: I love it.

REX: You ever been in a Rolls-Royce?

JOY: Never.

REX: Billy, I'm gonna take the lady for a spin around the block. If you want to ...

JOY: I'd love to.

BILLY: I don't know, Rex.

REX: I won't be but five minutes.

BILLY: I don't want to have to come looking for you.

MARGIE: Is this an open invitation?

REX: I didn't think you wanted a ride.

MARGIE: Well, I have changed my mind.

REX: Anybody else?

BILLY: Five minutes, I mean it.

REX: Word of honor, buddy.

(Rex, Joy and Margie exit. A pause.)

FRANK: I don't think I ever asked you. How much did you get for the piano?

STELLA: You ask me once a month, Frank. If I'd've known you liked it so much, I wouldn't have sold it. You should've spoke up.

FRANK: I hardly ever played it.

BILLY: I remember one night you got drunk and played

boogie woogie. I liked it.

STELLA: Frank, you should've spoke up.

FRANK: No big deal.

BILLY: You played nice piano that night. You remember, don't you, Stella?

STELLA: Frank, goddamn it!

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Eight

(LIGHTS RISE on Ann in the neutral area, now wearing her blue clothing.)

ANN: Blue is the color of life. Life came out of the ocean, which is blue. The air we breathe comes from the sky, which is blue. Blue attracts more good vibrations than any other color. Blue is the root color of existence.

You can't explain any of this to your mother. It's impossible.

Cindy tried. She's five years older than me and in another incarnation now. It was just an accident in India, getting hit by a car, but I lost my best friend.

I didn't know very much about the Kree when I went to India, I just wanted to visit with Cindy. But when I saw how happy she was and when Cindy started telling me about her life there, and what she believed in, I was really impressed. I wanted to meet Swami Kree myself but, of course, he's so sensitive to odor and everything else, I couldn't get past his guards. I still smelled like an American.

The song was an inspiration. I think I must have dreamed it, or maybe I wrote it in a previous incarnation, because the words and melody just came to me all at once and it was like being a medium for this spiritual essence that was outside me somehow. I wrote down the song in a single afternoon.

For months I kept the song to myself, singing it in the shower, when suddenly I realized that the song wasn't mine at all, it was his, and somehow I had been chosen to receive it and write it down and now I must find Swami Kree and sing it to him.

That was really scary to think about. It still is.

(LIGHTS RISE FULL in tavern.)

Scene Nine

(CONTINUOUS: Ann joins Stella, Frank and Billy in the tavern, coming from the rest room. Frank and Billy are into some serious drinking.)

STELLA: Well, don't you look nice.

ANN: Did my mother leave?

STELLA: Her, Rex and Margie went for a ride. She'll be right back. Another white wine?

ANN: I'd better switch to seven-up.

STELLA: I noticed you and your mother don't see eye-to-eye.

ANN: Which is totally ridiculous. There's supposed to be religious freedom in this country.

STELLA: I got the impression she wasn't really criticizing

your beliefs, just sort of, you know, missing you moving away from home.

ANN: People think we're brainwashed. It's so ridiculous. I have two years of college. I worked as a bookkeeper after that. I'm not some drugged-out weirdo or something.

(Stella serves her the seven-up.)

STELLA: Lot of misunderstanding in the world, I'll grant you that.

ANN: I think people are jealous because the Kree are so happy. People are so miserable with all their extra-marital affairs and divorces and careers and taxes and doctor bills, they go into a rage whenever they meet someone who is perfectly happy and content.

STELLA: Are you perfectly happy and content? You look a little nervous, to be honest.

ANN: I'm nervous about singing the song. What if Swami doesn't like it?

STELLA: You must want into that ashram pretty bad. Couldn't you rent an apartment and still go worship there?

ANN: It's the honor of living so close to him. His love is so powerful. They're building a new ashram from the ground up, and people will be coming from all over the world to live there. It's just incredible to think that I could be part of something like that.

STELLA: You must've left Portland pretty early in the morning to get here when you did.

ANN: We had a fight last night. I can't believe she followed me.

STELLA: I'm not choosing sides, understand, but I think your mother's more tolerant than you give her credit for. She just doesn't want to lose you.

ANN: She's not losing me. That's another stupid thing people are always bringing up, that the ashram is a prison or something. The Kree spend lots of time outside the ashram. There's tea to sell, books and bread to sell, lots of things.

STELLA: You need to raise money in any religion. I read where the Kree even opened a nightclub in Portland. That surprised me, to be honest.

ANN: We like to have a good time, just like anybody else.

STELLA: Nightclub seemed a little wild for a religious group.

ANN: It's just a place to have fun. We dance to the Kree rock band — the Blue Bliss.

STELLA: Why not? The Salvation Army does it.

ANN: We're not like the Salvation Army.

STELLA: Drumming up business with music, I mean.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Ten

(LIGHTS RISE on Frank in neutral area.)

FRANK: Nobody in my family was musical at all. Only music in the house was Hank Williams and such on the radio. But they had a piano in the little school I went to. That wasn't here in Juniper but out in the desert, past Fossil. It was one of them little school houses that teach all the grades in there together, and they had a piano. The teacher would play it when we sung hymns.

I learned about honky-tonk in the Army, in Korea, from a

fellow named B.J. He was a colored man and he played honky-tonk piano himself. Right away I liked that ol' music better than just about anything I'd ever heard before. B.J. kept teaching me little bits and pieces of it but, of course, pianos were hard to come by in Korea, about the only place to find one was in the NCO Club and it wasn't very often that it was empty enough for a beginner like myself to sit down and practice. B.J. taught me a couple of nice licks, though. Then he found himself on the wrong end of a commie mortar and that was the end of my honky-tonk lessons.

I used to play Stella's piano every once in a while when I was drinking but, to tell the truth, I never did remember too well how it turned out. But people seemed to like it. Then when the mill shut down, I figured I might start practicing regular and surprise myself. There was nothing else to do. Flirting with Stella, that's about it. Then I got the idea she was taking me more serious than I intended and even flirting stopped being fun.

So, I told myself, why not take up the piano again? I was just about to get off my butt, too. Then Stella went and sold it out from under me. It was June 17th.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Eleven

(LIGHTS RISE on the Rolls-Royce. Rex is driving, the two women in the back seat.)

MARGIE: Don't you go getting us no speeding ticket we

can't afford.

REX: Who's going to stop us? Billy's getting himself into some serious drinking. Damn, would I love to own one of these. Rides as smooth as silk, don't she?

(A pause.)

MARGIE: You live around here?

JOY: Portland.

MARGIE: Too bad about your daughter joining them blue shirts. I don't see why anybody would do that, personally. They say he has twenty-six of these cars. How can you feel religious about somebody with so many expensive cars?

REX: I feel like I'm in heaven!

JOY: It's called brainwashing.

MARGIE: You think they hypnotized your daughter or something?

JOY: It's more subtle than that. Some very talented con-men take advantage of young people who are searching for answers.

MARGIE: *(sincerely)* Answers to what?

(A pause.)

REX: What do you do in Portland?

JOY: I teach.

MARGIE: I got a cousin who teaches kindergarten.

JOY: I teach at the University.

REX: A professor?

JOY: Yes.

REX: Your daughter must have a pretty good job herself. When she bought her seven-up, she flashed a bankroll that wouldn't quit.

JOY: She just received an inheritance from my late husband. I take it she plans to give it all to Swami Cretin.

REX: She's pretty interested in him, alright. Even wrote a song about him.

JOY: A song?

REX: About how much she needs him and all.

JOY: The Kree practice a sophisticated form of brainwashing, I swear they do. What I should have done with Cindy is hire a deprogrammer before she left the country. Maybe that's what I should do with Annie.

REX: She ain't a kid.

JOY: Her mind is somewhere in the sixth grade.

MARGIE: I saw something on TV about how they do that. I think if I was in your shoes, I'd've done it.

(A pause.)

REX: Want me to kidnap your daughter for you?

MARGIE: Rex!

REX: Me and Frank could do it easy. We'd drive her back to Portland and you could hire yourself a deprogrammer.

MARGIE: Don't listen to him, he gets crazy ideas all the time.

REX: Be easy to do.

MARGIE: He's just bored from not working.

REX: What do you say?

JOY: What would you charge?

MARGIE: Rex! Criminy!

REX: To be honest, I'm not sure what the going rates are. I'd trust you to be fair.

JOY: All I'd ask you to do is drive her to Portland. I could handle it from there. Two hundred dollars?

REX: Sounds fair to me. Do we have a deal?

MARGIE: You two are talking about a crime here.

JOY: You said it's what you would've done.

MARGIE: But when Rex gets involved, nothing turns out right.

REX: Thanks a hell of a lot for the vote of confidence.

MARGIE: You'll wind up behind bars and then where will you be?

REX: In jail, Margie! Hang on, I'm gonna see how fast this ol' Rolls will go ...

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Twelve

(LIGHTS RISE on the tavern. Billy heads for the men's room.)

BILLY: I was afraid this would happen. Rex is dangerous when he's not working.

STELLA: He'll be back.

(When Billy is gone, Ma enters.)

MA: Pardon me. Do you have a phone I can use?

STELLA: Right through there.

MA: Thank you.

(She goes to the phone and will make a call.)

ANN: That's Ma Prama Rama Kree! She's the Swami's personal secretary.

STELLA: I've seen her on television.

ANN: But the car isn't here. She must've come for the car.

(Swami enters. He wears his cowboy hat and nose plug. He surveys the tavern, saying nothing. Finally he chooses a table and sits down.)

(Frank enters from the men's room. He passes Ma on the phone. When he spots Swami, he stops. He then heads straight for the exit and is out of there.)

(Ma returns and goes to Swami.)

MA: They found the car. It's at the Juniper Tavern.

STELLA: This is the place. We got a man out road-testing it right now.

MA: What happened to the car?

STELLA: Nothing Rex can't fix. He'll have it in better shape than when you lost it. Can I get you folks anything while you're waiting?

MA: Do you have herb tea?

STELLA: No, but I think I've got some Lipton around here somewhere. Used to be a mill worker who drank tea. What the hell was his name? Must've been three or four years ago.

MA: I'll have a glass of water.

STELLA: And you ... sir?

MA: Swami will have water as well.

(Billy enters from the men's room and goes to Swami.)

BILLY: Found your car.

MA: We know.

BILLY: Should be back any minute.

(No reply. Billy hesitates, then heads for the exit.)

STELLA: You leaving?

BILLY: Think I better see what Rex is up to before I put on my Santa suit.

(He exits. Ma takes out her knitting, something blue. Ann makes a slow approach to Swami.)

MA: Yes?

ANN: I believe.

MA: You wear blue. But no medallion.

ANN: I haven't been accepted yet. But I want to belong. I really do.

MA: And you want to live on the new ashram.

ANN: Oh, I do very much!

MA: You and thousands of our followers around the world.

(Disappointed, Ann turns to go.)

SWAMI: Please sit down. Please ...

(Ann sits.)

SWAMI: What is it you want to tell me? I can feel the energy of your question but I don't know what it is.

ANN: I wrote a song. Or maybe it was just given to me. It's about the Kree, about you.

SWAMI: Then sing it.

(Ann closes her eyes and begins to sing.)

ANN: *(singing)* You came from a land
So far away
To teach us the Truth
And show us the Way

You've always possessed
What we hope to find
The secrets of life
True peace of mine

(Chorus) Swami, please hear my plea

I know my path
Lies with the Kree
Swami, I'll give all I own
To live in your light
Never alone

(Joy has entered and approaches the table.)

JOY: *(to Swami, interrupting)* We met briefly in Bombay.

(Ann stops singing.)

JOY: I said, we've met before. My daughter was in your ashram in Bombay. Her name was Cindy. She got hit by a car over there. She died. I'd come over to get her body but she was cremated before I arrived. Her ashes were thrown in the river. I made an appointment to see you but could never pass your odor test. Apparently I stunk, no matter how many showers I took. Finally I saw you walking across the ashram grounds. I ran up to you and our eyes met before your guards pulled me away. Do you remember that? I'm sure we made eye contact.

(A pause. Swami doesn't reply. The moment is tense. No one moves.)

JOY: I'M TALKING TO YOU!

(BLACKOUT. End of Act One.)

ACT TWO

Scene One

(LIGHTS RISE on Rex in the neutral area.)

REX: The bottom line is, You gotta eat. I don't know what Margie expects me to do. You won't find a harder working sumbitch than yours truly but I can't open up the mill if the company don't want it open. If the mill ain't open, I can't haul logs. It's that simple.

There was a time when I'd've hit the road by now. But, damn it, I love this part of the country. I love Central Oregon. I love Juniper, the home I'm buying, my neighbors, the kind of life we share. I wake up in the morning, look out my kitchen window, and see nothing but snow-capped mountains. A rich man can't see anything prettier.

But you gotta eat, is what I was saying. And if there ain't work in the woods, that means you gotta find something else. You gotta use your imagination.

Like winning Luke's goat at poker. Hell, he didn't have the cash to match my raise and that means I could've raked in the pot right then. But he said, Can I put up my goat? Everybody thought that was funnier'n hell but I started thinking, Well, why not? I read in the paper that them blue shirts are health nuts, so maybe I could sell them a little goat's milk on the side. Course, this was too good an idea to share with the rest, so I joked about needing a new lawn mower anyway and let Luke put up his goat — which I won.

Then Margie wouldn't have a damn thing to do with that goat anyway, so I just gave it back to Luke. The point is, I was thinking, I was using my imagination, always looking for a way to make a buck on the side.

This is why I thought maybe the Swami would give us a reward for his car. This is why I offered to kidnap that lady's daughter. The jobs that come down the pike may not be the jobs you're used to having. You gotta be flexible. Because there's no way on God's green earth you're ever gonna change the bottom line — you gotta eat. You don't eat, you deal yourself right out of the ball game.

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Two

(LIGHTS RISE in the tavern. It's the moment immediately after the end of Act One.)

JOY: I said, I'm talking to you. I know what you're about. I know what's going on in that ashram of yours. And you know I know.

(No reply. Ma knits. Ann sits frozen. Swami sits benevolently. A pause. Joy turns and goes to the bar. Frank, Rex and Margie enter.)

ANN: I'm sorry.

SWAMI: Don't worry. Everything will be fine.

ANN: She doesn't understand anything.

SWAMI: She's not alone.

REX: Excuse me, Swami. I'm happy to report that I found your Rolls-Royce.

MA: He and the other are the ones who stole it. I'm sure of

it.

REX: No, ma'am, that's not true.

MA: I was working upstairs and saw you in the parking lot.

REX: Well, you must not've been there an hour earlier or you would've seen those kids from Redmond tampering with the engine. Christ, when me and Frank saw them doing that, I didn't know what to expect. I thought maybe they were rigging it with a bomb or something. The more I considered that possibility, the more pissed off I got. Pardon my language, ma'am, but I was damn mad. We like to be good neighbors here in Juniper, and the last thing we need is some punks from Redmond coming up here to assassinate the Swami. I mean, that's what went through my mind. So that's why I took the car, to give it a road test and make sure it was safe to drive. They could've pulled a pin somewhere, any damn thing. I wanted to make sure it was safe for the Swami to drive. That's the truth, ma'am. I'm a Christian like yourself.

MA: I'm not a Christian, I'm a Kree.

REX: Well, I'm sure neither religion permits lying.

SWAMI: Thank you for road testing the car.

REX: We just try to be good neighbors.

(A pause. Rex is waiting for his reward.)

REX: Well, Merry Christmas to you.

(A pause. Rex finally moves to the bar.)

MA: Shall we go?

SWAMI: Not yet, Ma. *(To Ann)* You really wrote that song yourself?

ANN: It just came to me.

SWAMI: I think it's beautiful.

ANN: You do?

SWAMI: Very much so. What's your name?

(Joy, unable to take any more, exits into the ladies' room. Rex follows, waiting for her near the door.)

SWAMI: Don't worry. What's your name?

ANN: Ann. My sister Cindy was in your ashram in Bombay.

SWAMI: I remember Cindy very well. She told me about you. I'm sorry we didn't have a chance to meet in Bombay.

ANN: I heard you speak several times. I was so impressed.

SWAMI: And now you want to live on the ashram, don't you?

ANN: Very much!

SWAMI: Why?

ANN: To seek the truth.

SWAMI: You think you have to come to the ashram to seek truth?

ANN: I have so much to learn. Please teach me.

SWAMI: I have only one message: the truth is inside you.

ANN: I want to meditate with you. I want to belong to the Kree.

SWAMI: I am not the truth. You are the truth.

ANN: Yes, I want to learn that.

SWAMI: Then look inside yourself!

ANN: I want to learn everything you have to teach me. I'd do anything to live on the ashram.

SWAMI: I must meditate on this, Ma.

(Ma reaches into her blue knitting bag and brings out a roll of blue toilet paper, which she hands to Swami. Swami carries it to the men's room.)

(Joy exits the ladies' room, meeting Rex.)

REX: You still want your daughter kidnapped to Portland?

JOY: I'm not sure ...

REX: With him in the bathroom, it may be now or never. Frank and I can do it. It's up to you.

JOY: Oh Christ ...

REX: She's your daughter.

JOY: If you think you can ...

REX: Wait here for Swami and keep him occupied.

(Rex returns to the tavern proper.)

REX: *(To Ma)* Want me to drive the other Rolls back to your ashram, ma'am? I could give Ann a lift.

MA: Our driver is outside, and Swami can drive the other one himself.

REX: Just trying to be neighborly.

(A pause.)

REX: *(To Ann)* That's not your VW bug outside, is it?

ANN: Yes. Why?

REX: I told you it was hers, Frank. You got a flat and it's locked. I was going to change it for you but couldn't get the spare.

ANN: I'm sure it's not locked.

REX: I tried both doors.

ANN: I don't understand.

(Ann heads for the door. Rex follows, gesturing to Frank to come along.)

REX: I'll be glad to change it for you. Won't we, Frank?

MARGIE: Rex ...

REX: She has a flat, for Christ's sake.

(Ann exits with Rex hustling Frank out behind her.)

MARGIE: Rex!

(Joy, impatient, now comes back into the tavern.)

MARGIE: *(To Joy)* They're going through with that crazy plan, aren't they?

JOY: I don't know what you're talking about.

(Margie exits to see what is going on.)

STELLA: *(To Ma)* Why's he wear a nose plug?

JOY: He thinks we stink.

(Margie returns.)

MARGIE: They're going through with it! They're kidnapping her back to Portland!

(Joy exits.)

MARGIE: Stella, they're kidnapping that girl.

STELLA: Come on, Margie. Frank and Rex ain't kidnappers.

MARGIE: They're going to take her to a deprogrammer.

MA: And they accuse us of brainwashing ...

STELLA: If they ain't back in thirty minutes, I'll phone Billy myself.

(Swami returns from the men's room. Before he arrives, Stella fetches a clothespin from behind the bar and puts it on her nose. She faces Swami, one nose plug against the other.)

SWAMI: I like your sense of humor!

STELLA: Nothing personal, understand, but I'm allergic to the smell of curry powder.

(Swami removes his nose plug.)

SWAMI: Of course I understand!

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Three

(LIGHTS RISE on Rex, Frank and Ann in the pickup. Rex drives, Ann is wedged between the men.)

REX: She ain't behind us, Frank. She should be right behind us.

ANN: My mother drinks too much. She'll stay in there till they kick her out.

REX: I don't know why she ain't behind us. What do you think, Frank?

FRANK: She ain't behind us?

REX: I don't see her.

FRANK: Then maybe she ain't coming. This is a crazy idea anyway.

REX: She's got to come. How do we know where to go in Portland?

ANN: Is that where we're going? I'll just leave and come right back. This is all so stupid.

REX: Maybe I'd better pull into the station and call the tavern. What do you think?

FRANK: No point in going to Portland if we don't know where to go.

REX: I'll call the tavern.

ANN: She's paying you to do this, isn't she?

(The truck stops. Rex gets out.)

REX: Keep an eye on her, good buddy.

(He exits.)

ANN: They can put you in jail for doing this. She's not going to help you. You'll be left holding the bag alone. She's going to stay at the tavern and drink herself into a stupor.

(A pause.)

ANN: I have to go to the bathroom.

FRANK: Better wait till Rex gets back.

ANN: I have to go now. Want me to wet my pants?

FRANK: It dries out.

ANN: I don't believe you guys. She must be paying you pretty good. She's going to hire a deprogrammer, isn't she? It won't work. I know what I'm doing. I know what I believe in!

(A pause.)

ANN: How much is she paying you?

(A pause.)

ANN: I'll pay what she did, plus a hundred dollars — if you drive me to the ashram.

FRANK: This is Rex's deal. You have to talk to him.

ANN: What do you do, go along with everything he says?

FRANK: Rex is my guru, you might say.

(A pause. Ann makes a move to scoot out Rex's side but Frank grabs her.)

ANN: You're hurting me!

FRANK: You gonna behave?

ANN: Yes.

FRANK: I don't like this any more than you do. Just go along with it.

(He lets go.)

ANN: This is so stupid. No one can deprogram me.

FRANK: Look, I'm just looking out for Rex. If it was me, I'd move you out to the ashram myself. For nothing.

ANN: They can still put you in jail. You're a co-conspirator.

(Joy enters, standing beside the truck.)

JOY: Hello, Annie.

ANN: Mother, this won't work! You're just getting yourself in trouble!

JOY: *(To Frank)* I want to be alone with her for a minute.

FRANK: I'll tell Rex you're here.

JOY: Tell him we're not going through with it.

(Frank nods and exits. Joy gets into the pickup beside Ann. A pause.)

JOY: Can we talk?

ANN: There's nothing to say.

JOY: I realize that. You're a very strong-minded young woman. So was Cindy. I don't think a deprogrammer would've had luck with either of you.

ANN: Thank you.

JOY: You both take after your mother.

ANN: If we have anything at all in common, you know you can't change my mind.

JOY: Is Swami Cretin that important to you?

ANN: His name is Swami Kree!

JOY: What happened to you in India?

ANN: I become enlightened.

JOY: I hardly recognized you when you got back.

ANN: Mother, there's no point in this ...

JOY: India's so pathetic. How can anyone find enlightenment in a country with so many problems?

ANN: I think India's beautiful.

JOY: Beautiful! With the streets packed with beggars? You did see the maimed children begging in the streets, didn't you?

ANN: I saw people in their karma.

JOY: In their karma ...

ANN: I saw Being.

JOY: Then perhaps we don't have anything to talk about.

ANN: I'm sure we don't. Goodbye, mother.

JOY: Annie!

ANN: *(leaving)* You can't change my mind!

JOY: *(after her)* When you change it yourself ... you always have a home ...

(Ann is gone. Joy exits.)

(Rex and Frank return and get into the pickup. Rex fetches a bottle from under the seat, which they'll share.)

REX: No guts. No imagination.

FRANK: Lady has a right to change her mind.

REX: Two hundred dollars! For a round-trip to Portland ...

FRANK: I don't think a deprogrammer would've had much luck. This probably saves everyone a lot of trouble.

REX: Shit, Frank, I sure miss driving my truck, I'll tell you that.

FRANK: I hear you.

REX: I don't know if logging will ever be the same. Maybe Fred Ross had the right idea — chuck the whole deal and start over.

FRANK: Hard to say.

REX: Sometimes I get so damn frustrated. I'm a working man, for Christ's sake. If I'm not working, I go crazy. I drink too damn much.

(They drink.)

REX: I'm not big on patience, you know?

FRANK: I hear you. Neither was your dad.

REX: I guess not.

FRANK: In the old days, when your dad and I got laid off, the town wasn't safe. I was a little crazy then myself.

REX: You still do pretty good.

FRANK: You should've seen me in the old days.

REX: Dad raise more hell than I do?

FRANK: I'd call it even. Like father, like son.

REX: Shit ...

FRANK: You want to head back?

REX: I want to scream.

FRANK: So scream.

(A pause.)

REX: Shit, Frank. Where's it all end?

FRANK: Your guess is as good as mine.

REX: Goddamn it to hell anyway!

FRANK: I hear you, buddy. Hear you loud and clear.

(They drink. BLACKOUT.)

Scene Four

(LIGHTS RISE on Joy in the neutral area.)

JOY: When Annie told me she was going to visit Cindy in India, I thought, Yes, maybe Annie can talk sense to her in

a way that I can't. Cindy was her father's daughter but Annie was more like me — more deliberate and practical in her view of the world. If anyone could talk sense to Cindy, it would be Annie.

Needless to say, I was wrong. The power those people have over young minds! When Annie returned, I saw in an instant that something had happened to her over there. She had this look in her eye, a look divorced from intelligence and self-awareness. She looked like a blissful zombie. She couldn't be talked to, a conversation was quite beyond her power. All she could speak were platitudes about Swami Cretin.

Then Cindy was hit by a car. I went to India immediately.

India was a nightmare. The heat and humidity were insufferable, the streets of Bombay were filthy and the air stank with smoke from the crematorium. It was like going to another planet. Everywhere you turned there were beggars, old men and women and even children, some of them maimed, all of them pathetic and filthy, pleading for handouts with shrill cries of "Ma, Ma!"

The weeks and months after returning were the worst in my life. I was drinking too much, my teaching suffered. And then Swami Cretin came to Oregon. Well, there's karma for you.

I knew we'd have our confrontation. I didn't know when or how, but I knew it was going to happen.

(LIGHTS RISE full on tavern, as Swami approaches Joy. Ma is knitting. Stella is behind the bar. Margie sits.)

SWAMI: At last we can talk.

JOY: I've tried talking to you.

SWAMI: There is a time for silence. And a time for language.

JOY: There's a time for exposing what you're really about.

SWAMI: I know how you feel. I used to feel that way myself.

JOY: You know nothing about how I feel.

SWAMI: I was not always a guru. I used to teach at University, like you do.

JOY: How do you know that?

SWAMI: Cindy told me. She was very fond of you. She wanted you to understand her.

JOY: What I understand is that you brainwashed her.

SWAMI: You think I did that?

JOY: It's not an opinion. It's a fact.

SWAMI: When I taught at University, I also looked at the gurus in my country as fakes, as tricksters out to prey on the gullible lost souls who are everywhere. I was a blind skeptic like yourself. But then a marvelous thing happened. I woke up one morning with eyesight! I quit University the same day.

JOY: I know what you're about, Swami Cretin.

SWAMI: You feel so much anger.

JOY: Of course I'm angry! I lost both my daughters to your lies.

SWAMI: You think you feel anger because your daughters are gone. But no one is gone. The form of life changes only. The reality is immortal.

JOY: Your mystical mumbo-jumbo won't work with me. Cindy is dead.

SWAMI: Cindy's karma took her on many journeys, as it continues to do now and in the future, and in one of those journeys you were blessed to play the role of her mother. You should celebrate your good fortune, not grieve for what was inevitable.

JOY: Don't mock my grief! Cindy would be alive today except for you.

SWAMI: You don't feel grief for Cindy.

JOY: Cindy is dead! Of course I feel grief.

SWAMI: The grief you feel is for yourself. And why should you grieve for yourself? Because you didn't love your daughter fully when it was possible to. If you'd loved her fully, unconditionally, during the accident of your role as mother, then all your energies would have been dissipated in that great total love.

JOY: You know nothing about love. You don't even respect human life.

MA: They don't understand, Swami. Let's return to the ashram.

SWAMI: Not yet, Ma.

JOY: The only thing I regret is not stopping you from brainwashing anyone else.

SWAMI: I've been thinking about our meeting. First Cindy comes to India and then I meet you and Ann here. This is significant.

JOY: I'm going to expose your mystical mumbo-jumbo for the crap it really is. There is no karma. There is no spiritual journey. There is life — right here and now. Breath! Heart beat! When it ends, we are dead. We are gone from the earth forever. Period.

SWAMI: You have such a small mind. You think in a prison.

JOY: It's impossible to talk to you, isn't it? You think you have a monopoly on the truth.

SWAMI: The truth is not in me. The truth is in you.

JOY: Then why do you have so many disciples kissing your feet?

SWAMI: I have nothing to do with this. For the past

month, I've been telling my followers the truth every day. I say, "You are going in the wrong direction when you come to me. Go inward, into yourself. Go home!" I tell them this, and they all nod. But no one goes home! It usually takes many months for them to understand the truth. Then they leave and tell people that I am a fraud. At last, they aren't using me for a crutch! They've made a beginning! This makes me very happy.

JOY: You stand there and expect me to believe you want your followers to go home? You are so goddamn clever ...

SWAMI: I tell them they can stay on the ashram for as long as they like. But this is a vacation on the spiritual journey.

JOY: I'll agree with you on one thing. I knew we were going to meet again. And when we did, I was going to silence you once and for all.

SWAMI: I just ended a vow of silence.

JOY: You goddamn charlatan. As long as you didn't talk, no one could show you up.

SWAMI: There is a time for silence. And a time for language.

JOY: You talk in circles.

SWAMI: See? The truth *is* in you!

JOY: You know why I wanted to see you again? To shoot you. I have a gun in my purse.

SWAMI: Then use it.

JOY: You think I won't?

SWAMI: It's irrelevant whether you do or not.

STELLA: I don't allow threats like that in my tavern, lady. Now sit down and behave yourself.

(Joy sits. Billy enters, dressed as Santa Claus but not wearing his beard.)

BILLY: If you promise not to tell anyone, Santa can use a drink. Where's Rex? I see he brought the car back.

STELLA: I'm not sure what's going on.

(Ma gathers her things to leave.)

SWAMI: Sit down, Ma.

MA: They understand nothing.

SWAMI: But now I understand ...

(Swami approaches Joy again.)

JOY: Don't you know when to leave well enough alone?

SWAMI: Another thing they don't understand at the ashram is that I'm not their guru. It's not for the student to pick the teacher. How can the student know what he needs? The guru chooses the disciple and not vice-versa. This is always the way.

JOY: Don't press your luck ...

SWAMI: Yet gurus do not consciously choose their students either. Events reveal their students to them. This is my revelation just now. This is why Cindy came to India and talked so much about you. This is why Ann came here today, so that you would follow her. Everything is happening according to its karma. Everything has been arranged for this moment of revelation.

(A pause.)

SWAMI: I am *your* guru!

JOY: You! ... are not! ... my guru!

SWAMI: I don't like it any better than you do. But I'm your guru.

JOY: You are no one's guru! You, Swami Cretin, are a fake, and if I'm the only one in this room who knows it, at least there is someone — me! — who isn't being brainwashed.

SWAMI: It's incredible, Ma. I'm this lady's guru! But why me? Life is such a joke!

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Five

(LIGHTS RISE on Margie in neutral area.)

MARGIE: All of a sudden everybody's worried about the meaning of life. I don't understand it. You're supposed to live life, not try to figure it out.

Course, I believe the way I was brought up to believe, same as my parents.

The meaning of life? I'll tell you a little meaning of life ...

Rex comes in this morning at five, smelling like a brewery and full of romance. My first impulse was to kick him out of the house. But Rex has my number, I'll hand that to him, he sure knows how to sweet-talk ol' Margie.

So his sweet-talking finally gets me interested and then the son-of-a-bitch is too damn drunk to get it up!

Now there's some goddamn meaning of life!

(BLACKOUT.)

Scene Six

(LIGHTS RISE in the tavern. We hear the closing chorus of "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" on the jukebox.)

(Joy goes to the ladies' room. Swami sits cross-legged on the floor, meditating. Ma is knitting. Stella is behind the bar. Billy and Margie sit at the bar.)

(The song ends.)

BILLY: Guy who wrote that is a millionaire.

(Ann, Rex and Frank enter.)

ANN: Is my mother here?

STELLA: She's in the can.

REX: *(about Swami)* What's he doing?

STELLA: I think he's meditating.

REX: What for?

STELLA: Mill workers drink beer, swamis meditate. It's the nature of things.

MARGIE: Have a nice time in Portland?

REX: I'm in no mood for wisecracks, Margie.

ANN: Is there a motel around here?

STELLA: Down the highway about two miles.

ANN: Do you think they have a vacancy?

STELLA: They haven't been full up in years.

(Rex approaches Swami, stares at him, then takes the Swami's blue cowboy hat and puts it on his head, trading his baseball cap for it. He goes back to the bar.)

ANN: Why did you do that?

REX: Just being neighborly. I don't take just anybody's hat.

BILLY: No trouble, Rex.

REX: I don't know, Sheriff Billy — I've never been arrested by Santa Claus before.

(Frank goes to Rex and removes the cowboy hat.)

REX: What do you think you're doing?

(A stand off: then Frank removes his baseball cap and puts it on Rex. A tense pause.)

REX: *(laughing)* Get asshole here a beer on me.

(Frank goes to Swami and puts the cowboy hat back on him. He puts on Rex's baseball cap.)

(Joy returns from the rest room.)

JOY: I wasn't sure you were coming back.

ANN: Just long enough to find a motel. Goodbye, mother.

tonight. Shall I make reservations?

(No reply.)

SWAMI: No reservations? Good! There are enough fools listening to me already. The truth is not in me. The truth is in you.

JOY: If the truth's in me, Swami Cretin, I'm here to tell everyone you're a fake!

SWAMI: *(ignoring this)* Ann, you can ride with me to the ashram if you like.

ANN: I have my car. I'll follow you.

SWAMI: Good people, Merry Christmas to all!

(Swami, Ma and Ann exit. Joy follows quickly behind. At the doorway, she takes a gun from her purse and fires once, outside. A scream from Ma.)

STELLA: *(hurrying to Joy)* Why don't you give me the gun, honey? I'll give you a nice cold beer on the house.

BILLY: You just sit down and relax, lady. Stella, get her that beer.

(Swami, Ma and Ann return. Swami is wounded in the arm.)

MA: Swami, please ...

SWAMI: Relax, Ma. This has to be done.

MA: We have to get you to a hospital.

SWAMI: JOY!? Where did you get such a ridiculous name?

When you join the Kree, I am going to name you Smoldering Volcano.

BILLY: No trouble, Swami.

SWAMI: You're shooting in the wrong direction. The anger you feel is really for yourself.

BILLY: You'd better get that looked at.

REX: I can drive him to the hospital in the Rolls.

BILLY: Better do it.

SWAMI: Maybe "Merry Christmas" was the wrong thing to say, Ma. I need a new exit line.

(They start out.)

SWAMI: "Have a good day."

"See you around."

"Regards to the family."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

(Swami, Ma and Rex are gone.)

ANN: I don't believe this, mother. *(To Billy)* What are you going to do with her?

BILLY: Gonna have to book her.

ANN: I just can't believe you did that.

(Ann is comforted by Margie and both exit.)

BILLY: We're gonna have to go into town, ma'am.

JOY: Can I have another beer?

BILLY: I have a Christmas show to do.

JOY: Very well.

(Billy starts off with Joy.)

STELLA: You take care of yourself, Joy. Do a good Christmas show, Billy.

BILLY: I'll be back later.

(Billy and Joy exit.)

STELLA: I need a drink.

FRANK: I can't believe she did that.

STELLA: He didn't help, egging her on like he did.

FRANK: Don't defend what she done, Stella. She could've killed him.

STELLA: When he started yelling like a lunatic, I thought of shooting him myself.

FRANK: Thinking and doing are two different things.

STELLA: He was asking for trouble.

FRANK: I think I know why he started yelling.

STELLA: I knew from the beginning — it was a stunt to get us to one of his talks.

FRANK: No, I think he has a point.

STELLA: What point is that?

FRANK: "Ahhhhh!" I've felt the same way myself more than once.

STELLA: So what the hell's "ahhhh!" supposed to mean?

FRANK: It means you've got something to say but just don't know how to say it, so you say "ahhhh!" instead.

STELLA: Go play some music.

(Frank goes to the jukebox. Christmas music will play.)

STELLA: I can still sympathize with what that lady done. I'm not saying she should've shot him but, hell, there's something about that man that mixes you all up. People are so lost any more, they believe anything just for the security of it. What kind of answer is "ahhhh!"? God help us if we end up with five thousand people out on the ranch, all screaming "ahhhh!"

FRANK: You get this place full of loggers and what do you hear? Nothing but hollering. "Yahoo!" "Yehee!" "Timber!" Same difference.

STELLA: Well, if you're looking for a blue shirt, Frank, the big sales start tomorrow.

FRANK: I'm not joining up with anybody.

STELLA: And here I thought you had an ulterior motive, waking me up so early this morning.

FRANK: What motive is that?

STELLA: Think about it, Frank.

(A pause.)

STELLA: Frank, are you going to ask me to marry you or not?

FRANK: I don't know what to tell you.

STELLA: I just want to know where I stand.

FRANK: I can understand that, Stella, and I did give it

some thought.

STELLA: And you decided, "ahhhh!"

FRANK: I'm too fixed in my ways. I got more bad habits than you can shake a stick at. I wake up in the morning coughing so bad I'm not fit to be near.

STELLA: I've woken up with you in the morning, Frank.

FRANK: Now and again ain't bad but regular I'd drive you crazy. You know how much I care for you, Stella, but I'm already upstairs more often than I've got a right to be.

STELLA: That's my decision, not yours.

FRANK: I'm too set in my ways. I'm a lone wolf and a born bachelor.

STELLA: Well, you finally said it! What the hell took you so long?

(She fetches Frank's Christmas present.)

STELLA: Merry Christmas, Frank. Well, open it.

FRANK: Sometimes it's hard to keep up with you ...

(He opens the present. It's a book, and he reads the title.)

FRANK: "The Confirmed Bachelor's Book of Drinkery, Cookery, and Housekeepery."

STELLA: I know you too goddamn well, Frank. It's Margie that keeps wanting us to get hitched. I like our arrangement just fine.

(Frank fetches Stella's gift.)

FRANK: Merry Christmas, Stella.

STELLA: You oughtn't've done that, being out of work.

(She opens it. A blue see-through nightie.)

STELLA: Oh my word!

FRANK: Try it on.

STELLA: Later, Frank. Come with me ...

(She leads him behind the bar.)

FRANK: You need a keg changed?

STELLA: Just go in.

(Frank enters a door behind the bar. Then we hear a chord on a piano. Stella is delighted. Frank returns.)

FRANK: Always did play better when I was drunk.

STELLA: You ought to practice sober once in a while.

FRANK: I hope you didn't pay more than you sold it for.

STELLA: I want to see you in here practicing every day.

(A pause.)

STELLA: You like it, don't you?

FRANK: Of course I do. I just don't know what to say.

STELLA: I thought that meant you were supposed to say "ahhhh!"

FRANK: Listen ... you want to dance or something?

STELLA: I'd love to dance.

(LIGHTS FADE TO HALF and RISE on Billy in the neutral area, dressed as Santa Claus.)

BILLY: And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

(Focus changes.)

FRANK: Ahhhhhhhh!

STELLA: Maybe you should start your own cult and give the Swami a little competition.

FRANK: I'm a lone wolf. I belong in the woods with the rest of the wild animals.

(Focus changes.)

BILLY: And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

(Focus changes.)

FRANK: But we've already logged the woods out of wild animals and practically out of trees. Who the hell knows where it's gonna end?

STELLA: Sshh — it's Christmas.

(Focus changes.)

BILLY: And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known to us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

(LIGHTS OFF neutral area, FULL in tavern.)

FRANK: Fred Ross hit it right on the money:

I'm in from the cold where the vine maples grow

And the dogwoods bloom in the spring.

I've been in the woods for thirty years

And I haven't accomplished a thing.

(Billy enters, still in part of his Santa costume. Frank and

Stella stop dancing.)

STELLA: How'd the Christmas show go, Billy?

BILLY: Terrible. I kept thinking about that Swami. What the hell makes a guy like that tick?

STELLA: Ask Frank. He's the convert.

FRANK: I'm a lone wolf.

BILLY: Listening to him got me all mixed up. When he started yelling, I felt like yelling back at him.

FRANK: Like this? Ahhhhhh!

BILLY: Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!

FRANK & BILLY: AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

STELLA: Frank? Billy?

FRANK & BILLY:

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

STELLA: *(under the yelling)* God help us all!

*(LIGHTS FADE TO BLACKOUT as the yelling continues.
The play is over.)*

OREGON DREAM

A Play in Two Acts

CAST (2F, 1M)

HANK, 60s, a retired history professor. Same actor plays
PIONEER HUSBAND.

CHEYENNE, 30s, a psychiatrist, Hank's daughter. Same
actress plays YOUNG MARTHA and PIONEER WIFE.

MARTHA, 60s, retired Women's Studies professor.

Cheyenne's mother, Hank's ex-wife. A lesbian activist.

SETTING

An abandoned cabin near Mt. Hood, Oregon. A Sunday in
summer, 2005. And flashbacks as noted.

ACT ONE

1/

*(AT RISE: Inside a ramshackle cabin. It's
an under-furnished mess and clearly
hasn't been lived in for a long time.)*

(At a table sits HANK, 60s. He is dressed in outdoor gear, as if he planned to take off on a hike somewhere.)

(Prominent on the table are a bottle of whiskey and an outdoor vest from which wires hang out.

This was, in fact, an attempt at making a bomb.)

(Someone is shouting at Hank from outside. This is CHEYENNE, 30s, his daughter.)

CHEYENNE (OS)

Dad, please let me in!

(Hank takes a swig from the bottle. No response.)

CHEYENNE (OS)

I'm not going away ... so you might as well unlock the door.
... Dad, for God's sake! Unlock the door!

HANK

(not loud)

It's not locked.

CHEYENNE (OS)

What? Did you say something?

HANK

It's not locked.

CHEYENNE (OS)

What?

HANK

It's not locked! It's stuck! If you want in so bad, use your shoulder!

(Another swig. Noise outside – and a sudden crash, as the door swings open and Cheyenne falls inside. She's over-dressed for the cabin, having come from church services. Her body language suggests she's expecting spiders to fall on her at any moment.)

HANK

The door doesn't have a lock.

CHEYENNE

It doesn't have a lock?

HANK

They took it.

CHEYENNE

Who?

HANK

The last ones to break in while there were still things left to steal. A year or more ago, I guess.

*(Cheyenne looks like she wants to
sit at the table but is afraid of
getting dirty.)*

HANK

You going to stand or sit?

*(Hank reads her hesitation
correctly. He gets up, grabs a
broom across the room, comes back
and sweeps off an empty chair at
the table.)*

HANK

Sit.

(Cheyenne sits.)

HANK

You want a drink?

CHEYENNE

No thank you.

HANK

Good. They took all the glasses.

(She stares at the wired vest.)

CHEYENNE

Is this ...?

HANK

It's my piece of shit. I've failed at a few things in my life, but this ... I may have set a new standard of failure here. Wait a minute. How did you know what it is?

CHEYENNE

Dad, I read your note.

HANK

So that's why you're here.

CHEYENNE

Why else would I be here?

HANK

Good point. I'm not thinking too clearly at the moment.

(A swig.)

CHEYENNE

I'm sure that doesn't help.

HANK

I'm sure you're sure.

(Another swig.)

CHEYENNE

I talked to mom.

(Hank studies her.)

HANK

Say what you mean.

CHEYENNE

She wants me to call her. She's very worried about you.

(Cheyenne takes out a cell phone.)

HANK

That'll be the day. Good luck getting reception out here.

(And he's right – nothing.)

HANK

How'd you find the note?

CHEYENNE

Your landlord called me. He found it. I dropped by your apartment after church.

(She brings the note out of her purse. It's printed on a sheet of paper. Hank reaches for it but Cheyenne pulls it away.)

HANK

What do you plan to do with it? Send it to your mother?

CHEYENNE

I think we should talk about it.

HANK

I can't afford you.

CHEYENNE

Very funny.

HANK

What is it you told me you charge? Hundred an hour?
What a world. Hundred an hour to listen to folks ramble.

CHEYENNE

Dad, I'm not here as a professional. I'm here as your daughter.

HANK

Right.

CHEYENNE

You don't believe me?

HANK

I don't know what I believe any more.

CHEYENNE

Can I tell you what I think is going on?

HANK

Can I stop you?

CHEYENNE

Dad, sometimes you scare me.

HANK

Like now.

CHEYENNE

Yes, like now.

(A pause.)

CHEYENNE

(re the vest)

Is this dangerous?

HANK

I couldn't get the damn thing to go off. I don't think it's

going to explode on its own.

CHEYENNE

It still scares me. Could you put it somewhere?

*(Hank moves the vest across the
room. He comes back and sits down.)*

CHEYENNE

I know how upset you've been. I couldn't believe it driving up here. There's so many houses going up.

HANK

Oregon Dream. Isn't that a lovely name for a housing development? I guess it beats Nottingham or Sherwood. All those snobby fenced-in communities they built in central Oregon.

CHEYENNE

This doesn't look pretentious. Just crowded.

HANK

I didn't say pretentious. I said snobby. There's a difference.

CHEYENNE

Some of them don't look so bad.

HANK

You came up the mountain to tell me this? You can just head on back down.

CHEYENNE

I came here because your note scared the bejesus out of me. I didn't know what I'd find.

HANK

I'm not suicidal, if that's what you're asking.

CHEYENNE

What do you call your note then?

HANK

Sacrificial. There's a difference. It's a trade off. I go, but some of them go with me. No, that's not right. I made sure I went to their office on a Sunday. I wanted to blow up the building, not the people. I wanted to make a statement. Well, I sure did. Oh, Jesus, did I. I mailed it to the paper. Fuck.

CHEYENNE

What did you send to the paper?

HANK

Explaining what I did. Only I didn't do it – so now I come off looking like a goddamn fool. Unless I can figure out how to do it right.

(He gets up and starts toward the vest across the room.)

CHEYENNE

Dad! Stop this!

(Her passion stops him in his tracks. He comes back to the table.)

HANK

It looked easy enough on the Internet.

CHEYENNE

You learned this online?

HANK

You can learn anything online.

CHEYENNE

So you wrap yourself in a bomb, go to the office of the developer, and blow the building and yourself to smithereens.

HANK

Something like that.

CHEYENNE

Because you're pissed that they're building condos all around you.

HANK

To make a statement.

CHEYENNE

Aren't you being a little selfish?

HANK

What are you, the Better Business Bureau?

CHEYENNE

I'm your daughter. And the more I talk to you, the more you scare me. Dad, I have to say this. I know we haven't had a relationship for long, but I've never seen you this bad. Never.

HANK

It sucks, doesn't it?

CHEYENNE

Yes, it does. So why don't you do something about it?

HANK

Is that code for see a shrink?

CHEYENNE

It wouldn't hurt.

HANK

I'm not nuts here. You have to understand how special this place was. When your mother and I bought the land, and built the cabin on it, there wasn't a neighbor to be seen. The view of Mt. Hood, the sound of the river below, the smell of the pines, it was our little piece of heaven. A man needs something to look forward to when he retires. A man needs a sense of ending up somewhere. Of having worked for something worthwhile.

(A pause.)

HANK

Of course, this was all before your mother went through her ...

(A pause.)

HANK

...changes.

(A pause.)

HANK

So how's your love life?

CHEYENNE

Pardon me?

HANK

You got anybody special in your life?

CHEYENNE

I broke up a three-year relationship recently. I'm taking a break.

HANK

Guy? Girl?

CHEYENNE

Jesus, Dad.

HANK

It's a common question today.

CHEYENNE

I'm straight. I told you before.

HANK

Once upon a time, so was your mother.

CHEYENNE

No, she was never straight. She was in the closet.

HANK

I was in bed with her, and I'm telling you she was straight.

CHEYENNE

She was bi even then. Dad, this is ancient history.

HANK

She's still the best woman I ever knew. And I mean, *woman*.

(Hank seems lost in thought. The lights change. We are going back thirty-odd years, and Cheyenne will become the young Martha. Hank's body language will be younger as well.)

(They rise and move close. They are outdoors.)

HANK

Look at the view, Martha! Just look at it!

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

How much is ours?

HANK

Enough.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I can't wait to build our house.

HANK

First a cabin to get by. We have lots of time.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Can I design the house?

HANK

You design the house. I'll build the cabin. In fact, I think I've already got the perfect design. One big room!

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

And a bathroom.

HANK

That's a little more complicated. This isn't going to be like living in Portland. I'm going to have to make a mountain woman out of you.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I promise to be a good student.

HANK

Even if it means peeing in one of those outdoor portable jobbies?

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Even then.

HANK

Reading by a lantern?

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Yep.

HANK

Fetching water? I mean, for everything. Washing dishes. Mixing drinks.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I can get used to it.

HANK

I bet you can.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I can get used to anything. I love you.

HANK

I like the sound of that.

(They kiss. BLACKOUT.)

2/

(LIGHTS CHANGE back to present time. They sit at the table as before.)

CHEYENNE

Here's what I think we should do, Dad. In my line of work, I make connections. I think I can get you to see a doctor who will help you. He works a lot with veterans. With post-traumatic problems.

HANK

I loved the Army. After Korea, before Vietnam. Perfect timing. They put me in the Army Security Agency. Sent me to a language school in Monterey to learn Russian. It was a

very intense and important learning experience for me. I became a man in the Army. What post-traumatic problem?

CHEYENNE

Not so much from a war as from the world. The way everything has changed. I mean, right here, look at all the changes around you. He can help you deal with them.

HANK

You want me to deal with this shit?

CHEYENNE

I don't know! I don't want you trying to blow yourself up just because you can take down a developer with you.

HANK

Make a statement.

CHEYENNE

Fine, make a statement. I want you to write a letter to the editor if you want to make a statement.

HANK

I did that already – and more than once.

(Hank starts laughing.)

CHEYENNE

What?

HANK

I wish I could've seen the look on my face. All that planning and anticipation. You talk about a rush. And I didn't even have 43 virgins waiting for me.

CHEYENNE

This isn't a joking matter.

HANK

That may be true. But making it one may be the only sensible thing left.

CHEYENNE

Will you come down the mountain with me?

HANK

I have to think about it.

(He takes a swig.)

CHEYENNE

I'd like to leave before it gets dark. I need to go in early tomorrow.

HANK

(offering the bottle)

You sure you don't want a drink?

CHEYENNE

Is there anything besides whiskey?

HANK

Sorry. If we had a refrig in here, somebody would've taken it by now anyway.

CHEYENNE

It will safer up here with neighbors.

HANK

Whoopee.

CHEYENNE

You like being broken into?

HANK

Of course not. In the beginning, nobody even knew about this place.

(LIGHTS CHANGE to the past again.

Hank younger, Cheyenne as young

Martha.)

HANK

(gesturing, showing off the new cabin)

I know, it's not much. But it'll keep us warm and dry. It'll do until we build our house.

(Young Martha looks around, taking it in.)

HANK

It's not the Ritz.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

No, it's not the Ritz.

HANK

I want you to like it.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I do! But like you always say, I'm a city girl. It's going to take me a little time to get used to this.

HANK

We've got all the time in the world.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

No water. No electricity. I guess this is what you call primitive.

HANK

Primitive is a tent. This is base rock civilization. We're like pioneers.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Pioneers.

HANK

You don't like it.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Actually, I'm impressed that you built it yourself. I don't think I've ever met anyone who built a cabin.

HANK

It's my first and last. Come on, let's break it in.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

You brought champagne?

HANK

I mean make love in it.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

On the floor?

HANK

On the sleeping bag. I'll pump up the air mattress. It's not really home till we make love in it.

3/

(LIGHTS CHANGE BACK to present.

Characters return to present.)

CHEYENNE

It's called progress, Dad.

HANK

My PhD dissertation made the argument that history wasn't progressive, it was circular. We never learn from our mistakes. Do you already know this?

CHEYENNE

I not sure I agree with it.

HANK

Not the thesis. That this was what my dissertation was

about.

CHEYENNE

No, I didn't.

HANK

I keep forgetting how little you know about me.

CHEYENNE

What can I learn if you're not there?

HANK

You deserve to hate me for that.

CHEYENNE

I don't hate you. I just don't understand it.

HANK

It's difficult to explain without sounding like I'm criticizing your mother. It was my failure, not hers. I should've done whatever it took to stay in your life.

CHEYENNE

She didn't want you to see me?

HANK

It's more complicated than that. She never talked about

me?

CHEYENNE

Not that I remember. You were gone, and that was that.

HANK

You came into the world at the worst possible moment. It was the worst time of my life after your mother...

CHEYENNE

Came out.

HANK

That sounds so inconsequential. Like she stepped through a door into the afternoon.

CHEYENNE

I've thought about how much it must have hurt you. I had a friend in school whose dad came out gay. It devastated her mother – and her, too. I can't imagine going through something like that.

HANK

I thought shrinks understood everything.

CHEYENNE

What I understand is, a person has to move forward. My job is to help them through crisis and transition. I wish I

could help you.

HANK

It's a little late for it to matter.

CHEYENNE

How can you say that? You were ready to blow yourself up.

HANK

Were?

CHEYENNE

Oh, God.

HANK

No God. No heaven. No 43 virgins. Just trying to go out with a little dignity.

CHEYENNE

I see nothing dignified about suicide.

HANK

Most people don't. I'm aware of the argument.

CHEYENNE

We're not getting anywhere here.

HANK

Where's to get?

CHEYENNE

I want you to come down the mountain with me.

HANK

So you can take me to your doctor friend.

CHEYENNE

I would prefer that. I'd settle for just getting you out of here.

HANK

You have a point. It's depressing here. No more view of the mountain, no more river sounds. It even smells different.

CHEYENNE

Then let's saddle up.

HANK

Saddle up.

CHEYENNE

It's an expression mother uses.

HANK

Which she got from me.

CHEYENNE

I didn't know.

HANK

How could you?

(A pause.)

HANK

I had so many dreams for this place. Even after your mother left me. This was the only thing I wanted in the divorce. I gave her everything else.

CHEYENNE

How come you never built a house here?

HANK

Good question. I think a house implied a family. I kept waiting to renew my faith in family.

CHEYENNE

You'd lost it?

HANK

Of course I'd lost it. We'd talked about having a large family.

CHEYENNE

Mother never wanted more than one. She told me so.

HANK

I'm sure that's true. But I thought different.

CHEYENNE

She said she wanted more?

HANK

I don't remember.

*(LIGHTS CHANGE to past. Hank and
Young Martha are cuddling after
love making.)*

HANK

I want a large family.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

How many is large?

HANK

I don't know. Four. Are you okay with that?

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

When I feel like this, I'm okay with anything. I want to feel this way forever.

HANK

Half boys and half girls. What do you think?

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

God, the last thing I want to do is think. I can barely talk. I shouldn't try. I'll end up sounding stupid.

HANK

You never sound stupid.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Everything that comes into my head is a cliché. "That was incredible. I didn't know it could be like this. It was magical. On a scale of one to ten, that was a fifteen."

HANK

We aim to please, ma'am.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

It's this place. The river, the wind. I felt like we were in

rhythm with the universe.

HANK

Wow.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

My body took on its own life. My head didn't get in the way like it usually does. I felt total abandon to forces beyond my control.

HANK

I can't top that.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

It wasn't good for you?

HANK

Of course it was. And it WAS special – because I knew it was special for you. Maybe you're right. It's this place.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I wish we could stay up here forever.

4/

(LIGHTS CHANGE to present.)

CHEYENNE

She's not the mother type, really. She had a hard time raising me.

HANK

What's-her-face didn't pitch in?

CHEYENNE

Emily. I don't think she wanted me around.

HANK

She took off then?

CHEYENNE

Dad, they're still together. You didn't know?

HANK

Nobody tells me anything. Still together after thirty-something years. Impressive. I guess your mother found happiness after all.

CHEYENNE

Why do you always say that? Your mother.

HANK

Somehow it goes down better than "Martha." Does it

bother you?

CHEYENNE

I'm just curious. You hold grudges, don't you?

HANK

Compared to your mother – to Martha – no, I don't think I do. I made the peace offering before she did, and she turned me down.

CHEYENNE

When was that?

HANK

A few years after we broke up. I missed you terribly.

CHEYENNE

I didn't know that.

HANK

I'm sure she didn't tell you.

CHEYENNE

So what happened?

HANK

I wanted you to spend the summer with me.

CHEYENNE

How old was I?

HANK

Two. Three. I suppose I could have taken the matter to court. Being on different coasts, it was harder for me to raise hell about it. I didn't have tenure yet, I felt very unsettled and insecure.

CHEYENNE

So you forgot about me.

HANK

I wouldn't put it that way. I gave up the effort it would take to stay in your life. Personally, I mean. I sent you things. You remember, don't you?

CHEYENNE

I think so. For a while.

HANK

I never got anything back.

CHEYENNE

I was just a child!

HANK

I know. She could have sent me one of your drawings or something. A photograph. It was abundantly clear she wanted me out of your life entirely. She always was more strong willed than I am.

CHEYENNE

I would have liked to spend a summer with you.

HANK

Maybe if we'd done that ...

CHEYENNE

What?

HANK

I don't know. I'm just glad we finally connected. Maybe that's too strong a word.

CHEYENNE

I was shocked, to be honest.

HANK

I can understand that.

CHEYENNE

What made you contact me after so long?

HANK

I'd totally lost track of you. I suppose I could've hired a detective. But I didn't.

CHEYENNE

And then you read about me in the paper.

HANK

Here we were, both in Portland. It was like a gift from the gods.

CHEYENNE

You're lucky I took my maiden name back after the divorce.

HANK

You're right. I never would've recognized you. The name made me curious.

CHEYENNE

I almost didn't agree to see you.

HANK

Understandable.

CHEYENNE

You know why I did? I wanted to make sure you realized

what a failure as a father you were. I wanted some kind of ... I'm not sure what the word is.

HANK

Revenge.

CHEYENNE

That'll do.

HANK

But you were so nice.

CHEYENNE

Nervous as hell. Angry. But there's something almost mythic about our meeting ... there's something about bloodlines. I saw a little of myself in you.

HANK

You don't have to say that.

CHEYENNE

It's true. The upper face, forehead to nose. I got mine from you.

HANK

At least I contributed something.

CHEYENNE

I read all your books. You contributed there, too.

HANK

How did you know about them?

CHEYENNE

It began with the one that sold so well.

HANK

Circular History.

CHEYENNE

I found it in the bookstore. Your photo was on the back cover. I knew the name, of course. I bought it and confronted mother about it.

HANK

I bet she loved that.

CHEYENNE

She said you were a homophobe. She was just trying to protect me.

HANK

A homophobe!

CHEYENNE

I have no idea if you are or not.

HANK

"Some of my best friends" and so on. Your mother not among them, unfortunately.

CHEYENNE

Here's something that's always puzzled me. She's the one who changed. She came out, not you. So how did you become the bad guy?

HANK

The old-fashioned way, I earned it. You really want to know?

CHEYENNE

Very much.

HANK

It's a long story.

(Pause.)

HANK

Okay. First, you have to imagine my shock when she told me what was going on. You have to picture the setting. We're living on Maryland's Eastern Shore then, the

Delmarva Peninsula, which is a long sandbar between Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. We're both teaching at Chesapeake College, our first jobs. I'm in History, and your mother, who they really wanted, is starting one of the first Women's Studies programs in the country. We're renting a farm house outside of town, set about a quarter mile off the paved road. A great old house, four bedrooms, just the two of us, so we each had an office. It's a summer day, hot and humid. I'm sitting on the front porch with a gin and tonic, avoiding a deadline I have for a book review. Your mother – Martha comes out with a fresh drink and one for herself. Here's the deal: if you'd asked me if I was happy, I'd have said, yes, absolutely happy. How could I not be? We both had teaching jobs, money wasn't a problem, we were renting a great old house, I was in an ideal marriage. I truly thought so.

(Pause.)

CHEYENNE

So what happened?

HANK

By my lights, an ideal marriage. Martha sits down, and we drink in silence for a while. She excuses herself to refill her drink and comes back with a pitcher. That's the only time she ever made a pitcher of gin and tonics. "We have to talk," she says. I asked what about. "Something is happening to me." Was I thinking that the ax was about to fall? Not at all. I'm not sure what I expected. I waited for her to go on. Finally she says, "I met someone at the conference." Oh, shit. Now I knew what was coming. But she didn't go on. Finally I asked, "Should I be worried about him?" She hesitated – and I read in the hesitation the worst that could happen, she'd met a colleague at the

folklore conference in D.C. last week and maybe even had fallen in love with him. At least had slept with him. I waited and waited. Martha says, "She. And I don't know. I only know I discovered something in myself that I need to explore."

(A long pause.)

CHEYENNE

Dad?

HANK

It's all coming back to me. It was surrealistic. Was I hallucinating? I might as well have been abducted by aliens. She had met a woman. A woman! I stammered, asking, "Are you telling me you slept with a woman?" Yes, she says.

CHEYENNE

Was this Emily?

HANK

Yes. Love at first sight and all that.

CHEYENNE

I'm so sorry.

HANK

The best is yet to come.

(Pause.)

CHEYENNE

What did you do?

HANK

I just got up and left. I didn't know what the hell to think or say. The love of my life, my soul mate, sleeps with a woman and tells me she wants to explore this side of herself. I should have asked her if she was a lesbian or not. Straight out. I couldn't handle it. I just left.

CHEYENNE

That's not so terrible.

HANK

It gets worse. I go to the Oysterman, a bar we often went to. And who did I find there but Heather O'Reilly. How can you forget a name like that? I'd had her in one of my history classes, and Martha was grooming her to study women's studies in graduate school. Heather O'Reilly. She was with some friends, students, and they invited me to join them. Before I knew it, people were getting up to go. Heather had had a little too much to drink and looked like she wanted to stay. I bought her another drink. Later I offered her a ride back to the dorm.

CHEYENNE

Dad, you didn't.

HANK

I guess it is that predictable.

CHEYENNE

Did she ... ?

HANK

Say no? Not that I remember. We drove to Ocean City and walked on the beach. We made out. It got hot and heavy ... nature took its course.

CHEYENNE

And mother found out?

HANK

Not right away. It didn't end there. I pursued her. Surreptitiously at first. I told her I was unhappily married – by now, I was – and I think she fell in love with me. Anyway, in less than a month, the rumors were spreading and finally Martha cornered me. "Are you sleeping with Heather O'Reilly?" I moved out after that. I was a wreck. A week later, I resigned my teaching job and moved back west. I had to get as far away as possible.

(Pause.)

CHEYENNE

Wait a minute. What about me?

HANK

Somewhere in there, your mother found out she was pregnant. I didn't learn until after the divorce. It was—...

CHEYENNE

What?...It was what?

HANK

Slip of the tongue.

CHEYENNE

Tell me.

HANK

It's not how I feel now.

CHEYENNE

Damn it, Dad!

HANK

Sometimes I thought her being pregnant, the timing of it, the accident of it, was the cruelest irony I've ever experienced.

CHEYENNE

Ironic because ...?

HANK

I wanted it so badly. The house in the woods, the land, the wife, the kids.

CHEYENNE

The American Dream.

HANK

More like the Oregon Dream. The real one, not this development shit. The landscape here was a big part of it. Before all this crap.

CHEYENNE

But the dream would have ended anyway.

HANK

I suppose so. It just seemed more cruel, ending the way it did.

CHEYENNE

The way you tell the story, I'm surprised mother had me.

HANK

She and what's-her-face—

CHEYENNE

Emily.

HANK

They wanted a family. Everyone in love wants a family. So suddenly it became very easy for them. I became their sperm donor.

CHEYENNE

I'm so sorry ...

HANK

I made it worse than it had to be. I don't blame your mother for getting pissed.

CHEYENNE

I wish she would've made it easier for you to see me growing up.

HANK

I wish I'd've been more forceful to make it happen.

CHEYENNE

I guess we do what we think is right at the time.

HANK

I was lazy. I didn't enjoy confronting her.

CHEYENNE

I know what you mean. She can be intimidating.

HANK

Do you take after her?

CHEYENNE

I think I'm softer than she is. Don't you?

HANK

I don't know you well enough to know.

CHEYENNE

I'd like to change that.

HANK

Ah. Is this where you get back on topic? How I come down the mountain with you and you take me to your shrink friend?

CHEYENNE

That's not what I meant. I do want to know you. But I don't know the man who wanted to blow himself up in order to make a statement.

HANK

That man is your father.

CHEYENNE

Then maybe we never can be close.

HANK

Probably too late for that anyway.

CHEYENNE

You sound like you're glad.

HANK

It's just reality, Cheyenne. You know, I always hated that name. I thought it was a name trying too hard to be hip.

CHEYENNE

I like my name.

HANK

Sometimes I thought of you as Albuquerque.

CHEYENNE

Albuquerque?

HANK

My little joke with myself at your expense.

CHEYENNE

Thanks a lot.

HANK

Not something I shared with anyone.

CHEYENNE

Do you still think of me as Albuquerque?

HANK

It's hard to think of you as anything. It's hard to believe you came up here after me.

CHEYENNE

What was I supposed to do after finding out?

HANK

I didn't think you cared. I'm glad you do.

CHEYENNE

Please come down the mountain with me.

HANK

I'm giving it serious consideration.

(A swig.)

CHEYENNE

You should sell this place, Dad. Put all this behind you.

HANK

You don't realize how much of my life was invested in this.
In what I thought this would be.

CHEYENNE

I'm sorry you lost your dream. But you have to move on.

HANK

I care more about losing certain memories than losing this.
A man depends on memories.

CHEYENNE

What memories?

HANK

The ones that make the present make sense.

(A pause.)

CHEYENNE

I don't know what to tell you. Mom changed in ways that you didn't. It happens all the time. But you have to let all this go. Mom, the condos, everything. Give yourself some peace. You're retired. You should be enjoying life.

HANK

You want me to play golf?

CHEYENNE

Travel, something. Live in the present.

HANK

Look around you. This is the present!

CHEYENNE

But whatever you think you and mom had—

HANK

Ecstasy. That's the word I've been looking for. We had ecstasy.

CHEYENNE

Ecstasy is not something that lasts.

HANK

But it's not something you deny either. She won't admit it. She won't admit we had something once. She says it was just me.

CHEYENNE

Maybe she's right, Dad.

HANK

I was there! I heard her screams! I felt the sweat on her body! I could smell the ecstasy on her!

(A pause.)

HANK

Sorry. I get emotional thinking about it.

*(A pause. Cheyenne is uncomfortable,
not knowing where this is leading.)*

HANK

I probably shouldn't tell you this. But I'm not crazy here. I'm not hallucinating. I'm not even exaggerating. It was the greatest experience of my life. Her orgasms. To be inside her when they happened, to have that kind of a connection to her energy, which seemed to drive mine. To bond with her like that. It was like we were animals. I mean that in a profound, spiritual way. What was going on was more basic, more fundamental, than we normally allow ourselves to be. We were out of control. We were out of our comfort

zone, out of our rational understanding, out of all our previous experiences. It was like being in a strange land without a map. We came together, bonded, and exploded together. It was miraculous. It was exhausting.

(A pause.)

HANK

But she denies it ever happened.

CHEYENNE

You've talked to her about this?

HANK

Not in years. Decades. When I was trying to get you for the summer, I reminded her of how it had been between us. That we'd shared ecstasy. She said I was exaggerating.

CHEYENNE

Couldn't it have been different for her?

HANK

How? I was an eye witness. She was shaking, she was screaming, she was sweating – and then, finally, crying in my arms? How the hell could that be different from what it was?

(A pause.)

CHEYENNE

Dad, I'm leaving. With you or without. I wish you'd come with me.

(Hank changes expression.)

HANK

Jesus.

CHEYENNE

What?

HANK

How could I be so stupid?

(He bolts up and starts looking for something.)

CHEYENNE

What is it?

(He's going through things on the counter.)

HANK

I made a mistake!

CHEYENNE

What are you talking about?

(He finds what he's been looking for: some diagrams and instructions printed from the Internet. He starts turning pages, looking for something.)

HANK

I forgot a connection, I'm sure of it.

CHEYENNE

Are you talking about the bomb?

HANK

Here. Jesus. How could I have forgotten to double-check?

(Now he goes to the bomb-vest. He carefully opens it and inspects the wiring. Cheyenne, frightened, stands.)

CHEYENNE

Dad, what are you doing?

HANK

I have to check something ...

CHEYENNE

It's too dangerous!

HANK

I know what I'm doing. Finally.

CHEYENNE

I'm leaving now.

(She heads for the door.)

HANK

Jesus.

(He moves back toward the table.

*Cheyenne stops at the door and
watches him.)*

HANK

If my head wasn't attached, I'd misplace it.

CHEYENNE

Dad?

HANK

I connected a wire to the wrong place. One wire. So the switch doesn't do anything. I can fix it and do it right.

CHEYENNE

No.

HANK

This isn't something I decided on a whim. I've been thinking about it for a long time.

CHEYENNE

I won't let you.

HANK

I don't think you can stop me.

(She comes back into the room.)

CHEYENNE

I want to know more about you and mom. Tell me about how happy you were.

HANK

Distractions aren't going to work, daughter girl.

CHEYENNE

I know what you mean about ecstasy. Especially as a woman, It is more intense for us. It can be scary. I frightened Tim.

HANK

I don't need to hear about your love life.

CHEYENNE

My passion. My ecstasy. My orgasms. He wasn't like you, feeling a bond, letting my energy lead his. He ran from it. He was scared of it.

HANK

You don't have to tell me this.

CHEYENNE

He was so inhibited. It's what finally drove us apart. I didn't feel connected to him. It's rare when two people can connect that way.

HANK

Your mother – Martha and I were connected, believe me. I don't know why she won't admit it.

CHEYENNE

Maybe she associates everything before coming out as a charade.

HANK

It was biological. She was like gravity, falling whether she wanted to or not.

CHEYENNE

She defines her own reality, Dad. If she thinks the experience wasn't authentic, even if it happened, she's going to live in the present with that assumption.

HANK

Isn't it your job to make her see the truth? If she were your client.

CHEYENNE

No. It's to make her live in the present with as much self-worth and health and integrity as she can.

HANK

What about me?

CHEYENNE

What about you?

HANK

Don't you see what that does to me? If she denies it, if this is her reality, then I might as well have hallucinated the entire experience.

CHEYENNE

No, it just led to different consequences for you.

HANK

It didn't lead to any consequences. That's the point.

CHEYENNE

This is the consequences, Dad. Right here and now. You thinking of connecting the bomb right and going back to blow up the building.

HANK

If I hallucinated the ecstasy we shared, then I hallucinate everything. Then I might as well use the bomb for myself. I can't live in the world if I can't trust my own perceptions of it.

CHEYENNE

You're really stuck, Dad. Let me help you get unstuck.

HANK

By what? Denying it ever happened? I already told you, it was the greatest experience of my life.

CHEYENNE

By letting it go. Not forgetting it. Just not obsessing about it. Letting it drive you where you don't want to go.

(Hank laughs.)

HANK

I'm sorry. Everybody thinks they know what's best for their neighbor. We're a nation of meddlers.

CHEYENNE

You don't think you have a problem?

HANK

Of course I have a problem! Jesus. But it's my problem, okay? I own it. If I have nothing else in this world, I have my problems.

CHEYENNE

Promise me you won't go to the developer.

(She gestures to the vest.)

HANK

I'm not sure I can promise that.

CHEYENNE

Dad ...

HANK

Even if I said I would, how could you trust me? If I'm as

crazy as you think, why wouldn't I lie to you?

CHEYENNE

You're not crazy. You're suffering.

HANK

We all suffer.

CHEYENNE

You're suffering over things you can't change. You need to let them go.

HANK

Easier said than done.

CHEYENNE

That's why you need professional help. You can't do it alone.

HANK

What a mess, huh?

CHEYENNE

It doesn't have to be.

*(He takes the last swig from the
bottle.)*

HANK

All gone.

(He puts the bottle on its side.)

HANK

Let me try this another way. Where I'm coming from. When I built this, when I was with your mother early on, living together, even before we got married, I was happy. I truly was happy. And so was she. This is the real issue. She refuses to accept that she was happy with me. She refuses to accept that she experienced ecstasy with me. With a man, I suppose it is. What is it, politically incorrect for a lesbian to have a past of pleasure with me? But that's not really what I'm getting at. I was happy then, truly happy. And you know what I thought at the time? I thought it would only get better. I was only 25, my life ahead of me, and already I knew what happiness was. I knew what ecstasy was. I knew what passion was. And I had my life ahead of me. Everything would only get better. What an incredibly energizing thing to feel as a young man. Never for a moment did I think that this was it. This was my allotment of happiness. This was my share in the universe of ecstasy. After this ended, there'd be nothing more. It would never get better. After 25, well, after 27, when the shit hit the fan, after that, everything that followed would feel empty in comparison. My life of ecstasy was over.

CHEYENNE

Dad, it doesn't have to be this way.

HANK

When you're my age, I think you'll see it differently.

CHEYENNE

God, I hope you're wrong.

HANK

I wish I was wrong, too. But I'm not. When we're happy, we think we'll always be happy. And we're always wrong.

*(LIGHTS CHANGE to past. Hank and
Young Martha cuddle after lovemaking.
Young Martha has been crying.)*

HANK

Are you okay?

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

It was an out-of-body experience.

HANK

A good thing?

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Words can't describe it.

HANK

I hear you.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I love you so much.

HANK

I love you, too.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

It's scary, in a way.

HANK

Scary how?

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

To be so out of control. It's like jumping off a building and realizing in the middle of flight that you're falling and can't stop yourself. You're at the mercy of something far greater than yourself.

HANK

Gravity. Big difference, though. No splat at the end.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Maybe a pleasurable splat. Is it like that for you?

(Hank kisses her cheek.)

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I think it's more intense for me. For women, in general.

HANK

I like being close to you then. The sense of being one.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

It's more than just you and me. It's like being capital-O
One with the universe. Sometimes I'm aware of the river or
the wind, and I seem to be moving in the same rhythm.
God, listen to me. You've turned me into a babbling
romantic.

HANK

Not a bad thing.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

No, definitely not a bad thing.

HANK

One day, a miracle will come from such a moment.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

It's already a miracle.

HANK

A child.

(A pause.)

HANK

When we're ready.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

After we graduate.

HANK

After we're teaching.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Um.

HANK

Well. We should get back, I suppose.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Not yet.

HANK

I have an exam tomorrow.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

I know. In a moment. I want to do it again.

HANK

I don't know if I can.

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

You always say that. And you always can.

HANK

Once more, and then we have to saddle up. Promise?

CHEYENNE/YOUNG MARTHA

Promise.

(They embrace. LIGHTS UP to present.)

5/

(Hank and Cheyenne at the table.

MARTHA, 60s, enters.)

MARTHA

You two look cozy.

CHEYENNE

Mother!

*(Cheyenne goes to Martha. They
embrace.)*

MARTHA

I've been trying to reach you. I was worried.

CHEYENNE

My cell doesn't work up here.

HANK

Martha.

MARTHA

Hank. Are you all right?

HANK

Do you care?

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

Can we have dinner together?

CHEYENNE

Of course. I'm trying to get him to come off the mountain with me.

HANK

She knows a shrink.

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

I don't want to get involved in this. Do you know the Barlow Trail restaurant on the highway?

HANK

I was telling her about your cosmic orgasms.

MARTHA

Jesus Christ.

HANK

Flowing with the river, in rhythm to the wind. The big-O Orgasm in the big-U Universe.

("Twilight Zone"...)

Dah-dee-dah-dah, dah-dee-dah-dah.

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

How long will you be?

CHEYENNE

(to Hank)

Dad, are you coming with me or not?

HANK

Not, I think.

CHEYENNE

Then I'm leaving. I can't help you if you don't want to be helped. You have to take the first step, however small, on your own. Apparently you can't do that.

HANK

Apparently not.

(Cheyenne starts away, Martha following.)

HANK

Don't deny it, Martha. I was there, too. I know what we experienced together.

(Martha turns to him.)

MARTHA

Cheyenne is right. You're a very sick man.

HANK

Why do you keep lying to yourself? You were there. You damn well know what happened.

*(BLACKOUT. Suddenly in the darkness
we hear Young Martha's orgasmic
CRIES OF ECSTASY. Eerie, cosmic, a
tad frightening. And then SILENCE.
Act One is over.)*

ACT TWO

1/

(AT RISE: As before. Martha and
Cheyenne are heading for the door.
Hank takes a pistol from the vest.
He aims it at Martha.)

HANK

Hold it.

(The women turn to him.)

CHEYENNE

Dad, please ...

HANK

(to Martha)

We're going to settle this once and for all.

MARTHA

There's nothing to settle.

HANK

Sit down. This may take a while.

CHEYENNE

Mom, do as he says.

MARTHA

He wouldn't dare.

CHEYENNE

For me. Please.

*(The women return and sit at the
table. Hank stays across the room.)*

HANK

We need to do this for Cheyenne's benefit. Let her know she was born of ecstasy.

(to Cheyenne)

You probably don't even know how we met.

(to Martha)

Does she?

MARTHA

I certainly never told her.

HANK

Tell her now.

CHEYENNE

Dad, I don't have to know this.

HANK

I want you to. Tell her.

MARTHA

We met at Maxie's. It was a campus hangout.

HANK

A graduate student hangover. A tavern near campus. Tell her the rest.

MARTHA

There isn't any more. That's where we met.

HANK

We were set up. A mutual friend thought we'd connect. Both being progressive thinkers interested in history and all. You remember?

MARTHA

Sam Henderson..

HANK

Now we're getting somewhere. Was Sam right? Did we hit it off?

MARTHA

I suppose so, yes.

HANK

No doubts about it. We ended up at your apartment. Remember?

MARTHA

Yes.

HANK

For the next two days! We skipped classes and screwed our brains out. You remember that?

MARTHA

May I say something?

HANK

Remember?

MARTHA

I don't know why ancient history has become so important to you but—

HANK

Do you remember skipping classes to stay in bed? Do you or don't you?

MARTHA

I remember.

HANK

So we had an auspicious beginning. But this is nowhere near where we'd end up getting. This wasn't a few days of ecstasy. This was just great sex. Nothing magical or mystical about it. We were just getting off. There's a big difference between sex and ecstasy. Am I right?

MARTHA

I don't follow.

HANK

Bear with me. You'll get it eventually. So we quickly became an item. In two months, we rented a house together. Remember the house on the tracks?

MARTHA

Yes.

HANK

(to Cheyenne)

It was an old Victorian, larger than we needed, set only ten or fifteen yards from the railroad tracks. When a train came by, the whole house shook. Remember waking up to the train? Remember how you called it an aphrodisiac?

(No reply.)

HANK

You remember. It was in this house that you had your first vaginal orgasm. Your words, not mine. You didn't think such a response was possible. In the house by the tracks, you discovered it was. That's what you told me.

MARTHA

I'm not comfortable talking about this in front of Cheyenne.

CHEYENNE

I really don't need to hear this, Dad.

HANK

But this is for your benefit. You weren't a mistake, dropped into the world by accident at the end of a failed marriage. You weren't an inconvenience. You were born from ecstasy.

MARTHA

Let her go. We can talk about this privately.

HANK

I want her to know!

(He waves the gun menacingly.)

CHEYENNE

It's okay, Dad. I'm staying. Go on.

HANK

(to Martha)

You remember getting married?

MARTHA

Of course.

HANK

(to Cheyenne)

I wasn't hot for the idea. That probably sounds strange. But I'd been reading a book by Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, so far ahead of its time it's amazing. Written in 1900 or something. He was banned from lecturing in this country because he wrote it. It was considered obscene because it challenged traditional marriage. Over a century ago!

(to Martha)

Remember how much I was into that book?

MARTHA

Yes.

HANK

Russell argues that marriage exists for children, not for adults. To get a marriage license, therefore, a couple would have to prove that the woman is pregnant. Otherwise, just live together.

CHEYENNE

Why did you get married then?

(Martha shoots a glance at Cheyenne.

Hank sees this. He smiles.)

HANK

(to Martha)

She has a right to know. You want to do the honors or shall I?

MARTHA

I can't wait to hear how you'll twist this one around.

HANK

I haven't twisted anything around. I was there. I know what happened. So do you.

MARTHA

Fine. You tell it.

HANK

(to Cheyenne)

It was the beginning of our first summer together. We were going to do some camping and end up in Denver, where Martha's parents lived. But at the last minute, Martha, with something like cold feet, insisted we get married before visiting. Ends up, they didn't know we were living together. Your granddad didn't approve of that sort of thing. Martha wanted to show up with a husband, not a live-in boyfriend.

(to Martha)

Did I get it right?

MARTHA

Close enough.

HANK

Right on, and you know it.

CHEYENNE

(to Martha)

It's true?

MARTHA

I had a complicated relationship with my father.

HANK

We got married across the river in Vancouver because in Washington, unlike Oregon, you didn't need a blood test. This saved us a lot of time. We got married in a judge's office, with the secretaries bearing witness. Am I right?

MARTHA

Yes.

HANK

The honeymoon was our camping trip. And our visit.

CHEYENNE

Were you disappointed?

HANK

Not at all. I was okay with all of it. I didn't have to get married, to be sure, until we were ready to start a family. But it seemed like a big deal to your mother, so I went along with it.

(to Martha)

I was a gentleman and a scholar in those days.

MARTHA

Can we move on?

HANK

Impatient to get to the ecstasy part? I can do that.

MARTHA

If you really insist on doing this, you may not like what you find out.

HANK

Oh?

MARTHA

I'm just warning you.

HANK

That almost sounds like you admit it happened.

MARTHA

I do know what happened, Hank. And it's not like what you think happened.

HANK

You're still in denial.

MARTHA

There's a loaded word.

HANK

You're right. I take it back.

CHEYENNE

Why is denial a loaded word?

HANK

It's too easy. Claims of innocence become proof of guilt. It's a Catch-22 situation.

MARTHA

Denial closes the possibility of discussion.

HANK

And we don't want to do that.

(to Martha)

Shall I go on?

MARTHA

By all means.

HANK

You're sure?

MARTHA

I want to see your face when you find out the truth.

HANK

And I, yours, when you admit it.

MARTHA

Let's get on with it then.

HANK

The blue tent. Remember the blue tent?

MARTHA

In the interest of time, assume I remember everything. I'll stop you when you go off track.

HANK

Fair enough.

(to Cheyenne)

We bought a used blue canvas tent at a garage sale.

CHEYENNE

For the honeymoon camping trip?

HANK

This was before we got married. The first time we used it we camped on the coast.

MARTHA

Near Seaside.

HANK

Very good. It was during Spring break, and we hiked to a cove and put up the tent. We had the beach to ourselves. It was a little piece of paradise.

MARTHA

That first night, they made love in the tent.

HANK

You mean we did.

MARTHA

She'd already started having vaginal orgasms in the house along the tracks. She hadn't thought they were possible.

HANK

You didn't.

MARTHA

Very intense. Quite incredible, really.

HANK

I can't believe you're suddenly admitting it.

MARTHA

The more often she had them, the easier they seemed to be. It was a very erotic period of her life. So when they made love at the beach, she was already in tune with a deep sensuality within her.

HANK

Wait a minute. You're up to something.

MARTHA

The first night in the blue tent was special. She could hear the ocean roaring close by, and somehow the sound of it, the rhythm of it, began to influence her own rhythm in lovemaking, and she became part of some energy larger than herself, some—

HANK

Wait a minute!

(A pause.)

MARTHA

Isn't this what you want to hear?

HANK

But it was true!

MARTHA

Have I said otherwise?

HANK

You're mocking it, putting everything in the third person as if you weren't there.

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

Was I mocking it?

CHEYENNE

I don't think I should be here right now.

MARTHA

But it's for your benefit.

(to Hank)

Right?

HANK

Why are you doing this?

MARTHA

Telling the truth?

HANK

Making it sound so ...

MARTHA

What's the right word? Far-fetched? Melodramatic? No, I think the right word is ... sophomoric.

HANK

Sophomoric.

MARTHA

And Male.

HANK

You left out the most important parts. You were completely out of control. Sweating, gasping, crying out – and later in tears, you had something close to a nervous breakdown in my arms.

MARTHA

In rhythm with the ocean, I think she said.

HANK

It was an intensely emotional experience for you!

(A pause.)

CHEYENNE

The one time I cried afterwards with Tim, he thought he'd done something wrong. From that point on, he seemed guarded in our lovemaking. He seemed afraid to make me cry again.

HANK

It was different with us. We bonded.

(to Martha)

I felt so bonded to you. When I was inside you then, it felt like we were the same Being, the same Body, the same Energy.

(A pause.)

HANK

I think you felt the same.

MARTHA

Maybe she did.

HANK

Stop saying she!

MARTHA

Whoever this woman was. It was not me.

HANK

Of course it was you.

MARTHA

No. She was a charade. You married a shadow, a fantasy, a performance. You didn't marry *me*.

HANK

Fine, it wasn't the person you are now. But it was *you*.

MARTHA

I'm not a liar. That woman was a liar.

HANK

So you deny me everything.

MARTHA

I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about her.

HANK

About you.

MARTHA

Her. The lie I was living then.

HANK

Who felt one with the Universe. You even called it cosmic sex.

MARTHA

She did, I'm sure. She was attracted to hyperbole and the dramatic. It better camouflaged the lie at the core of her being.

HANK

Give me something here, for God's sake!

(A pause.)

CHEYENNE

Are we done?

HANK

No. It started in the house by the railroad tracks, and reached new heights in the blue tent at the beach. But it didn't stop there. It didn't stop there! Even after we were married, it didn't stop. I was afraid it might. Marriage

changes everything, I'd seen that in my friends. Happy couples living together become bickering married folks. But after we married, we still bonded, we still came together with all the same incredible intensity. We could bond wherever we were. We bonded in the cabin.

MARTHA

She was faking it.

HANK

What?

MARTHA

Even before they got married. It stopped working for her.

HANK

I don't believe you.

MARTHA

She knew how important it was to you. She knew how much pleasure it gave you, how her pleasure fed your own. So when she lost it, she pretended she still had it. The last year of your time together, more than that, she was faking it.

HANK

Cheyenne was born in ecstasy!

MARTHA

She wasn't.

(to Cheyenne)

I'm sorry. I can't lie to you.

HANK

I was there. I would have known if you were faking it.

MARTHA

I think you'd already stopped paying close attention by then.

HANK

I don't believe you.

MARTHA

She lost her trust in you. After that, she couldn't respond the same way. She had orgasms, yes, but they were different, not so ... well, you're right, her word was cosmic. She stopped having cosmic sex.

HANK

You son of a bitch ...

CHEYENNE

(to Martha)

Why did she lose it? Why did she stop trusting him?

MARTHA

Because of something that happened.

CHEYENNE

What?

MARTHA

(to Hank)

You're not going to want to hear this.

HANK

Whatever you say, it's a lie.

(to Cheyenne)

Don't trust her.

CHEYENNE

What happened?

MARTHA

(to Hank)

We were visiting your college friend in L.A. Remember?

HANK

Greg. What about him?

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

Greg was black.

HANK

He still is.

MARTHA

We felt very liberal, having black friends. Didn't we?

HANK

What about Greg?

MARTHA

Remember the night he took us bar hopping in his old neighborhood in Watts?

HANK

Of course I remember.

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

This wasn't in your best neighborhood, believe me. Most of the time, we were the only whites around. It was a little

stressful, even for liberals.

HANK

Speak for yourself.

MARTHA

You were as uneasy as I was. Don't deny it.

(to Cheyenne)

Hank had to use the men's room. We were sitting at the bar. The bar was crowded, standing room only, great blues playing from a juke box, everybody talking under it, over it, a high Saturday night in the neighborhood. And we were the only white people to be seen.

HANK

I went to the john. So what?

MARTHA

You don't remember?

HANK

Wait a minute. Yeah, what happened when I was in the john. I remember.

CHEYENNE

What happened?

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

While he was gone, a man slipped onto the vacant stool next to me, Hank's stool. He leaned so close I could smell the whiskey on his breath. Do you remember?

HANK

Thirty-plus years and you're not over it.

MARTHA

Look who's talking.

(to Cheyenne)

He leaned in close enough to kiss me. And then he asked, How much I charged for a blow job.

HANK

What the hell was I supposed to do?

MARTHA

Well, as soon as he said it, I saw Hank coming out of the men's room and heading back. I felt like I might faint. The man saw I was looking over his shoulder, turned and saw Hank, and then moved away. As soon as Hank slid onto the stool, I told him what had happened.

HANK

What could I do? We were the only white people in the place.

CHEYENNE

Where was your friend?

MARTHA

Greg. He'd left us there while he picked up his girlfriend after work. He was going to join us later.

HANK

You insisted we leave.

MARTHA

He thought I was a whore!

HANK

(to Cheyenne)

You have to understand the demographics. Most white women in a place like that were, in fact, prostitutes.

MARTHA

That's an excuse. And probably not even true.

HANK

What the hell would I accomplish by confronting him? You wanted me to start a race riot?

MARTHA

I wanted you to stand up for the dignity of your wife.

HANK

(to Cheyenne)

You know what gets me to this day? Your mother is the Great Liberal Feminist. And here she's bitching because I don't defend her honor like a cowboy in some Grade-B western!

MARTHA

It wasn't like that.

HANK

That's exactly how it was. You wanted me to protect your precious honor because the poor guy mistook you for what the odds said you were, a white prostitute in a black bar.

CHEYENNE

So what happened?

MARTHA

We left.

HANK

We drove back to Portland. I had to explain to Greg on the phone later.

MARTHA

Lying, of course.

HANK

I didn't want to make an issue of it.

CHEYENNE

What did you tell him?

MARTHA

What was it? I had a virus, food poisoning?

HANK

What difference does it make?

MARTHA

Food poisoning, I think.

HANK

What was I supposed to tell him? You were so upset at getting propositioned that we had to leave?

MARTHA

It would have been the truth.

HANK

It wouldn't have been fair to Greg.

MARTHA

To Greg!

(to Cheyenne)

Men have to stick together.

CHEYENNE

(to Hank)

I don't understand how the truth isn't fair to him.

HANK

It was a reflection on his favorite tavern. His neighborhood. It wasn't being a good guest.

MARTHA

(laughing)

A good guest! You are truly amazing.

HANK

I don't have to take any more of this abuse from you.

MARTHA

Listen to him. Poor baby.

HANK

I don't believe you were faking it. I think you're afraid to admit you shared pleasure with me. Shared ecstasy. With a man, for God's sake! It goes against your Lesbian Politics

or whatever you call it.

MARTHA

You know what you've become? A male cliché. It saddens me actually.

HANK

A male cliché, I see. Is that code for warrior or football player or cop or what?

MARTHA

All of the above.

HANK

I'm not getting into a name-calling game with you. If you want to be called a dyke, you have to go somewhere else.

MARTHA

Oh, I'm sure among your friends, you've called me that more than once. And worse.

HANK

Which shows how little you know me.

MARTHA

Good. I'm glad you realize that. Maybe we can make progress here after all. I don't know you – and you don't know me. Get it, Hank?

HANK

I knew the woman who wept in my arms.

MARTHA

Perhaps you did. God rest her soul.

HANK

I loved that woman.

MARTHA

I'm sure you did.

HANK

Maybe I still do.

CHEYENNE

That's the problem, Dad. You have to move on.

HANK

I will not abandon or deny or reduce the importance of my past experiences. Especially experiences that are rare in this world. Don't you see why this is so important? I was blessed to share ecstasy with you! With her! Whoever the hell it was. It doesn't matter who it was. It happened – and it happened to me, I was there, I was participant and witness to something extraordinary. I will not give that up.

CHEYENNE

You don't act like you're blessed. You act like you're haunted.

MARTHA

Doomed. Branded. The brand of Dionysus.

HANK

Fuck off.

MARTHA

Does that mean we can go?

(A pause.)

CHEYENNE

Dad, I think it's time to stop this. Please put down the gun.

(He actually does, setting it on a counter.)

HANK

I wanted you to know you were born in ecstasy.

CHEYENNE

In *your* ecstasy. I can see that now. I'm glad I know that.

MARTHA

What does that make me, a womb for hire?

CHEYENNE

You said you were faking it.

MARTHA

That doesn't mean I didn't want you. I wanted a baby a hell of a lot more than he did.

HANK

I wanted a family!

MARTHA

You wanted the Idea of a Family. A cabin in the woods, lots of pretty scenery, a barefoot wife baking bread, and a cute little baby crawling on the cabin floor. You didn't want to change diapers.

HANK

Apparently you have no idea what I wanted.

MARTHA

You were a dreamer, Hank. Apparently still are.

HANK

A dream beats the hell out of this crap being built all around us.

MARTHA

That's another issue.

HANK

No, it's the same issue.

CHEYENNE

What issue do you mean?

HANK

The natural order of things. Living in harmony with nature.

MARTHA

Is that the cue to beat a drum? Or do we start chanting?

CHEYENNE

I don't follow you, Dad.

HANK

We don't live in Nature, we live against it. We fight it. We try to "fix it," as if something needed fixing. And it always comes back to bite us in the ass. Progress is an

illusion. History is circular.

MARTHA

But evolution is linear. This is the sense in which progress means something.

CHEYENNE

Explain that.

MARTHA

I'm waiting for a response from your father.

HANK

No comment.

MARTHA

We do evolve. We're not living in caves, and as much as you hate the way condos and cheap ugly housing projects spout up everywhere, as I do, people do buy them and apparently find what happiness they can in them. We learn to adjust to our environment. With one important, and perhaps suicidal, exception. Shall I pause for effect? Anybody want to guess?

HANK

As if it's not obvious what you're going to say.

CHEYENNE

This is all over my head.

MARTHA

Want to tell her, Hank?

HANK

Elam spelled backwards.

CHEYENNE

M ... a ... l ... e? Male?

HANK

Your mother thinks the world's problems are caused by men. I suppose that's capital-M Men.

MARTHA

I think this is perfectly obvious.

CHEYENNE

It's too simplistic.

HANK

Good girl. I want to read you something.

(He starts looking around.)

MARTHA

Think about it.

HANK

A former student sent me a poem. Quite remarkable really. I never knew he was a poet. It's about how much men and women have changed.

MARTHA

(ignoring this)

Take away men, and you take away most of the violence in the world.

HANK

Here it is.

(He picks up a sheet of paper.)

MARTHA

The facts of history speak for themselves.

HANK

Catherine the Great? Margaret Thatcher?

MARTHA

Women trying to become men.

HANK

A man can't win, can he? Is this the Lesbian Agenda?

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

Didn't I say your father was a homophobe?

HANK

You're making the political pronouncements, not I. Listen to this:

(reading from the sheet of paper)

"I'm not fit company for women of intelligence if their necks are long, if their hips are slim, if their eyes darken with forbidden possibilities

I'm not fit company for women of intelligence who reject an old biology, who prefer sensitive men who talk about feelings un-biologically

If a thought is unspoken speech then isn't a feeling unthought thought? And if a feeling is unthought, how possibly can it be talked about?

I'm not fit company for women of intelligence who mistake equality for similarity

Which brings me to you

In these dim lights I'm not sure what I see but go on
instinct when I say the odds strike me as good, despite the
pleasantries between us, I'm not fit company, I'm not fit
company"

CHEYENNE

Let me see that.

HANK

What's happened to men and women in this country is very
sad.

(He gives Cheyenne the poem. A pause.)

MARTHA

Let me try again. I'm suggesting that the male half of the
species has outlived its usefulness because it has not
evolved and responded to changes in the world
environment. Once upon a time, warriors were necessary
for survival. But for some time now, warriors have been the
problem.

HANK

The world is more dangerous than ever. I think that means
we need warriors, men, more so, not less.

MARTHA

Dangers unilaterally caused by men. You continue on this
path and the species becomes extinct.

HANK

You know what would happen if all American men disappeared overnight? In less than a year, you'd be given the choice of worshipping in a mosque or getting your head chopped off. You think the Lesbian Coalition is going to save America?

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

I rest my case.

CHEYENNE

Did you two argue like this when you were married?

MARTHA

I've never been married.

CHEYENNE

When "she" was married?

MARTHA

I think she and Hank were both good liberals of their day. At least, until she discovered she no longer could trust him.

HANK

I wasn't going to start a race riot on your behalf! Jesus Christ. Go on, get the hell out of here. Both of you. I've had it with you.

CHEYENNE

What are you going to do?

MARTHA

(To Cheyenne)

When the door cracks open, rush through it before he changes his mind.

(Martha starts for the door.

Cheyenne stays put.)

CHEYENNE

You scare the hell out of me, Dad. Please come down the mountain with us.

MARTHA

Leave me out of it.

CHEYENNE

With me.

MARTHA

I thought we were having dinner.

CHEYENNE

I'm worried about him. Don't make me choose between you.

MARTHA

Are we having dinner or not?

CHEYENNE

Not now. Not tonight.

MARTHA

Very well.

(Takes the door knob.)

CHEYENNE

I'll call you!

(Martha turns back into the room.)

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

I don't trust him. I want you to leave with me.

CHEYENNE

I'm fine. I think it's better if you go now.

MARTHA

You're sure?

CHEYENNE

Yes.

MARTHA

Hank? You wouldn't hurt her to spite me, would you?

HANK

(ignoring this)

It was not a terrible thing to weep in my arms. It's not something to be ashamed of. Not even for a lesbian to be ashamed of. Vulnerability like that is precious and rare. We have to remember it. We have to honor it. "To be is to be vulnerable." Who wrote that?

MARTHA

(to Cheyenne)

Call me tonight.

CHEYENNE

It may be late.

MARTHA

I don't care how late it is.

CHEYENNE

Okay.

*(With a final glance at Hank,
Martha exists.)*

CHEYENNE

I was conceived from your ecstasy. I like how that sounds.

HANK

I've never seen anyone as naked, as emotionally raw, as fragile and vulnerable, as your mother weeping in my arms. I wanted her to know she was safe. I wanted her to know I would protect her.

CHEYENNE

I think that's what she wanted from you in the bar. She wanted to feel like you were protecting her. She wanted to feel like she did in your arms in the blue tent and the house by the railroad tracks.

HANK

What could I have done?

CHEYENNE

It was unrealistic to confront him and make a scene. I understand that. But maybe there was something ...

HANK

I don't know what.

CHEYENNE

I don't know either. It was a complicated situation. But I think what she wanted was to feel protected.

HANK

I was protecting her, and myself too, by leaving. I thought I was.

CHEYENNE

In reality, you probably were. But she wanted to feel like your arms were around her.

(A pause.)

HANK

Can a woman fake it that well?

CHEYENNE

Dad, in my experience, a woman can fake it very well.

HANK

It's not right. A man can't fake it. He gets it up or he doesn't.

CHEYENNE

You know what they say: no one ever said life was fair.

HANK

It never occurred to me she was faking it.

CHEYENNE

For you. It was like a gift.

HANK

A gift?

CHEYENNE

She didn't want to take your pleasure from you, even as she, her authentic self, was beginning to move away from you.

HANK

You think she was faking it just for me?

CHEYENNE

Of course. There's no point in faking it for yourself.

HANK

But it felt the same to me.

CHEYENNE

In a way, it was the same.

HANK

No. We weren't bonded if she was faking it.

CHEYENNE

That's true.

HANK

Wait. I should have seen the difference. She stopped weeping in my arms. I thought it was because it was less surprising to her, less jolting. She became used to the intensity of it. But she stopped weeping in my arms. That was the end of it, and I missed it.

CHEYENNE

That makes sense to me, Dad.

HANK

So now I know. All that time, I was duped.

CHEYENNE

It doesn't lessen the other. She still wept in your arms. You'll always have the memory of that.

HANK

But it wasn't her.

CHEYENNE

Whoever she was, she was a woman weeping in your arms. She was someone. You didn't imagine it. She was flesh, she was real. You touched her, you smelled her. Whoever she was. Not many people get such an experience, I think. I never have.

HANK

You never wept in Tim's arms?

CHEYENNE

Once, a little sobbing. Even that frightened him to death. I usually feel disconnected after sex. I feel sad.

HANK

I've felt that. That's just about all I've felt since, you know ...

CHEYENNE

You're still one of the lucky ones. You have a true memory of something absolutely and profoundly human. I think if we were mentally healthy, it would be like this for everyone all the time.

HANK

You do?

CHEYENNE

I really do.

HANK

Where did we go wrong? Was it always this way?

*(LIGHTS CHANGE to the past. But now
Hank and Cheyenne are a PIONEER
COUPLE, homesteading in the 19th
century.)*

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

I have supper for you, husband! Come in now before it gets cold!

*(Hank enters and will mime washing
his hands.)*

HANK/PIONEER

Let me get cleaned up.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

I used the last of our meat. I thought we should celebrate you getting the crop in.

HANK/PIONEER

It's the rain we need now more than celebrating. If it don't come soon, we're in for a long winter, I fear.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

I've prayed for rain every day. I feel like the Good Lord has heard me.

HANK/PIONEER

Then we've nothing to worry about.

(He moves to Cheyenne.)

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

Have your seat, and I'll serve you.

HANK/PIONEER

Not yet. I want to hold you.

(They embrace.)

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

You must be tired.

HANK/PIONEER

Harder work than I thought when we were in Missouri dreaming about Oregon. They left the hard work part out

of the brochures.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

You don't fool me, husband. You knew how hard it would be. You pretend to think otherwise for my sake.

HANK/PIONEER

You work as hard as I do. Sometimes I think harder.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

We do what has to be done. Your dreams don't come true without work.

HANK/PIONEER

We're on our way to ours. We made it safe to Oregon, we got our own place ...

(She tries to wiggle out of his arms.)

HANK/PIONEER

Now where do you think you're going?

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

Your food's getting cold.

HANK/PIONEER

I ate cold food before.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

What is going on? Are you fixing to tell me something?

HANK/PIONEER

I guess I am.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

Well, get it said so we can eat.

HANK/PIONEER

I was thinking there's still one thing missing from that Oregon Dream of ours. I was thinking it's time to start a family.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

Listen to you.

HANK/PIONEER

I see no reason to wait.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

It might help if we knew we had crops to harvest.

HANK/PIONEER

I trust your prayers on that.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

And if I'm taking care of a baby—

HANK/PIONEER

I figured all that out. My brother's coming west. Bringing the whole family.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

When?

HANK/PIONEER

Right away. I got a letter yesterday. Jed brought it by.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

And never told me?

HANK/PIONEER

I was waiting for the right moment. I figure he can build on the lot behind us, and two of his boys are old enough to farm now, we'll have a whole family to do the work around here. You can spend all day spoiling our baby.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

Please don't pinch me. I want to believe I'm not having a dream here.

HANK/PIONEER

It's time to start a family.

CHEYENNE/PIONEER

I love you so much ...

(They kiss. BLACKOUT.)

2/

*(Hank and Cheyenne at the table as
before.)*

CHEYENNE

Dad, let's go down the mountain.

HANK

I suppose it's time.

CHEYENNE

Good.

HANK

I've got a bomb. Maybe I should blow this up.

CHEYENNE

Not a good idea.

HANK

I guess not.

*(They get up to go. Hank picks up
the vest/bomb.)*

CHEYENNE

Leave it here.

HANK

Right.

(They move to the door.)

CHEYENNE

You have good memories, Dad. No one can take them away from you.

HANK

A man needs his memories.

CHEYENNE

I understand that. You've been one of the lucky ones.

HANK

You think so?

CHEYENNE

I'm so glad you shared this with me. I like being born in ecstasy.

HANK

I like it, too.

CHEYENNE

Yours is all the ecstasy I need.

(Arm-in-arm, they leave. BLACKOUT.

The play is over.)

SCREENPLAY

EMIL: ...'Not the bronze casket but the brazen wing.'

From "The Brazen Wing"

THE BRAZEN WING

FADE IN:

EXT. CITY – DAY

A SERIES OF SHOTS

City life.

--a clogged freeway at rush hour.

--a mall parking lot, full, cars roaming for a space.

--busy city streets. Buses, taxis.

EXT. MEDICAL CENTER - DAY

A full parking lot.

A public bus pulls up.

INT. CLINIC - EXAM ROOM - DAY

EMIL COLLINS, 70s, buttons his shirt after an exam.

Sitting with him is his DOCTOR. He hands Emil a prescription.

DOCTOR: I'm giving you stronger pain medication.

Emil takes the slip of paper.

EMIL: Tell me straight, doc. How long?

DOCTOR: In the best of worlds, three, four months.

EMIL: In the worst?

DOCTOR: I can get you in a hospice, Emil. You'd be more comfortable there.

EMIL: In other words, any time after I leave here. Does it come gradually or do I fall over?

DOCTOR: It's impossible to predict something like this. I'll call you later this week about the hospice.

INT. CLINIC - PHARMACY - DAY

Emil sits waiting for his prescription. Flipping through a magazine.

WANDA, 50s, approaches.

WANDA: Professor Collins?

Emil doesn't seem to recognize her.

WANDA: Wanda McDonald. I took American Literature from you maybe fifteen years ago.

EMIL: (*distant*) How are you?

WANDA: I'm fine. I want to tell you how much you changed my life. I was so scared coming back to school after so long. You inspired me to keep at it. You were so inspirational.

Emil looks embarrassed.

EMIL: Well, I'm going to assume you graduated then.

WANDA: I went on and got my Masters. I teach American Lit at the community college. You're my model of what a teacher should be.

VOICE ON SPEAKER: Emil Collins.

Emil stands up. He still looks embarrassed.

EMIL: I'm glad it all worked out.

He heads for the counter.

INT. CLINIC - FRONT DESK - DAY

Emil starts toward the exit. He carries a small bag. He passes the front desk.

ROSE, 20s, the secretary, sees him.

ROSE: No poetry today, Professor Collins?

Emil stops and turns.

EMIL: I almost forgot. Here's one. "As long as you and I have arms and lips which are for kissing and to sing with, who cares if some one-eyed son-of-a-bitch invents an instrument to measure Spring with?" E.E. Cummings.

ROSE: Now my day's complete.

Rose smiles as Emil exits.

EXT. CLINIC - DAY

Emil emerges into a sun-bright day. He takes a deep breath.

He closes his eyes. Another deep breath.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Emil at the bar with WALLY, 60s, a friend.

WALLY: That's terrible news!

EMIL: Sshh, I don't want the whole galaxy to know. It's not as bad as you think. I've lived a good life, and the world's going to hell in a hand basket. I'm ready to go.

WALLY: Don't say that.

EMIL: I just did.

WALLY: What are you going to do?

EMIL: That's what I've been thinking about. Maybe

take a trip. I'm not sure.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - STREET - DAY

A bus pulls to the curb. Emil gets off.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - RHODES HOUSE - DAY

Upper-end homes along a shaded street.

BILLY RHODES, teens, is mowing the front lawn.

Emil slowly approaches.

Billy turns off the lawn mower.

BILLY: Hey, Gramps! How'd it go?

EMIL: I've got the heart of a linebacker.

BILLY: You should've called. I would've picked you up.

EMIL: You would've, would you? How would you manage that?

BILLY: I'd take Mom's car. It's not that far. And on the way back, you'd be in the car, so driving with my learner's permit would be legal.

EMIL: Next time I have to get somewhere, I'll let you know.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The family around the dinner table: Besides Emil and Billy, Emil's daughter MARTI and her husband, DON, both late 30s, and Billy's older sister, SARA, 19.

MARTI: What did the doctor have to say, Dad?

EMIL: I have the heart of a marathon runner.

BILLY: And a linebacker.

EMIL: (*winking at him*) That, too.

MARTI: Your blood pressure's good? Nothing out of order?

EMIL: Everything's out of order. It's called old age.

MARTI: I'm allowed to worry about you.

DON: *(to Marti)* Change of subject. Are you telling her or am I?

SARA: Telling me what?

MARTI: We decided to spend a week at the beach. We're putting you in charge. Think you can handle it?

Sara lights up.

DON: And no parties. You keep an eye on her, Billy.

SARA: Dad, I'm a sophomore in college. Don't treat me like I'm in high school.

DON: As long as you're home for the summer, you play by the house rules.

SARA: Yes, I can handle it. I'll even cook for these comedians.

EMIL: I can't wait.

EXT. RHODES HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Seeing Don and Marti off are Sara and Billy. Don in the car behind the wheel, waiting for Marti to get in.

MARTI: Give me a hug.

She hugs Billy, then Sara.

MARTI: No parties. I mean it.

SARA: Mother, please.

MARTI: I'm calling to check on you.

DON: Marti...

MARTI: We'll be home next Monday night. It may

be late.

Marti gets in the car. Don backs out the driveway.

And they are gone.

BILLY: Are you really going to cook?

SARA: What I'm going to do, kiddo, is make a deal with you.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - SARA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Sara is packing a tote bag. Billy watches.

SARA: I'll be back Monday.

BILLY: What time?

SARA: I don't know. Afternoon.

BILLY: How are we going to eat? I don't think Gramps knows how to cook.

SARA: Gramps has money. He'll take you out every night.

BILLY: Shouldn't I get something for not telling mom?

Sara takes out her wallet. She hands Billy a twenty dollar bill.

SARA: Don't ask for more because it's all I have.

BILLY: Are you going to have sex with him?

EXT. RHODES HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Sara with her bag, waiting in the driveway.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - DAY

Emil at the front window. Billy joins him.

EMIL: Where's Sara going?

BILLY: She's taking off with her boyfriend.

EMIL: Your mother know about this?

BILLY: No way.

Emil studies him.

EMIL: Sara bought you off. How much did you get?

BILLY: Twenty bucks.

EMIL: You come too cheap, lad.

BILLY: And the keys to Mom's car. Want to go for a ride later?

EXT. RHODES HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DAY

A car pulls up. Behind the wheel is JASON, 20s.

Sara climbs in and they're off.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - DAY

Billy and Emil watch Sara leave.

BILLY: They're going to have sex.

EMIL: Sex? Remind me what that is again.

Billy grins and Emil musses his hair.

EXT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Billy driving Marti's red VW convertible. Emil riding shotgun.

Billy's a safe driver. Both are grinning, enjoying themselves.

INT. ICE CREAM PARLOR - DAY

They sit at a table over ice cream sundaes.

EMIL: I need to take a little trip. Since you're such a great chauffeur, how'd you like to come along?

BILLY: Where to?

EMIL: Idaho.

BILLY: Idaho, wow!

EMIL: Clearwater country.

BILLY: How far is that?

EMIL: Not far at all. A long day's drive.

BILLY: They come back Monday night.

EMIL: We'll be fine. Leave today, get there tomorrow. Spend a few days. I'll show you God's country and we'll do some fishing.

BILLY: Awesome.

EXT. RHODES HOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Packing the VW for the trip. The top is down.

Both Emil and Billy are traveling light. Each puts a tote bag in the trunk.

Emil climbs in.

EMIL: I'm ready when you are.

Billy jumps behind the wheel.

BILLY: This is so awesome.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - STREET - DAY

The VW cruising.

EMIL: Pull in over there.

EXT. TAVERN - DAY

Billy pulls in front of the tavern.

EMIL: I won't be a minute.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Emil enters and finds Wally at the bar.

WALLY: *(to bartender)* Bring a beer for Emil.

EMIL: Just here to make a delivery.

He hands Wally an envelope. On it is printed: "Emil Collins. To be opened in the event of death."

WALLY: Damn it, Emil, why you giving me something like this?

EMIL: It's a copy of my will. I named you executor.

WALLY: I'm not a lawyer.

EMIL: You're a friend. That's what counts.

WALLY: You decide what to do?

EMIL: I ever tell you about Emma?

WALLY: Probably. I don't remember. Who's Emma?

EMIL: The one that got away. I'm going to find her and I'm going to ask her to marry me.

WALLY: You can't ask a woman to marry somebody on his death bed.

EMIL: You don't know Emma.

WALLY: What if she's already married?

EMIL: I'll ask her to get divorced.

WALLY: What if she's dead?

EMIL: Then I really blew it.

EXT. TAVERN - DAY

Emil comes out and gets back in the car.

EMIL: To Idaho, James!

Billy grins and starts the engine.

A SERIES OF SHOTS - THE DRIVE TO IDAHO

--on a crowded freeway in the city.

--on an Interstate in the suburbs.

--on an Interstate in countryside.

--at a rest stop, Emil pointing out their destination on a large wall map.

--back on the Interstate, different countryside.

--at a fast food speaker, ordering.

--on the Interstate with burgers in hand.

EXT. INTERSTATE - DAY

The VW top is up. Emil driving.

He takes an exit ramp.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Billy, who was dozing at the window, stirs.

BILLY: We need gas?

EMIL: We're calling it a day.

BILLY: Already?

EMIL: We've come about as far as my back can take.

EXT. MOTEL - OFFICE - DAY

The VW parked in front. Billy waits.

Emil comes out, holding up a key.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM - DAY

They each carry a bag into the motel room. Twin double beds.

EMIL: Which bed you want?

Billy tosses his bag onto a bed.

EXT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

The VW parked in the lot.

INT. RESTAURANT - BOOTH - NIGHT

Emil and Billy finishing up dinner.

BILLY: Why do you call Idaho God's country?

EMIL: Because it is. Only northern Idaho, to be precise.

ILLY: If it's so great, why'd you leave?

EMIL: Because many, many years ago I decided I should go to college and become a professor. Sometimes life deals you very difficult choices. You do the best you can at the time.

BILLY: How come we never went to Idaho on vacation?

EMIL: Because your mother wouldn't be able to find a five-star resort.

INT. RESTAURANT - BOOTH – NIGHT (LATER)

Billy working on an ice cream sundae. Emil with coffee.

EMIL: You have a girlfriend?

BILLY: Not really.

EMIL: That almost sounds like yes.

BILLY: She already has a boyfriend.

EMIL: Maybe she really likes you better.

BILLY: Yeah, right.

EMIL: It's not possible?

BILLY: She's a cheerleader. Her boyfriend's a football player.

EMIL: Ah. So you've given up.

BILLY: Wouldn't you?

EMIL: Sometimes we give up too easily.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM - NIGHT

Emil in one bed, Billy in the other. Watching TV.

Emil turns out his bedside lamp.

EMIL: Goodnight.

BILLY: Want me to turn off TV?

EMIL: Won't bother me at all.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM – NIGHT (LATER)

A dark room. Emil snoring to beat the band.

Billy rolls over. He grabs the second pillow on his bed and holds it over his head.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM - DAY

Emil comes out from the bathroom. Billy is still in bed.

Emil shakes Billy.

EMIL: Rise and shine! One hundred miles before breakfast.

EXT. INTERSTATE - DAY

Emil driving.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

The top up. Billy sprawled on the back seat, sleeping.

EXT. TRUCK STOP - DAY

The VW parked and dwarfed by 18-wheelers.

INT. TRUCK STOP - TABLE - DAY

Billy with eggs, bacon, hot cakes. Emil with oatmeal and coffee.

EMIL: I have a confession to make.

Billy looks up but says nothing.

EMIL: I'm looking for someone.

BILLY: Who?

EMIL: A woman. The one who got away.

BILLY: Who's that?

EMIL: Her name is Emma. I don't even know if she's still alive.

BILLY: When's the last time you heard from her?

EMIL: Let me think ... I haven't seen her since 1947. But I talked to her on the phone after that. Once.

BILLY: You haven't heard from her in all that time?

EMIL: Don't rub it in.

BILLY: So why do you want to see her all of a sudden?

Emil stands up.

EMIL: Desire is one of the wonderful mysteries of life, lad. Excuse me. Nature calls.

He hobbles away. Billy watches him go, puzzled.

EXT. INTERSTATE - INTERCHANGE - DAY

The VW moves off the Interstate onto a state highway.

EXT. HIGHWAY - FARMLAND - DAY

The VW on a two-lane highway through Palouse country.

In the distance, a lone tractor working the land.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Emil driving. Billy staring off at the tractor.

BILLY: He has to plow that whole gigantic field?

EMIL: It's called farming.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - OUTSKIRTS - DAY

The VW on the outskirts of a small Idaho town we'll call Homestead.

A junk yard. A gas station or two. A welcoming sign.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - MAIN STREET - DAY

Homestead's Main Street is typically lined with the square, brick and stone buildings of a western town.

Emil pulls the VW in front of a bar.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Emil keeps the engine running.

EMIL: Can you amuse yourself for about half an hour?

BILLY: Is she in the bar?

EMIL: I doubt it. I'm just hoping I find somebody I know.

BILLY: Is this a wild goose chase?

EMIL: It's not over till it's over. Be back here in thirty.

INT. BAR - DAY

Emil enters the bar.

Half-a-dozen men sit on stools. A few couples at small tables along a wall.

Most of the men look old enough to be retired, wearing cowboy hats or baseball caps. Emil joins them at the bar.

The BARTENDER, a middle-aged woman, comes over.

BARTENDER: What can I get you?

EMIL: Short beer. Whatever's on tap.

She goes to draw it.

Emil looks down the bar for a friendly face. Just men lost in their thoughts.

The bartender brings his beer.

EMIL: I'm looking for Emma Wells. That was her last name when she was single. You wouldn't know her, would you?

BARTENDER: Jake, you know Emma Wells?

An old man down the bar, JAKE, looks up. He just nods.

BARTENDER: This here gent is looking for her.

EMIL: *(to Jake)* Can I buy you a beer?

EXT. HOMESTEAD - MAIN STREET - DAY

The VW cruising Main Street.

Billy reaches one end of town, turns around, and comes back. The downtown section of Homestead is about three blocks long.

Finally he pulls into a fast food restaurant at one end of

town.

INT. FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

Billy goes to the counter.

INT. BAR - TABLE - DAY

Emil and Jake at a table.

JAKE: You know Emma's daughter?

EMIL: I didn't know she had a daughter.

JAKE: And two sons. She could give you the address of the place.

INT. FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

Billy finishing up a burger.

JENNY, teens, comes by, busing tables. She wears the company uniform.

JENNY: Everything okay?

BILLY: It's great.

JENNY: You're not from around here.

BILLY: I guess it shows.

JENNY: This is a small town. If you don't know somebody coming in, it usually means they're just passing through.

BILLY: I'm visiting with my granddad. He grew up here.

JENNY: What's his name?

BILLY: Emil Collins.

JENNY: I'll ask my grandma if she knows him. You staying long?

BILLY: Just a few days. He's taking me fishing.

JENNY: Then we have something in common. I'm on the river every chance I get.

BILLY: Actually I've never been fishing before.

EXT. BAR - DAY

Emil comes out. No Billy.

EXT. FAST FOOD JOINT - PARKING LOT - DAY

Jenny has walked Billy to his car. She hands him a slip of paper.

JENNY: Call me. Maybe grandma knows your granddad.

BILLY: Way cool. Thanks.

They exchange smiles. An attraction is obvious.

EXT. BAR - DAY

The VW pulls up.

Emil comes around to the driver's side.

EMIL: Slide over.

Billy does. Emil gets behind the wheel.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

The VW cruising through a cluster of homes, a small town neighborhood.

Emil pulls to the curb.

EXT. HOME - PORCH - DAY

Emil and Bill at the door, waiting.

MARTHA, 40s, opens the door.

MARTHA: May I help you?

INT. HOME - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Emil and Billy sit on a sofa across the room from Martha.

MARTHA: I'm trying to raise three kids by myself. I can't look after her, too. Dennis offered his guest room but he lives in LA, and you couldn't get mom there if you paid her.

EMIL: Can't say I blame her.

MARTHA: When we decided it wasn't safe for her to live alone, we had little choice. It's a good facility. Very good reputation.

EMIL: Do you have the address? I'd like to visit her.

MARTHA: Let me get it.

Martha leaves the room.

EMIL: She looks a little like Emma. Only Emma was prettier.

EXT. HOUSE - PORCH - DAY

Martha seeing them out.

MARTHA: She doesn't get many visitors, I'm afraid. I can only get up there a weekend every month or so. I'm sure she'll be delighted to see you.

EMIL: I'll give her your best.

INT. HOMESTEAD - STREET - DAY

Emil driving.

EMIL: It's about an hour. We could get a room and

you could stay here if you wanted.

BILLY: You don't mind?

EMIL: Can't be much fun listening to a couple of dinosaurs reminisce.

BILLY: I met a girl who says her grandmother may know you.

EMIL: You met a girl already! Before you were telling me you're the shy type.

BILLY: She wants me to call her later.

EMIL: We'd better get a room.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - MOTEL - DAY

The VW parked in front of a motel door. Emil at the car.

EMIL: If I'm not back by six, eat without me. You need money?

BILLY: I still have ten bucks.

Emil reaches into his wallet.

Billy's eyes light up when he sees how much Emil is giving him.

BILLY: Man, thanks!

EMIL: You probably should take that girl out to dinner. I'll fend for myself and catch up with you later.

He gets into the VW.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The VW, its top down, cruises through farmland down a two-lane highway.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Emil lost in his thoughts.

INT. GYMNASIUM – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

SUPER: "Homestead High School Gymnasium. Graduation Prom, 1947."

A crowded dance floor. A SMALL COMBO plays on a temporary stage.

Dancing close are YOUNG EMIL and YOUNG EMMA, teens, in their prom best.

The song ends. Applause.

Emil and Emma move off the dance floor. They pass MR. FRYER.

MR. FRYER: Emil, I heard Gonzaga gave you a scholarship. Congratulations.

YOUNG EMIL: Thank you, sir.

MR. FRYER: You look beautiful tonight, Emma.

YOUNG EMMA: Thank you, Mr. Fryer.

They move on.

INT. GYMNASIUM - STORAGE ROOM – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Emil and Emma sneak into a dark storage room. Lights from the hallway spill through the cracked door.

They immediately embrace and kiss. Hot and heavy.

EXT. UNIVERSITY TOWN - DAY

The VW enters the outskirts of a university town.

INT. HOMESTEAD - MOTEL ROOM - DAY

Billy waiting on the phone.

BILLY: Jenny?...It's Billy Rhodes. You sold me a hamburger this afternoon....I was wondering if your grandmother knows my granddad....I can't wait to tell him.

He closes his eyes, makes a face, and goes for it.

BILLY: Say, I was wondering, are you doing anything later?

EXT. UNIVERSITY TOWN - ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY
- DAY

The VW pulls into the parking lot.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - COUNTER - DAY

Emil steps up.

NURSE: May I help you?

EMIL: I'm looking for Emma ...

He glances at the slip of paper Martha gave him.

EMIL: ...Simpson.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - HALLWAY - DAY

Emil follows the nurse.

NURSE: Are you a relative?

EMIL: An old friend.

NURSE: I'm sure she'll be happy to see you.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - EMMA'S ROOM - DAY

EMMA, 70s, sits in a stuffed chair. She's staring at a TV soap opera. She looks asleep with her eyes open. A knock on the door.

NURSE (O.S.): Emma, you have company!

The door opens and the nurse peeks in.

NURSE: Someone to see you, dear.

Emma turns to the door. Her static expression hasn't changed. Emil appears. He sees Emma – and looks stricken.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - COUNTRY ROAD – NIGHT
(FLASHBACK)

A car parked on the shoulder of a deserted road.

INT. CAR – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Emil and Emma, prom clothes disheveled and askew, making out. Hotter and heavier.

Emil groans and pulls away.

YOUNG EMMA: No, I want to. Emil, I want to.

Emil studies her. She kisses him.

YOUNG EMMA: I want to.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

The car door opens. They get out and climb into the back seat.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - EMMA'S ROOM - DAY

The nurse lets Emil in.

NURSE: I'll let you two visit. Emma, you have company!

Emma just sits there.

NURSE: It takes her a while, but she'll be with you in a minute.

The nurse leaves, closing the door behind her.

Emil stands inside the doorway.

EMIL: Emma? It's Emil. Emil Collins.

INT. CAR – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Emil on top of Emma. She makes a cry of pain.

YOUNG EMIL: Emma?

YOUNG EMMA: It's okay. Don't stop...please, don't stop.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - EMMA'S ROOM - DAY

Emil sits down next to Emma.

EMIL: Hello, Emma.

Emma's expression finally changes. She looks inquisitive.

EMMA: Who are you?

EMIL: Emil Collins.

EMMA: Emil...

EMIL: It's been a long time.

EMMA: ...Emil.

Emil takes her hand.

EMIL: Do you remember me?

She studies him.

EMMA: Of course, I remember you.

INT. CAR – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Young Emil and Emma are in the front seat, dressed, after lovemaking. Her head is on his shoulder.

YOUNG EMIL: One day I'm going to show you the most incredible sight in God's creation.

YOUNG EMMA: The Goose Necks.

YOUNG EMIL: You have to see it to believe it. It makes you feel so small – and yet so ... I don't know what the word is. Blessed. To live amidst such wonder. To live amidst such beauty on Earth.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - EMMA'S ROOM - DAY

Emma looks at their joined hands.

EMIL: It's been a long time.

EMMA: I thought you were dead.

EMIL: I should have come long before now. There's so much to talk about. I don't know where to begin. I saw a garden outside. Would you like to go out?

EMMA: Yes, I think I would.

INT. HOMESTEAD - CAFE – DAY (FLASHBACK)

Emil and Emma in a back booth. They lean close and speak in hushed tones.

Emma has been crying.

YOUNG EMIL: It's going to be okay. I just have to think a minute.

YOUNG EMMA: I'm so scared.

YOUNG EMIL: I'll get a job.

YOUNG EMMA: You can't. You have a scholarship.

YOUNG EMIL: We'll get married. We'll figure a way for me to go to college later.

YOUNG EMMA: I feel so horrible. I feel like I'm ruining your life.

YOUNG EMIL: Emma, stop it. We're in this together.

He takes her hand.

YOUNG EMIL: I love you, Emma.

EXT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - GARDEN - DAY

Emil and Emma walk in the garden.

EMMA: It's so lovely.

EMIL: I was worried when I saw you. You looked so ...

EMMA: Dead? It's boredom. I am so bored in this place!

They walk a moment.

EMIL: I came here for a reason, Emma. I didn't know if I'd find you or not. But if I did, I had something I had to tell you. I'm going to say it now and get it off my chest. You don't have to say anything. Just listen.

EMMA: Well, you certainly have my attention.

EMIL: I've always regretted not marrying you when I had the chance.

EMMA: What a sweet thing to say.

EMIL: It broke my heart when you married somebody else.

Emma turns away.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - WELLS HOME - DAY
(FLASHBACK)

Emil waiting on the front porch. Emma opens the door.

YOUNG EMMA: Emil, what are you doing here?

YOUNG EMIL: I need to speak to your father.

YOUNG EMMA: Why?

YOUNG EMIL: I'm going to ask his permission to marry you.

YOUNG EMMA: You can't tell him!

YOUNG EMIL: I'm just asking for your hand. May I see him?

YOUNG EMMA: (*frantic*) No, I think we should wait.

YOUNG EMIL: There's no point.

YOUNG EMMA: But I was just about to call you. I have news. Everything's changed, Emil. It was what they call a false pregnancy. You can go to Gonzaga, after all. We can write and see each other during the holidays, just like we planned.

Emil looks stunned. Emma embraces him.

YOUNG EMMA: It can be just like it was before.

But there are tears in her eyes.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - MOTEL - DAY

Billy waits outside the hotel room.

A car pulls up. Jenny is driving.

Billy gets in.

INT. JENNY'S CAR - DAY

Jenny wears casual clothes. She's all smiles.

JENNY: I'm glad you called.

BILLY: Me, too.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - MOTEL - DAY

Jenny's car pulls away and onto Main Street.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - DINING ROOM - DAY

Emil and Emma seated at a table. RUTH, who works in the kitchen, sets a piece of pie in front of each of them.

RUTH: Here we go. Mr. Collins, if this isn't the best coconut pie you've ever tasted, you let me know.

EMIL: It looks delicious.

RUTH: Only the best for my girl.

She beams at Emma. Emma smiles back. Then Ruth goes back to the kitchen.

An awkward silence.

EMIL: Do they let you off the premises?

EMMA: It isn't a prison, if that's what you mean. But they're responsible for me. I have to sign out.

EMIL: I was wondering if you'd like to go fishing with me.

EMMA: I remember how much you like to fish.

EMIL: I haven't done much lately. City life, you know. I live with my daughter.

EMMA: Tell me about your family.

EMIL: After you answer my question. Do you want to go fishing?

EMMA: I'm not sure they'd let me go without supervision. They'd be afraid I'd slip on a rock and drown myself.

EMIL: I'd be there.

EMMA: They'd be worried about you for the same reason.

EMIL: How about you sneak out?

EMMA: Oh my!

EMIL: I'm serious. I come by early in the morning, before anybody's up, and take you fishing.

EMMA: That sounds like a real adventure.

EMIL: You always were the adventurous kind. We'd spend the day fishing and then I'd bring you back.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

Jenny's car is parked on the shoulder. Below, the river.

On the bank, Jenny is preparing her pole. Billy stands beside her, holding another pole, looking like he has no idea what to do with it.

JENNY: You never even cast before?

BILLY: You don't get a lot of chances to fish in the city.

JENNY: So we'll start at the beginning. First, you bait your hook.

EXT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - PARKING LOT - DAY

Emil and Emma stand at the VW.

EMIL: I'm going to be here at five in the morning.

Don't you change your mind on me.

EMMA: I'll be here.

EMIL: Good. We'll have ourselves quite a day.

He moves forward. They awkwardly embrace.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

Jenny stands behind Billy, showing him how to cast.

He casts, reels it in, and casts again.

He's a quick learner.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Emil in the VW, heading back to Homestead.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

Billy with his line in the water. Beside him, Jenny has her line in the water.

Billy is finally fishing on his own.

Above, on the road, the VW passes Jenny's car and heads on.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - SPORTING GOODS STORE - DAY

The VW parked outside a sporting goods store.

INT. SPORTING GOODS STORE - DAY

Emil pushing a cart through the store.

A tent, a camp stove, three sleeping bags, other camping equipment piled in the cart.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

Billy has a fish on the line. He reels it in, and Jenny nets it.

BILLY: Is it a salmon?

JENNY: A trout. You did great!

She raises a hand. Billy high-fives.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - MOTEL - DAY

Jenny's car pulls behind the VW and stops. They both get out.

Billy sees all the camping gear in the VW.

JENNY: Are you going camping?

BILLY: I thought we were going fishing.

JENNY: They go together.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM - DAY

Emil is dozing on a bed when the door opens. Billy and Jenny step in.

Emil twitches awake.

JENNY: I'd better go.

BILLY: We'll be there.

JENNY: If you can't, give me a call.

She flashes her smile.

JENNY: I had a great time, Billy.

BILLY: Me, too.

She's gone.

Emil sits up.

EMIL: Who had a great time?

BILLY: Jenny. Her grandmother remembers you.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

The VW is parked in a driveway.

INT. HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Around the table are Emil, Billy, and Jenny's grandmother, ANNIE, 60s. The table is filled with serving plates of food.

EMIL: I'll take your word for it.

ANNIE: You helped me with my homework several times. Especially Shakespeare. I hated reading that stuff.

BILLY: You don't remember, Gramps?

EMIL: I remembered to put on my pants this morning. After that, it gets iffy.

Jenny enters with one fried breaded trout on a plate.

JENNY: Ta da! To the fisherman goes the fish!

She places the fish in front of him.

BILLY: Wow.

EMIL: Looks to me like you had a good teacher.

He winks at Jenny. She grins.

ANNIE: I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving. Everybody dig in.

They do.

INT. HOUSE - DEN - NIGHT

Billy and Jenny are playing a video game.

INT. HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Emil is drying dishes. Annie washes.

ANNIE: I hardly knew Emma at all. My older sister, bless her soul, got close to her when Emma was pregnant. It was such a bad time for her.

EMIL: She had a difficult pregnancy?

ANNIE: Not being married and all. Everybody knew. I don't know what she would've done if Brad hadn't done the honorable thing and married her. Then, no sooner does she have the baby, and God takes her back. Emma's had such a tragic life.

Emil looks intense. All this is news to him.

EXT. HOUSE - PORCH - NIGHT

Everyone on the porch.

ANNIE: Hope to see you again before you leave.

EMIL: It was a wonderful dinner. Thanks so much.

JENNY: Call me, Billy?

Billy nods.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - NIGHT

Emil driving.

EMIL: I like her. Maybe she can visit us at the campground.

BILLY: That would be cool.

INT. MOTEL - NIGHT

Both in bed, getting ready for lights out.

EMIL: I'll shake you at four.

BILLY: You're kidding.

EMIL: I'm serious, lad. We pick Emma up at five.

BILLY: Why so early?

EMIL: We have to get her out of there before the full staff comes on. She's not supposed to go.

BILLY: Like we're helping her escape?

EMIL: Exactly like that. So lights out. Four will be here before you know it.

EXT. MOTEL - DAY

Early morning. Emil and Billy come out. Billy walks like he's half-asleep.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Emil driving.

Ahead, the horizon getting light.

EXT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - DAY

The VW pulls up and stops.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Emil lets the engine idle.

Billy is asleep against the window.

EXT. ASSISTED LIVING FACILITY - DAY

Emil gets out.

He looks around. What now?

A sound.

EMMA: Emil...

Emma steps out of the shadows. She's carrying a small bag.

EMIL: Let me help you.

He takes her bag. They walk to the car.

Emil taps on the window. Billy jumps awake.

EMIL: My grandson.

Billy opens the door.

EMIL: Billy, this is Emma. Would you mind riding
in the back seat?

Billy yawns.

BILLY: Hi. No problem.

EMMA: Look at all this. How long are we staying?

EMIL: Hey, if we have a good time, maybe we'll
never come back.

He helps Emma in. He moves around the car and gets back
behind the wheel.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Emil smiles.

EMIL: When it warms up, we'll put the top down.

A SERIES OF SHOTS

as they drive to the campground.

--back along the country road, the sun low and climbing.

--through Homestead as the town wakes up.

--along the river.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING AREA - HALLWAY - DAY

The nurse from earlier comes down the hall. She taps on
Emma's door.

Nothing.

Louder.

She unlocks the door.

INT. EMMA'S ROOM - DAY

The nurse looks inside. Nobody home.

INT. ASSISTED LIVING AREA - KITCHEN - DAY

Nurse enters. Ruth at the stove.

NURSE: Have you seen Emma this morning?

RUTH: Sure haven't.

INT. MARTHA'S HOME - DAY

Martha on the phone.

MARTHA: God, she must have dementia. Why else would she just wander off?...Don't you think you should call the police?

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

The VW enters a campground.

A few campers here and there.

Emil pull into a campsite right on the river.

Everybody piles out.

EMMA: It's beautiful!

BILLY: I caught a trout in this river.

EMIL: And ate it, too.

A SERIES OF SHOTS

as they set up camp.

--unloading the car.

--putting up the tent.

--setting up the stove.

--inflating air mattresses for the sleeping bags.

--and then to the river, fishing.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - RIVER - DAY

Everyone fishing from the bank.

Billy and Emma hook a fish almost at the same time. Great excitement.

Emil helps, netting each trout in turn.

LATER

Emil and Billy on the river alone.

Emma reading at the picnic table.

Emil moves close to where Billy is fishing.

EMIL: Where would you be if you were a fish? In faster water or slower?

BILLY: I don't know.

EMIL: Think about it. Try and think like a fish.

Billy thinks a moment.

BILLY: Slower.

EMIL: Why?

BILLY: I'd spend less energy fighting the current.

EMIL: (*grinning*) Good genes, lad. You're a natural. Now see that submerged rock?

Billy follows Emil's gesture.

EMIL: I bet there's a whale just waiting for dinner on the upstream side. If you cast right, you can fool him into thinking you're it. Cast right above, so it floats by. Yum yum.

Billy reels in. He recasts near the rock. Almost immediately he gets a strike.

BILLY: Wow!

EMIL: It's all about observation and thinking like a fish.

INT. RHODES HOME - DAY

A telephone in the living room rings. And rings.

Finally the voice mail picks up.

MARTI'S VOICE: You've reached the Rhodes residence, Marti, Don, Sara and Billy. Leave a message and the appropriate party will get back to you.

A beep.

INT. COASTAL RESORT - DECK - DAY

Marti with a cell phone on the deck of a five-star resort. Beyond, the spectacular ocean.

MARTI: Sara, it's mom. Just checking in. Give me a call on my cell when you get a chance. We're blessed with just beautiful weather here. Hope all is well on the home front. Call me. Love you.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

Evening, just after sunset.

Emma at the stove. Frying trout.

Billy at the campfire, staring into the flames.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Emil pops a pain pill, chasing it with a can of pop.
Deep breaths.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

Emil comes out of the tent.

EMIL: Man, that smells good!

EMMA: Almost ready.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - NIGHT

A lantern on the picnic table.

All three around the campfire.

Emil and Emma huddled close.

BILLY: I'm going for a walk.

EMIL: Take the flashlight.

Billy leaves.

EMIL: How long were you and Brad married?

EMMA: 40 years. He died not long after our ruby anniversary. And how long were you married? You haven't said much about your wife.

EMIL: Which one?

EMMA: How many were there?

EMIL: Four.

EMMA: Four!

EMIL: Six if you count live-ins.

EMMA: Emil Collins. I had no idea you were such a ... what is the word?

EMIL: Idiot?

EXT. CAMPGROUND - ANOTHER AREA - NIGHT

Billy at a pay phone outside the rest rooms.

INT. HOME - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jenny sprawled on her bed.

INTERCUT

JENNY: I know that campground very well.

BILLY: Think you can come?

JENNY: I can visit. I don't know if I can stay over.

BILLY: Either way would be great.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

Emil has his arm around her. Less romantic, more protection against the chill. Both staring into the fire.

EMIL: I didn't realize you'd lost a child.

Emma looks up and pulls away.

EMMA: Who told you that?

EMIL: Jenny's grandmother, Annie, said her older sister knew you. I'm sorry you had to go through that.

EMMA: What else did she say?

EMIL: That seemed like enough.

A silence.

Emma gets up and goes to the stove on the table.

EMMA: Coffee?

EMIL: I'm fine.

EMMA: I want to take a drive tomorrow. It's not far from here.

EMIL: What isn't?

EMMA: What I want to show you.

Billy returns.

BILLY: I'm going to bed.

EMMA: Half a cup of coffee and I'm right behind you.

BILLY: Are we all sleeping in the tent?

EMIL: There's room. You need privacy?

BILLY: Not really.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Emil holds the lantern.

Three sleeping bags in a row on air mattresses.

EMIL: Take the end there, Billy. I'm beside you.

EMMA: Goodnight, all.

She and Billy crawl into the end sleeping bags.

EMIL: I'll try not to step on you, lad.

He turns off the lantern.

He maneuvers over Billy and crawls into the middle sleeping bag.

Emma laughs.

EMIL: What's so funny?

EMMA: I'm so bored most of the time, the nurses have me on my death bed. If only they could see me now.

INT. COASTAL RESORT - DAY

Marti on the phone.

Don enters from the bathroom.

MARTI: Nobody's answering. Since when has either of them been out of the house at eight without me kicking them in the butt?

DON: Your dad's not answering?

MARTI: No one is home.

She slams down the receiver.

DON: No.

MARTI: What?

DON: We're not rushing back. We're not letting this ruin our vacation.

MARTI: Oh my God. What if Dad's in the hospital? That would explain why no one is home.

She punches a number.

MARTI: How do I get information?

EXT. CAMPGROUND - RIVER - DAY

Early morning. Emil alone at the river.

He folds his arms against the chill. Contemplative.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Emil has coffee on. Emma stumbles out of the tent, looking a fright.

EMMA: Good morning.

EMIL: Yes, it is.

EMMA: I slept like a rock.

EXT. CAMPGROUND – DAY LATER)

Emil and Emma at the table, eating breakfast.

Billy steps out of the tent.

EMIL: Morning. I kept your eggs warm.

INT. FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

Jenny behind the counter.

Two deputies enter. They are DEP. HALL and DEP. MALINOWSKI.

JENNY: Morning. What will it be?

DEP. HALL: Just coffee.

DEP. MALINOWSKI: Decaf, black.

DEP. HALL: Real coffee, room for cream.

He hands Jenny a flier.

DEP. HALL: You seen this woman?

THE FLIER

a photo of Emma with description and the words, "Missing from the Palouse Valley Assisted Living Center."

JENNY: I don't know her. Would you like me to put this on our bulletin board?

DEP. HALL: You took the words right out of my mouth.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Emil and Emma in the VW with the top down.

EMIL: We should be back before dinner.

BILLY: Maybe I'll have a trout dinner waiting for you. Jenny's coming by. She can help.

EMIL: *(to Emma)* Romeo here used to be shy with girls.

Emil toots the horn – and they're off.

INT. FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

Jenny on the phone.

JENNY: I don't get off till three, so it'll be four or so. Is that too late?...Okay, great! See you then.

She hangs up.

YVONNE, a teen co-worker, has overheard.

YVONNE: New boyfriend?

JENNY: I'm not sure yet.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The VW, top down, Emil at the wheel, Emma's hair blowing in the wind.

EXT. COUNTRY CEMETERY - ROAD - DAY

The VW pulls into a small cemetery.

EMMA: Park anywhere.

EXT. COUNTRY CEMETERY - GRAVES - DAY

Emma leads the way past rows of graves.

She stops at a small marker.

Emil reads: "Emily Sharon Simpson. 1948-1950."

EMIL: Your daughter?

EMMA: Our daughter.

Emil looks confused.

EMIL: I'm missing something.

EMMA: I'd decided to get an abortion. I didn't want

you to turn down your scholarship.

EMIL: Emma...if you'd told me—

EMMA: I couldn't go through with it. I named her Emily, after you. She was so beautiful.

EMIL: But what about Brad?

EMMA: He always had a thing for me. He talked me into keeping the baby and marrying him. Everyone thought it was his.

EMIL: But did you love him?

EMMA: Yes, I did come to love him. Mostly I've had a happy life. Isn't that crazy?

Emma loses herself in Emil's arms.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Jenny pulls up and parks. She gets out.

She walks down to the river where Billy is fishing. A smile on her face.

EXT. RIVER - DAY

Jenny sneaks up behind Billy. She grabs him.

He turns, and they playfully wrestle a moment.

JENNY: Catch anything?

BILLY: Take a look.

She peeks in an ice chest on the bank. Three trout.

JENNY: I think you're getting the hang of this.

EXT. COUNTRY CEMETERY - DAY

Emil and Emma strolling, holding hands.

EMIL: I told Billy we'd be back by dinner.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - TABLE - DAY

Jenny has the fish breaded and ready to fry.

Billy setting the table.

BILLY: Here they come.

The VW arrives and parks.

Emil and Emma get out.

Seeing Emma, Jenny does a double-take. The lady on the poster.

EMIL: This must be Jenny!

JENNY: Hello.

BILLY: My granddad. And this is Emma.

EMMA: Hi.

Jenny looks ill at ease. Yes, she's definitely the one on the poster.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - CAMP FIRE - NIGHT

Everyone around a camp fire.

Billy gets up.

BILLY: Be right back.

EMIL: Seeing a man about a horse?

BILLY: Right.

JENNY: I'll come with you.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - WALKWAY - NIGHT

Jenny takes Billy's arm.

JENNY: She's a missing person.

BILLY: Who is?

JENNY: Emma. A sheriff came in with a missing poster about her.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - CAMP FIRE - NIGHT

Emil and Emma, sitting close.

Billy and Jenny return.

EMIL: Everything come out all right?

BILLY: Can I talk to you a minute, Gramps?

Emil gives a "what is this about?" look to Emma. He gets up.

Billy moves away. Emil follows him into the growing darkness.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - TENT - NIGHT

Billy stops near the tent. Low tones.

BILLY: There's a wanted poster out for Emma. They think she's been kidnapped or something.

EMIL: Oh, boy.

INT. COASTAL RESORT - NIGHT

Marti on the phone once again. Don on the bed, reading.

MARTI: I have no idea what's going on. Sara's not answering her cell. I called every hospital I could think of....Well, if anything changes, you have my number.

She hangs up.

MARTI: Vicky says there are four papers in the driveway. Starting with the day we left.

DON: That's doesn't make sense. Emil always reads the paper.

MARTI: Nobody's home, Don. That's what I've been trying to tell you.

DON: Where would they go?

MARTI: I have no idea. But we can't find out sitting here thinking about it.

DON: Marti—

MARTI: If you don't want to come, I'll rent a car in the morning.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - CAMP FIRE - NIGHT

Everyone around the fire. Jenny gets up.

JENNY: I have to get back. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.

EMMA: At my age, a little notoriety does the soul good.

JENNY: I just hope no one gets in trouble.

BILLY: I'll walk you to the car.

They disappear into the night.

EMIL: At least we had our time on the river.

A reflective moment.

EMIL: (*quoting from memory*) "I do not know what it is about you that closes and opens; only something in me understands the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses. Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands." (*softly*) Cummings.

EMMA: I don't want to go back.

EMIL: We don't have much choice.

EMMA: Of course we do. What is it the brochures say? We're in our golden years. Don't you feel golden?

Emil looks away, thinking.

EMMA: What is it?

EMIL: Staying here sounds so wonderful. But don't you think they'd find us pretty quick?

EMMA: We don't have to stay here. Where is that place you used to tell me about? Your family took a vacation there. How you raved about it! The goose something?

EMIL: The Goose Necks of the San Juan. The most amazing scenery on the planet.

EMMA: Let's go there.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - PARKING AREA - NIGHT

Billy and Jenny in a lip lock. It ends.

JENNY: I guess that means I'll see you soon.

BILLY: You don't think Gramps will get in trouble, will he?

JENNY: It's not like he took her against her will. I think everybody will be thrilled she's okay.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - CAMP FIRE - NIGHT

The sound of Jenny's car leaving.

Billy appears from the shadows.

BILLY: So are we going back first thing in the morning or can I fish first?

EMIL: Change of plans. We're going into town and renting a car. You return to Homestead and Emma and I are going on a trip.

BILLY: But she's a missing person.

EMMA: Do I look lost to you?

BILLY: A trip where?

EMIL: To God's most amazing creation.

EXT. COASTAL RESORT - DAY

Don is packing the car. Marti brings out another suitcase.
There is visible friction between them.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Breaking camp. Almost done.

Emil at the car. Emma wiping down the table.
Billy brings the rolled tent to the car.

BILLY: I want to go.

EMIL: That's not a good idea.

BILLY: Why not?

EMIL: Because your mother would kill me.

BILLY: I'll leave her a message so she knows we're safe. Gramps, it's summer. I've got nothing else to do. You know we'd make better time with me driving. I mean, it can't take that long to get there. They won't even be home yet. They probably won't even know the difference.

EMIL: Your dad would know. He'd see the mileage on the car.

BILLY: Big deal. We bought our own gas, didn't we?

Emma walks up.

EMIL: He wants to come. What do you think?

EMMA: What I really think? I wish I had the courage at his age to do something this adventurous.

Billy smiles, as if it's settled.

EMIL: You're not leaving anybody a message.

A SERIES OF SHOTS – INTERCUT

The two journeys

--Emil, Emma and Billy on a country road.

--Marti and Don on the highway from the coast.

--The VW catches a highway to head south.

--The Rhodes car reaches the outskirts of the city.

INT. RHODES HOME - DAY

Marti rushes in. She goes straight to the phone.

She picks it up and punches a number. Voice mail.

DOCTOR (*FILTERED*): This is a message for Emil.
I found a hospice with a vacancy but I need to hear
from you right away so I can reserve it for you.
Please get back to me as soon as you can.

Don enters. Marti looks in shock.

DON: What's the matter?

MARTI: My father is dying.

EXT. GOLF COURSE - DAY

A twosome, one of whom is the doctor. His PARTNER is teeing up.

The doctor's cell phone rings.

DOCTOR: Wouldn't you know?

He steps away and answers it.

DOCTOR: Hello?...Yes, Mrs. Rhodes What?...
Mrs. Rhodes, your father has pancreatic cancer. He
has a few months at best.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - DAY

Marti sets down the phone. Total shock.

EXT. DESERT SOUTHWEST - DAY

The VW convertible zipping along with the top down.

Billy is driving. Luggage has been rearranged, so Emil and Emma can sit together in the back seat.

Their hair blows in the wind. They have the ecstatic look of teenagers in love.

And the landscape, the landscape!

Spectacular rock formations rise from the ground like stone gods marching across the desert. The beauty is enough to turn an atheist religious.

EXT. RHODES HOUSE - DAY

A police car is parked in the driveway.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

OFFICER HAMILTON filling out Marti's missing person report. She's been crying. Don looks stoic.

OFFICER HAMILTON: But you have no idea where they might have gone?

Marti shakes her head.

OFFICER HAMILTON: No brother or sister to visit, old friend, anyone at all who comes to mind?

DON: He always talked about going back to Homestead before he died.

OFFICER HAMILTON: Where's the homestead?

DON: It's a small town in northern Idaho.

EXT. RHODES HOUSE - POLICE CAR - DAY

Officer Hamilton in the car, punching numbers in a computer. Waiting for results.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - DAY

Hamilton walks in through the open door. Marti waits for him.

OFFICER HAMILTON: Does the name Emma Simpson mean anything to you?

MARTI: Don! Did dad ever mention someone named Emma?

Don approaches.

DON: You know, it rings a bell. Sometimes he'd talk about his first girlfriend back home. I believe it was an Emma.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

A Sheriff's car pulls in and parks.

INT. FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

The deputies Hall and Malinowski come to Jenny at the counter.

DEP. HALL: Got another poster for you.

He hands it to Jenny.

THE POSTER

shows Emil, Billy, and Sara.

Looking over her shoulder is Yvonne.

YVONNE: Is that his girlfriend?

Jenny looks dazed.

EXT. CAMPGROUND - DAY

Sheriff's car pulls into the old campsite. The two deputies get out.

One kicks a burned log in the makeshift fireplace.

The other stares out at the river.

DEP. HALL: What makes a grown adult a missing person?

DEP. MALINOWSKI: Dementia?

DEP. HALL: Maybe they just wanted to go fishing.

EXT. SOUTHERN UTAH - GOOSE NECKS AREA - DAY

The sun low in the west.

The VW convertible pulls up atop a flat mesa. Nothing but the wide open spaces up here. This is definitely not "an improved camping area."

Billy, driving, gets out. Emil and Emma get out from the back seat.

Emma does a complete circle, sucking in the view. Her hair blows – there's a good wind way up here!

EMMA: Oh my Lord!

EMIL: This is just the first course. Follow me.

Emil starts across the mesa. Emma and Billy follow.

EXT. GOOSE NECKS - MESA - DAY

Suddenly the ground opens up into a deep gash. No warning, just a sudden drop.

Emil makes sure everyone stops in time.

Across the canyon, the mesa continues. The perspective is misleading – so far down, that the canyon gives the illusion that one could jump across it.

EMIL: Be really careful – but look down there.

He takes Emma's hand and leads her closer to the edge.
Billy follows.

They get close enough to peer down the deep canyon.

EMIL: I give you – the Goose Necks of the San Juan
River.

EXT. GOOSE NECKS - DAY

And what an incredible view!

Far, far below, the thin river turns one way and then back
on itself, for as far as the eye can see.

It's like a condensed version of the Grand Canyon – and
more spectacular because it's more comprehensible. You
see it and wonder...Could I really jump across?

EXT. GOOSE NECKS - MESA - DAY

Emma is blown away by the beauty. She takes Emil's arms.
Tears well in her eyes.

EMIL: What do you think, Billy?

BILLY: I think this is what awesome really means.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - NIGHT

Suitcases at the door. Don waiting patiently.

Marti storms up.

EXT. AIRPORT - NIGHT

A small jetliner landing.

INT. AIRPORT - TERMINAL - NIGHT

Marti and Don enter. Don totes a carry-on, Marti has a cell phone to her ear.

She drops it.

MARTI: I'm going to murder that girl.

INT. AIRPORT - RENTAL CAR COUNTER - NIGHT

Don at the counter. Marti waits nearby.

EXT. AIRPORT - RENTAL CAR PICKUP - NIGHT

Don and Marti climb into a late model car.

INT. RENTAL CAR - NIGHT

Don behind the wheel.

MARTI: Do you know where you're going?

DON: I know what the map says. Do you have a short cut?

Marti glares at him, then out the window.

EXT. MESA - SCRUB BRUSH - NIGHT

The tent is set up within a cluster of scrub brush, protected somewhat from the wind.

No table. No fireplace. Primitive camping.

Everyone sits on a tarp on the ground. The stove, also on the ground, is nearby.

Emma looking up at the sky.

EMMA: A shooting star! Emil, help me up.

He has a bit of trouble getting up himself. Then he offers Emma his hand.

Billy jumps up. They all look up at the sky.

BILLY: There's one!

EMMA: And another!

Overhead, a summer meteor shower in its early tease.

The Milky Way floats across the sky like the ghost of a dragon.

EMMA: I've never been anywhere so beautiful.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - MOTEL - NIGHT

The rental car parked in front of the office.

Marti waiting in the car.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM - NIGHT

Don turns on the light, and they enter.

MARTI: Did you ask about a restaurant?

DON: Nothing open this late.

MARTI: Terrific. Welcome to Redneck City.

DON: There's a bar that may make us a burger.

INT. HOMESTEAD - BAR - NIGHT

Don enters alone. A decent late night crowd, mostly male and blue collar.

Don walks to the end of the bar.

The LADY BARTENDER comes over.

DON: Is the kitchen still open?

LATER

Don sitting at the bar, nursing a beer, waiting for the food.

A RANCHER takes the stool next to him.

RANCHER: *(to bartender)* Regular, Doris!

The rancher looks at Don.

DON.: I was wondering if you knew Emil Collins or Emma Simpson.

The rancher grins.

RANCHER: What are you, an uncover cop from Boise? Well, I don't know where the hell they are for one, for two I wouldn't tell you if I did, and for three, whatever the hell they've done, it can't be worse than being cooped up in a damn rest home somewhere.

EXT. BAR - NIGHT

Don comes out, carrying a sack of burgers.

EXT. MESA - NIGHT

Only Emil and Emma outside now. Still looking up at the meteor shower.

EMMA: (*counting meteors*) Two hundred and five.

EMIL: One eighty-four. Eighty-five!

EMMA: Two hundred and six!

INT. HOMESTEAD - MOTEL - NIGHT

Marti and Don at the table. Eating burgers and fries for dinner.

The phone rings.

Marti dashes for it.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - NIGHT

Sara making the call. Her boyfriend, Jason, stands next to her.

SARA: She's going to kill me.

INTERCUT

MARTI: Hello.

SARA: (*meekly*) It's me.

MARTI: Where have you been? Where's your brother and granddad?

SARA: I don't know. Is Gramps really dying?

MARTI: No thanks to you. You are grounded forever!

Don comes forward.

DON: Give me the phone.

Marti clutches it.

SARA: It was an emergency. Jason needed to go out of town for a job interview and needed moral support. On the way back we had a flat, and then his spare ended up being flat, and—

Don has wrestled away the phone.

DON: It's me. Did they mention anything about coming to Idaho?

SARA: They're in Idaho? (*to Jason*) They're in Idaho.

EXT. MESA - NIGHT

Holding hands, Emil and Emma slowly walk to the tent.

Before going in, Emma stops him. She kisses him.

EMMA: You haven't talked about your health.

He looks suspicious.

EMIL: Do I look dead or something?

EMMA: I was wondering if, you know, you're sexually active.

EMIL: I haven't been for years.

EMMA: The machinery broke?

EMIL: Oh, no. Now and again I rise in the morning, if you know what I mean.

EMMA: You just have nothing to do with it. Well, now you do.

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Awkward, comic, Emil and Emma try to crawl into one sleeping bag without waking Billy, who sleeps nearby with only the empty bag between them.

EMIL: (*whispering*) This will never work.

EMMA: (*whispering*) We won't know unless we try.

They maneuver into the bag together, Emil angled above her. Now they struggle to get their pants off.

It's not an easy thing to do – and in the process Emma gets the giggles.

EMIL: Sshh.

But trying to stop her only gives him the giggles.

BILLY: What's so funny?

This gets them laughing louder.

BILLY: Have you two been drinking?

And louder still.

BILLY: You are really weird.

Emil and Emma manage to get control of themselves.

EMIL: (*whispering*) He's right.

Which gets them laughing again.

EXT. MESA - CAMPING AREA - DAY

On the tarp, Emma is zipping two sleeping bags together.

Billy comes out of the tent.

BILLY: Morning.

EMMA: Good morning, Billy.

BILLY: Where's Gramps?

EMMA: He headed off yonder with a shovel. Sorry we woke you up.

BILLY: What was so funny?

Emma starts to reply but laughs instead. She raises a hand, as if excusing herself.

Billy, shaking his head, wanders off.

INT. TENT - DAY

Emma comes in with the zipped-together bag. She makes room for it.

Moving Emil's travel bag, a small bottle of medicine drops out.

Emma picks it up and reads the label.

An immediate expression of concern.

EXT. MESA - DAY

Emil approaching camp without the shovel.

Emma coming out to meet him.

EMIL: I gave Billy the shovel if you need it.

EMMA: Why are you in pain? I found your pills. What's going on, Emil? I want the truth.

EXT. MESA - CAMP FIRE - DAY

Emil and Emma huddled close around a fire to ward off the

morning chill.

Billy returns, carrying the shovel.

EMIL: Sit down, lad.

BILLY: What happened to breakfast?

EMIL: We'll get to it. I have something to tell you.

EMMA: *We* have something.

Billy, puzzled, sits down.

INT. FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

Jenny at a table with the two sheriffs, Marti and Don.

JENNY: Does Billy know his granddad's dying?

MARTI: Nobody knew. He didn't tell anyone.

DEP. HALL: No hint where they might go from the river?

JENNY: I thought they were coming back to Homestead.

EXT. FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

Jenny seeing off the deputies. Marti and Don stand nearby, waiting.

JENNY: Will you let me know how Billy is?

DEP. HALL: Sure thing.

INT. FAST FOOD JOINT - DAY

Jenny comes inside.

YVONNE: Phone, Jenny!

EXT. DESERT TOWN - GAS STATION - DAY

Emil filling the tank.

Billy on a nearby payphone.

INTERCUT

JENNY: Hello?

BILLY: It's Billy.

JENNY: Where are you?

BILLY: I can't say. I just want you to know I'm okay.

JENNY: Your parents are here. Billy, everyone's worried about your granddad because—

BILLY: I know what's going on. That's why I have to help him.

JENNY: Help him what?

BILLY: I can't say. I just wanted you not to worry. I can't call again until this is over.

JENNY: I was so worried about you.

BILLY: Jenny, I have to run.

JENNY: Billy—

BILLY: I really like you a lot. Bye.

Hanging up, Billy has to catch his breath.

So does Jenny.

EXT. GAS STATION - DAY

Billy returns to the car. Emil hangs up the pump.

BILLY: I called Jenny. I didn't tell her where we're going or anything.

EMIL: I didn't figure you would. I'm proud that you're willing to help me with this, Billy.

Emma returns from the rest room.

EMMA: Well. I'm good for a hundred miles, I

should think.

EMIL: My turn.

INT. GAS STATION - REST ROOM - DAY

Emil pops a pain pill at the sink. Deep breath.

He looks at himself in the mirror. Pops a second pill.

EXT. DESERT SOUTHWEST - ROAD - DAY

The VW convertible, top down, Billy driving, racing down a country road.

Emil and Emma in the back seat. More serious than before, though. A destination hangs over them.

EXT. MOTEL - NIGHT

The VW parked in front of a motel room.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM - NIGHT

Billy's bag on one bed. On the other, Emil's and Emma's. Obviously they will share a bed.

INT. RESTAURANT - BOOTH - NIGHT

Over dinner in a booth.

Emil makes a sound.

EMMA: Are you okay?

EMIL: Excuse me.

He gets up and heads for the men's room.

Emma watches him closely.

EMMA: He's in more pain than he lets on.

Billy is quiet.

INT. RESTAURANT - MEN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Emil at the sink. He pops a pill, then cups his hand for water, chases it down.

He stares at himself in the mirror. He closes his eyes against what he sees.

INT. RESTAURANT - BOOTH - NIGHT

Dessert and coffee.

EMIL: I've come up with a plan. I don't think you'll like it, so I'm giving you another chance to bail out.

EMMA: I'm not bailing out of anything.

BILLY: Me neither.

EMIL: Better wait till you hear what I have to say.

They wait.

Emil clears his throat. This isn't going to be easy.

INT. MOTEL - NIGHT

Emil pacing.

Billy on the bed, nervous.

The bathroom door closed.

EMIL: Emma? You're not making matters any easier.

No reply beyond the door.

EMIL: I shouldn't have told her.

Billy opens his mouth but no words come.

EMIL: Not you, too. *(to the door)* Emma? I'm going to bed.

Emil goes to his bed. Strips to underwear and crawls in.

Billy still sitting on the bed.

EMIL: I need to find a good bookstore. There's something you two need to hear.

He turns off his light.

EMIL: Goodnight.

Billy sits, fighting back tears.

EXT. MOTEL - DAY

Early morning. Emil comes out.

He walks across the lot toward the restaurant.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM - DAY

Billy asleep.

In the other bed, Emma wakes. She realizes Emil is gone.

INT. RESTAURANT - BOOTH - DAY

Emil over coffee, reading the paper.

Emma slips into the booth across from him.

EMMA: Good morning.

EMIL: Morning.

EMMA: I got it out of my system.

EMIL: I think maybe you should go home.

EMMA: Don't you dare say that. What you're going through is not something a man should do alone. He needs people around who care for him. Billy adores you.

Emil looks at her for the first time.

EMMA: I adore you.

She offers her hand. He takes it.

The WAITRESS arrives.

WAITRESS: Don't you two look like you're on your honeymoon?

EXT. MOTEL - DAY

Packing the VW. The top is up.

EMIL: Billy, you want to start?

Billy gets in behind the wheel. Emil and Emma in back.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The VW zipping along, top still up.

From the back seat, Emil leans forward and gestures for Billy to take an exit into an approaching town.

EXT. SMALL TOWN - STREET - DAY

The VW is parked on the street.

INT. SMALL TOWN - BOOKSTORE - DAY

Emil rooting around the shelves. He goes to the counter.

CLERK: May I help you?

EMIL: I surely hope so.

INT. SMALL TOWN - CAFE - DAY

Billy and Emma in a booth.

Emil joins them.

EMMA: Any luck?

EMIL: Nope. I need a decent bookstore. We'll take a side trip to Boise. It's not too much out of the way.

EXT. HOMESTEAD - SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

The rental car in front of the small building of the sheriff's office.

INT. SHERIFF'S OFFICE - DAY

Marti and Don meeting with Dep. Hall.

DEP. HALL: I'm serious. There's nothing you can do here. It may be a day, it might be a week or more. Depends on where they are and how visible they're letting themselves be.

MARTI: We want to be here when you find them.

DEP. HALL: We'll call you immediately. It's up to you.

Marti and Don exchange a glance.

DON: I do need to check in at work.

INT. AIRPORT - TERMINAL - DAY

Don and Marti in line to board.

MARTI: What if he's already dead?

Don doesn't reply.

EXT. INTERSTATE - OUTSIDE BOISE - DAY

The VW approaching Boise. Billy driving, top up.

INT. BOISE - BOOKSTORE - DAY

All three in the bookstore. Browsing.

Emil in the Poetry section. Emma down the aisle.

Eureka! He pulls out, "Selected Poems" by Lew Welch.

Behind him, Emma selects something. She approaches Emil.

EMMA: Look what I found.

She shows Emil a thin volume of poems by Cummings.

EXT. BOOKSTORE - DAY

They exit the bookstore. Emil and Emma each carry a small bag.

EXT. BOISE - MOTEL - NIGHT

The VW parked in the lot of a Boise motel.

INT. MOTEL - ROOM - NIGHT

Emma and Billy sit anxiously at the table.

Emil stands before them, book in hand.

EMIL: I feel like I'm back in the classroom.

EMMA: I bet you were a wonderful teacher.

EMIL: Flattery will get you everywhere.

He clears his throat.

EMIL: Let me put what I'm going to read in context. Lew Welch was a minor poet among the Beats. Also an alcoholic. So Gary Snyder, a better known poet of the era, lets Welch use his mountain cabin in order to dry out. When Snyder returns to check in on him, Welch is gone. Also gone is the shotgun Snyder kept there. And there's a long poem on the writing desk and in the typewriter. This is the last

section of that poem, which is called, "Song of the Turkey Buzzard."

Again he clears his throat. Emma and Billy wait.

EMIL: (*reading*) "Hear my Last Will & Testament: Among my friends there shall always be one with proper instructions for my continuance. Let no one grieve. I shall have used it all up, used up every bit of it. What an extravagance! What a relief! On a marked rock, following his orders, place my meat. All care must be taken not to frighten the natives of this barbarous land, who will not let us die, even, as we wish. With proper ceremony disembowel what I no longer need, that it might more quickly rot and tempt my new form. Not the bronze casket but the brazen wing, soaring forever above thee, o perfect, o sweetest water, o glorious wheeling bird."

Silence.

Emma fights back tears. Billy looks confused.

EMIL: "All care must be taken not to frighten the natives of this barbarous land, who will not let us die, even, as we wish." This part applies directly to me. I know how I want to die. I know the authorities, even my own daughter, would not approve. I've taken you into my trust because I feel you, if not approve, at least will understand what I plan to do. But this is not the time to reveal what. In the morning, we go home to God's country.

BILLY: Are we going back to Homestead?

EMIL: Close.

EXT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

They come out of the restaurant.

EMMA: (*to Emil*) Let's walk.

EMIL: (*to Billy*) We'll see you back at the motel.

BILLY: Later then.

Billy heads out.

Emil and Emma linger, begin walking in another direction.

EXT. PARK - NIGHT

A small park along the way.

EMMA: I want to know.

EMIL: This is something I have to do alone.

EMMA: I know that. I just want to be as much a part of you as you'll let me be.

EMIL: I should have married you.

EMMA: No. This is so perfect, it had to happen just this way.

Emil stops and draws her close.

EMIL: I'm going to the Salmon River out of White Bird. It's where my people come from. I'm going to fish. And then I'm going to end my journey in the river. Don't ask me to say more than this.

They embrace and kiss.

EXT. MOTEL - DAY

Packing up the VW.

EMIL: I'll drive. One more errand.

EXT. BOISE - MINI-MALL - DAY

Emil parks in a mini-mall.

EMIL: You two wait for me at Starbucks.

BILLY: Where are you going?

EMIL: I won't be long.

Emil heads out.

BILLY: *(to Emma)* Do you know what's going on?

EMMA: Let's do as he says.

They head for nearby Starbucks.

EXT. MINI-MALL - GUN SHOP - DAY

Emil enters a gun shop.

INT. GUN SHOP - DAY

Emil is overwhelmed by the variety of weapons he faces.

He wanders around.

Finally he stops at a display of pistols.

EXT. STARBUCKS - OUTDOOR TABLE - DAY

Billy and Emma drink coffee, waiting for Emil.

BILLY: Here he comes

Across the way, Emil puts something in the car. Then he approaches.

EMIL: I'm ready when you guys are.

BILLY: What'd you get?

Emil sits down.

EMIL: I might as well let you in on this, too, Billy.
I bought a gun.

Emma looks away, hit by the reality of the moment.

Billy's expression reveals a slow understanding of Emil's meaning.

EMIL: The thing is, you have to consider the

alternatives. The doctor wanted to put me in a hospice. He means well. He doesn't want me to suffer. But if I'd done that, look at all the adventure we'd have missed. You still wouldn't have caught a fish. For me, this way is better.

BILLY: For me, too, Gramps.

EMIL: Good.

He puts his hand on Billy's.

EMIL: Good.

EXT. INTERSTATE - DAY

Back on the interstate. Billy driving, the top down.

Emil and Emma in back. They sit close, Emil's arm around her.

EXT. INTERSTATE - ANOTHER AREA - DAY

A police car behind the VW turns its lights on.

Billy pulls to the shoulder.

INT./EXT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Emil turns around, sees the police car pull behind.

EMIL: Were you speeding?

BILLY: Unfortunately.

The POLICE OFFICER approaches. He looks at Billy, Emil, Emma.

POLICE OFFICER: I bet you're Emil Collins.

EMIL: I am.

POLICE OFFICER: You've got a lot of people worried about you, old timer.

INT. RHODES HOUSE - NIGHT

Marti answers the phone.

MARTI: Hello?...Thank God!

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

The VW and police car pull up. Everyone gets out.

A FEMALE OFFICER approaches to lead Emma inside.

Behind them, the officer leads Emil and Billy.

INT. POLICE STATION - ENTRY - DAY

The women move toward one hallway, the men toward another.

EMMA: Emil, we're jailbirds!

EMIL: Keep your spirits up!

EMMA: Oh, they're up! Up and up and up!

INT. POLICE STATION - CELL - DAY

The police officer leads Emil and Billy to a cell. It's modern and comfortable as far as jails go.

POLICE OFFICER: Here we go. It ain't the Ritz but there's worse, believe me.

Emil and Billy enter. The officer closes the door behind them.

EMIL: What time's the cocktail hour?

The officer grins and shakes his head.

POLICE OFFICER: I thought you were supposed to be sick.

EMIL: You ought to see me when I'm not.

The officer leaves.

There's a bunk bed against the wall.

EMIL: You want top or bottom?

BILLY: Top.

EMIL: Ever been in jail before?

BILLY: No way.

EMIL: Guess you're a jailbird, too. Just don't list this on your college application.

EXT. AIRPORT - NIGHT

A small jetliner lands.

INT. AIRPORT - TERMINAL - NIGHT

Marti and Don enter. They head directly to a car rental booth.

INT. CELL - NIGHT

Emil and Billy on their bunks. Lights spill into the cell.

In the bottom bunk, Emil pops a pain pill.

BILLY: Gramps, you awake?

EMIL: I appear to be.

BILLY: What are you going to do now?

EMIL: That is what used to be called the sixty-four thousand dollar question.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

A rental car pulls up, Don behind the wheel. It parks beside the VW.

Marti and Don get out. Don inspects the VW.

DON: Looks fine.

Marti already heading for the entrance.

INT. POLICE STATION - WAITING ROOM - DAY

Emil, Billy and Emma seated at a long table. The police officer stands.

The door opens, and Marti and Don enter.

MARTI: Oh, Dad. What am I going to do with you?

EMIL: Too late for talk like that, I'm afraid.

MARTI: You had us worried to death.

EMIL: This is Emma. My daughter, Marti.

EMMA: Hello.

MARTI: Hello.

DON: Hi.

MARTI: Billy. I can't believe you got involved in something like this.

POLICE OFFICER: If I could get some signatures, I can send you folks on your way.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Emil, Emma, Billy, Marti and Don come out. They stop at the cars. A moment of indecision.

DON: Somebody has to take Emma back to Homestead. Marti, why don't you do that in the VW and follow us.

EMMA: I'd like to ride with Emil.

MARTI: I don't think that's a good idea.

EMIL: Of course it's a good idea. We own the back

seat. Come on.

Emil and Emma climb into the back seat of the VW.

Marti stares at Don, as if to say, Do something!

DON: Billy, guess that leaves you with me.

Marti can't believe her eyes: Don and Billy get into the rental car.

She has no choice but to get behind the wheel of the VW.

The rental car pulls out first. Then the VW.

At the window, the police officer has been watching.

INT. POLICE STATION - WINDOW - DAY

The police officer grins and shakes his head, watching them go.

Another OFFICER passes by.

POLICE OFFICER: I love that old son-of-a-bitch.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The caravan heading to Homestead, the rental car in front, the VW behind.

INT. VW CONVERTIBLE - DAY

Marti looks in the rear view mirror. Emil and Emma sitting close. Quiet, content.

Marti looks mentally frazzled.

INT. RENTAL CAR - DAY

Don driving.

DON: You know he's very sick, don't you?

BILLY: He just wants to die the way he wants to.
What's wrong with that?

Don has no answer for him.

EXT. SMALL TOWN - DAY

The cars cruise on Main Street of a small town.

They park in front of a cafe.

INT. CAFE - TABLE - DAY

Around the table with menus. A WAITRESS arrives.

INT. CAFE - TABLE - DAY (LATER)

Empty lunch dishes. Emil is missing.

INT. CAFE - REST ROOM - DAY

Emil at the sink. More pain pills. There aren't many left.

INT. CAFE - TABLE - DAY

Emil returns.

EMIL: Everything came out okay.

MARTI: Dad, you're incorrigible.

EMIL: There's a big word.

MARTI: You enjoy driving me crazy.

EMIL: You drive yourself crazy.

Marti gets up. Her car keys are on the table.

MARTI: Excuse me.

She heads for the rest room.

Don picks up the bill.

DON: Might as well take care of this.

He goes to the cash register, leaving ...

Emil, Emma and Billy alone. Emma leans close to Emil.

EMMA: (*reciting from memory*) "Since feeling is first--"

EMIL: (*finishing*) "--who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you."

They kiss.

EMMA: I'm going to pretend to have a seizure. In the confusion, you two grab the VW and get where you have to get.

BILLY: Gramps, let's do it!

EMIL: My darling Emma.

EMMA: We don't have much time.

EMIL: We'd have to get a different car as soon as possible. There should be a rental agency in the next town, it's large enough.

EMMA: I'll start to the ladies room and collapse on the way. You ready?

EMIL: I should have married you.

EMMA: Quit saying that. Would we be having all this fun now? Here he comes. I'm glad I know you, Mr. Emil Collins. You've brought sunshine into my life.

EMIL: My sweetest Emma.

Don heads back.

Emma gets up and starts to the rest room.

EMIL: Emma!

She turns. Emil mouths "I love you!" She smiles and continues on.

Marti exits the rest room and comes toward her.

Suddenly Emma falls to the floor.

MARTI: My God!

DON: (*to waitress*) Somebody call 911!

Marti and Don rush to Emma's side.

Billy grabs the VW keys. He and Emil walk quickly to the door.

EXT. CAFE - DAY

They climb into the VW, Billy behind the wheel. They take off.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Everyone is huddled around Emma.

Suddenly she starts shaking. At first, it appears she might be having a seizure. But in fact she is unable to control her laughter.

Emma becomes a laughing maniac.

Everyone is puzzled. Then Marti looks out the window and notices that the VW is gone.

MARTI: Don, they're gone!

Don rushes to the window.

DON: I'll call the police. They won't get far.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The VW cruising down the highway. Obeying the speed limit.

EXT. HIGHWAY - EXIT - DAY

The VW takes an exit to a town.

EXT. TOWN - RENTAL CAR AGENCY - DAY

The VW parked outside. Billy waiting by the car.

Emil comes out with keys.

EMIL: We don't want to leave your mother's car here. Makes it too easy for them. We'll park where it'll take a while to find it.

EXT. TOWN – SUPERMARKET

The new rental car, with Emil driving, enters the parking lot of a supermarket. The VW follows.

Emil gestures for Billy to park. He does.

Emil also parks. He gets out and goes to the VW. Billy climbs out.

Emil opens the passenger door. Then the VW glove compartment. He takes out a pistol.

EMIL: You drive.

BILLY: You bet.

EMIL: They won't find the car till tomorrow earliest. And that's all the head start we need.

BILLY: Can I hold the gun?

EMIL: Why do you want to do a thing like that?

He hands Billy the pistol anyway.

BILLY: Is it loaded?

EMIL: Not yet. Let's get out of here.

Billy returns the gun.

They climb into the rental, Billy behind the wheel.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The rental car on a deserted road.

INT. RENTAL CAR - DAY

Billy still driving.

EMIL: How you holding up? I can relieve you.

BILLY: I'm not close to tired.

EMIL: Ah, youth!

BILLY: How far before we stop?

EMIL: Well, if you don't mind driving, we could get there tonight.

BILLY: Let's do it.

EXT. COUNTRY STORE - NIGHT

The rental car pulls up to a country store.

INT. RENTAL CAR - NIGHT

Billy, behind the wheel, starts to get out. Emil touches him.

EMIL: This is where I get off.

Billy looks confused.

EMIL: I want you to drive back to Homestead and turn yourself in.

BILLY: Why?

EMIL: This is the end of the line.

BILLY: But you were going fishing.

EMIL: There's a trail behind the store. Leads right to the river.

BILLY: You don't have a pole, bait, nothing.

EMIL: There's fishing and then there's fishing.

Billy now looks on the verge of tears.

EMIL: Sometimes when I'm fishing, I wish I had no bait on the hook because the last thing I want is a bite. It would spoil the serenity of the moment. It would spoil another kind of fishing I'm doing out there.

BILLY: I don't get it.

EMIL: Sometimes I'm out on the river for ... what's the word? Understanding. An understanding of myself. When you get to be my age, you'll get it fine.

A silence.

BILLY: What do I tell mom?

EMIL: That you're the best grandson a fella could have. You give me respect, Billy. This whole trip, you gave me nothing but respect. I couldn't ask for anything more from you. I love you, lad.

BILLY: I love you, Gramps.

Now the tears come.

BILLY: I'm sorry.

He takes out a handkerchief, tries to get himself under control.

EMIL: Never apologize for feeling deeply. Now I want you to do one last thing for me.

BILLY: Okay.

EMIL: Your mother's going to get her way in the end. They'll find me, they'll be a funeral and a lot of nice speeches and the rest. And then I'll get the bronze casket. That's fine. But while you're watching me go six feet under, look around and see if you can see a bird in the sky. That's where my spirit will be. On "the brazen wing." And I couldn't have done this without you, lad.

Emil gives Billy a hug.

Emil gets out. He leans into the window.

EMIL: You drive safely now. Go on. I want to see you driving down the road.

Billy nods. He backs up. The car moves back down the road.

Emil watches till the car is out of sight.

EXT. RIVER - NIGHT

A quiet peaceful spot along the river. A bright moon overhead throws light onto the water.

Emil sits on a stump overlooking the river. He holds the pistol.

A bald eagle in a tree. Silence.

A deer in the brush. Silence.

The moon, almost full. Magical.

Suddenly: BANG.

The deer scurries into the brush.

The eagle takes flight.

The stump along the river is vacant.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

MOURNERS at Emil's grave site. Family and friends, including Wally.

The bronze casket being lowered into the ground.

In front, with his parents, is Billy. In a dark suit. Somber.

He looks up. He searches the sky and ...

...there it is! A bird gliding on the air currents.

A magnificent, glorious, wheeling bird!

EMIL (V.O.): "Not the bronze casket but the brazen wing, soaring forever above thee, o perfect, o sweetest water, o glorious wheeling bird."

A smile comes to Billy's lips.

FADE OUT

SHORT NOVELS

Oh, give them a break, for God's sake! Suspend your disbelief long enough for them to explore this moment. Magic is at work. Just because you failed at love doesn't mean that they must.

From "Love At Ground Zero"

LOVE AT GROUND ZERO

People who are sensible about love are incapable of it. --
Douglas Yates

No love like first love. --English Proverb

We never forget those who make us blush. --Jean-François De
La Harpe

First love is dangerous only when it is also the last. --Branislav
Nusic

1

BEFORE THE NEW York sun had climbed to noon, by which time television stations around the world were repeating, like a film loop in a pornographic peep show, images of unthinkable catastrophe; before TV anchors found their gravest tones of voice with which to christen the shocking events “a day of infamy,” no less historic and horrific than December 7th or November 22nd, days etched permanently into memory by all who experienced them; before America’s violent baptism under the clear blue sky of a late summer morning; it was, after all, just an ordinary day beginning in an ordinary way.

Commuters by the tens of thousands streamed into the city by train and subway, by bus and car, by bicycle and on foot, rushing forward in a relentless march to another work day, with computers to boot, phone calls to make, meetings to attend, deals to close, new deals to initiate.

Deals were lurking everywhere (“the business of America is business”) in this city that considered itself the financial center of the world and therefore the center of western civilization, New York, stretching awake with no suspicion of how much political innocence could be lost so quickly, oblivious to its vulnerability, oblivious to the march of history. September 11, 2001, was just another day as a great city scurried to life, a day like yesterday and presumably a day like tomorrow. Not an American hurrying to work could have guessed what was about to happen. You certainly didn’t expect it.

*

Wes, moving along in the flow of this commercial throng, felt apart from it. He was a student, after all, not an employee – and a creative writing student at that, which made him an observer more than a participant. He seldom ventured this far south of the NYU campus but this morning was a special occasion. Mike, his older brother, was in town, and Wes wanted to spend as much time as possible with him. Mike lived in San Francisco, where he worked for Jacobs & Smith, a lawyer like their father.

Despite their different career paths, indeed their different interests, Wes and Mike were close. Wes had missed his older brother since the last visit over Christmas, a brief appearance at the family dinner with the latest girlfriend, an attachment that gave the brothers precious little time alone together, which was why Wes especially valued the opportunity to be together today. Mike had taken care of business, the purpose of the trip, sooner than expected, giving them most of his last day together. Wes had no Tuesday classes at the university.

Mike’s college roommate, Jimmy, worked on the 88th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center, another lawyer, but it turned out the timing was bad for a visit, so Mike and Jimmy decided to meet briefly before

work. This was why the brothers had come to the towers this early in the morning.

“How long will you be?” Wes asked as they walked across a plaza toward the South Tower.

“Jimmy has a meeting at nine. I’ll meet you in the coffee shop.”

“How’s he like working for a big corporation?”

“Jimmy likes making money.”

“So do you, big brother.”

Mike smiled, letting the family renegade have the last word. He admired his little brother more than he’d ever told him. Mike fully expected Wes to write a hit movie or a best-selling novel and become the wealthiest member of the family.

They did not look like brothers. Mike, at six-two, retained the athletic build that had won him accolades in high school, though he hadn’t played organized football since then. His hair was dark and curly, after their mother. Wes took after their father, blond and stocky, though not yet fat, and short enough to wish he were taller.

At the entrance into the building, a balding man, surely a tourist, was bending precariously back, trying to shoot up the overwhelming reach of the tower, barely keeping his balance. Tens of thousands of tourists visited the twin towers of the World Trade Center daily. Today, soon enough, millions of people around the world would visit the scene by television.

Wes and Mike exchanged smiles as they passed the tourist. They entered the building, showed photo IDs to the security guard and moved on.

This was only the second time Wes had been in the building, and the experience of entering the lobby once again was overwhelming. He gawked under the enormous presence of glass and steel, commerce as cathedral. Around him men and women rushed by with more mundane

interests, getting to work, turning on computers, beginning the tasks of the day, but Wes hesitated as Mike walked on, taking it all in.

When he realized that Mike was moving away from him, heading toward the elevators, Wes called, "Look for me near the coffee stand!"

2

AMERICA WAS STILL capable of surprising her. Waiting for an elevator, Hayaam marveled at the American capacity to ignore miracles. What else was the extraordinary building in which she stood with Areeba, waiting for an elevator, this 110-story tower of the World Trade Center, but a miracle of engineering? The first time she saw it, two years ago when everything in America was still new to her, her eyes had been wide with marvel, much as Areeba was looking around now, but this had been on a Saturday when the tower and its twin across the way were filled inside and out with tourists like herself. Today was a Tuesday, a workday, and what impressed Hayaam most was not the miracle of engineering but how easily it was ignored by those who worked here, whether American or not (and clearly the tower was host to businesses from all around the world because already she had seen many races and national styles of dress in the building, including those from her homeland, Indonesia.). Hayaam, wearing traditional Muslim clothing or hijab, the long flowing dress purple, the head scarf orange, felt no one staring at her in such an international environment, the way students sometimes stared at her when she walked across campus at NYU.

Areeba also wore hijab, which was gray and drab in contrast to Hayaam's bright presence. Neither woman

wore makeup.

Areeba couldn't keep her eyes still, taking in the wonder of the building.

"Quite a place, isn't it?" Mike said. He smiled first at Areeba, then at Hayaam.

A bell rang, and the elevator door opened. Hayaam and Areeba waited their turn and entered. There was room for the man who had spoken to enter behind them.

Hayaam punched the button for the fifth floor, which was where the Employment Agency was located. She'd been studying to become an American citizen, though she'd told neither her brother nor written her father about this, and she was seeking a part-time job to reinforce her growing independence. Her father, she realized, might stop supporting her once he learned of her intentions.

As the elevator began to rise, Hayaam noticed the after-shave of the man standing in front of her, the man who had spoken to them. She found the aroma pleasant. She assumed the man was an American by the forwardness of his question, and she also guessed that he was there on business, like themselves, rather than an employee somewhere in the building because he was not wearing a tie.

The elevator made its first stop at the third floor, and a few people got off. At the fifth floor Hayaam said, "Excuse me," and the man with the after-shave shuffled to the side so they could move past him.

Before the elevator door closed behind them, the man who had spoken spoke again.

"Have a nice day," Mike said with a smile.

As they walked on, Areeba grinned, the reaction of an embarrassed schoolgirl, as if the man had been flirting with them, which was probably true. Hayaam smiled back.

Of course, you already know it would not turn out to

be a nice day at all. But Hayaam didn't know. Wes didn't know.

3

WES BOUGHT COFFEE at a stand, got a newspaper from a vending machine, and sat down at a table in an indoor courtyard off the lobby, figuring Mike could find him easily enough. He started reading the paper.

Suddenly there was a noise unlike anything Wes had heard before, not quite an explosion, not quite a crash, but clearly something of magnitude, strong enough to jar the foundation of the building as if some great force were sliding the floor out from under him. And then, just as suddenly, stillness, at least in the building's foundation. But the air was heavy with menace, like a distant, humid echo of catastrophe.

Already people were racing to the windows and running outside to see what had happened. Wes watched the commotion with a forced calm, staying at the table.

Across the way a man yelled, "The north tower's on fire!"

The news drew even more people to the windows and exits. Wes stood up, leaving the paper on the table but taking his coffee. He headed for the nearest exit, which faced north, trying not to join the growing panic. He mistrusted panic because it depended on first impressions.

Outside Wes couldn't quite believe what he was seeing, the north tower in flames several dozen stories up, spitting out great billows of dark smoke. Even harder to believe was what he could decipher from an anxious crowd of observers, many of whom were talking and yelling at once, as if trying to articulate their own disbelief. Apparently an airplane, a jetliner, had crashed into the

north tower, an accident of colossal proportions.

High in the south tower above him, Mike would have quite a view of the situation. Wes decided to join him.

He made his way back inside, weaving through the crowd still coming out of the building. In the chaos, the security guard had abandoned his checkpoint, and Wes was able to enter without flashing identification. He found the building directory.

Mike had told him the name of the law firm where Jimmy worked. Wes scanned the directory, looking for a name that sounded right.

On a loud speaker, a man was telling everyone not to panic, that the problem was in the north tower, not here, and that everyone should return to work. Few paid attention and a great flow of people continued to move outside.

Jacobs & Smith! That was the firm. The 88th floor. Wes headed for the elevators.

The first to arrive was packed with people coming down to get out of the building, still ignoring the advice to go back to work. When the last woman stepped out, Wes entered the elevator. Only several others joined him.

There were no stops until the sixth floor. The door opened. Just as a woman was about to step in, a horrendous explosion rocked the elevator, knocking Wes and everyone else off their feet, the woman landing on top of him. He quickly maneuvered free and struggled to his feet, then helped the woman to hers. Someone yelled that they must get off the elevator, but Wes was a step ahead of the advice, wandering into the hallway. What the hell had happened?

The hallways were filled with stunned employees, everyone in shock, moving en masse toward the stairs, and Wes stepped along with the flow. Where had the explosion come from? Certainly from above, somewhere high in the building, somewhere closer to where Mike was.

Wes could hear screams coming from throughout the building. As he moved with the crowd to the stairwell of the fifth floor, one scream in particular caught his attention, a woman with a British accent, calling desperately for help from somewhere close. Wes moved into the hallway and found her only a few doorways down, a young woman in a gray robe, the style of dress worn by Arabs, who was kneeling over another Arab woman, whose robe was purple and orange.

“Someone help me!” the young woman cried.

Wes raced down the hallway.

“She can’t walk,” Areeba told him. “She twisted her ankle.”

Wes reached down to the young woman on the floor.

“Take my hand.”

Hayaam grasped the hand, and Wes pulled her to her feet. Hayaam grimaced in pain.

“I don’t think I can walk,” she told him, also with a British accent.

“Okay, here we go,” said Wes.

He lifted her up into his arms.

“You okay?”

Hayaam said, “Yes.”

“This way.”

Wes carried her back to the stairwell, where he joined the crowd that continued downstairs. Areeba took his arm and followed.

Something had changed. The air was now filled with dust and a pungent odor, strong and unpleasant, reminding Wes of the smell of burning oil. If his hands had been free, he would have held a handkerchief over his nose and mouth, but he was carrying the young woman in his arms, who was surprisingly light.

They continued downstairs with the flow, everyone staying calm, as if this collective routine was enough to put a temporary halt to fear and anxiety. But when they reached the ground floor, spilling out into the lobby, the crowd exploded into its panicked parts, with individuals suddenly racing for the exits and crying out in unintelligible anguish, the crowd becoming a mob.

Wes carried the young woman outside and moved far enough from the building so the crowd scattered a safe distance around them. He set her carefully on her feet.

"I have to go back inside," he said. "Will you be okay?"

"Yes," said Hayaam. "Thank you so much."

"No problem."

Hayaam recognized the same after-shave on the man as the earlier man was wearing, the one who had spoken to them. She offered her hand, the American gesture of gratitude.

"I am Hayaam. This is my cousin, Areeba."

He took her hand.

"I'm Wes."

There was a silence. When Wes realized he was still holding her hand, he released it.

"I have to go. I'm looking for someone."

"Thank you for saving me."

This had not occurred to him, and Wes had no time to reflect on the matter. His plan was to return inside the building and somehow find Mike, but when he looked up, as if expecting to find his brother staring down at him from some window high in the tower, Wes saw a horror of flames and dark smoke, and he realized that whatever catastrophe had happened in the north tower had occurred in the southern twin as well, creating a chaotic evacuation of the building. Try as he might, he couldn't fight against

the stream of people now escaping the building, which pushed him farther and farther from his brother. Without consciously deciding to do so, he had joined the escaping frenzy of frightened people running randomly across the plaza, racing to go anywhere but here, racing to get as far from the towers, this center of western civilization, as possible. Fighting back tears, Wes raced on with the crowd.

4

WES ENDED UP watching the continuing nightmare on television. For blocks he trotted along with an anonymous mob, heading north in the direction of NYU, occasionally glancing back to see the twin towers engulfed in flames and smoke, the sight as confusing and surrealistic as it was frightening, because accidents this extraordinary did not happen in pairs, which meant that clearly New York had been attacked – but by whom and for what reason? The innocent are always shocked to learn that they have enemies.

Finally Wes stopped running and bent forward to catch his breath. Straightening up, he saw the neon sign of a bar and decided a drink was exactly what he needed.

Everyone along the bar was staring up at a television set. Many were talking at once and again, as he had outside the tower after the first explosion, Wes pieced together a semblance of coherence from the snippets of what he overheard. The Pentagon also had been attacked, America apparently coming under attack in many places at once. There was an unconfirmed story of a fourth plane, perhaps on route to the White House, which apparently had crashed in a field short of its target. This was like Pearl Harbor, more than one angry patron announced to no one and everyone. Staring up at the television's replay after replay of the jetliner crashing into the south tower, Wes felt

numb. Suicide bombers had come to America. Had Mike been able to get out or was he still trapped inside the tower?

After a beer, Wes found a pay phone near the restroom and called home. His mother answered, and as soon as she recognized his voice she started crying, sounding so relieved that he stammered when assuring her that although Mike wasn't with him, surely he was all right, which Wes believed less strongly than he could bear to admit, even to himself. He felt certain that Mike was located considerably higher than the plane's point of contact, and under such circumstances it probably was safer to be higher than lower. All the same, it might be some time before anyone could get up to rescue people on the higher floors.

Soon enough Mike's survival became a moot point. Shortly after ten the south tower collapsed on live television, imploding upon itself with devastation beyond comprehension, a slow crumbling descent that looked almost to be in slow motion, kicking up a cloud of thick dust and debris as horrific as a nuclear explosion, yet also obscenely sensual in the slow rise and pulsation of its contours. Somewhere in the great growing heap of rubble was his brother, and Wes understood that no one could survive the tragedy on the screen, and the higher your fall, the more certain your death. He felt sick in his stomach.

By the time the north tower collapsed, Wes was running again, north again, to get away from the threatening advance of smoke and dust that approached from the direction of the collapsed towers. Dust would hang in the air for days, as if one needed reminding of what had happened. Wes finally hailed down a cab and returned home, to the family house in Glen Cove on Long Island, expense be damned, even though Wes was living at home to save money so he could devote his time to the graduate creative writing program without taking a part-time job.

As soon as Wes entered the house, Evelyn, his mother, ran forward to embrace him, almost knocking him

down. Where was Mike? Wes didn't even have to answer the question. She saw the truth in his expression, and her response was immediate. I know you will tell me it's a cliché if I write that she collapsed in grief, but this is exactly what she did.

5

NO ONE FOUND the body or parts of the body or any formal evidence of Mike's death, but everyone in the family knew and accepted what had happened, and so Mike was given a memorial service and a burial, dedicating a tombstone over an empty grave.

Walter and Evelyn hosted a reception after the funeral, which was attended by over a hundred people, extended family and friends, but Wes found so many people less comforting than distracting, a diversion from facing his grief head-on in order to deal with it. The well-meaning condolences from uncles and aunts and cousins, from long family friends and recent neighbors – *I'm so sorry, we share your loss, you're in our prayers* – the rhetoric of grief was repetitive and numbing. Finally Wes retreated in search of silence and found himself entering Mike's old room, which had not been lived in for almost a decade.

But the room looked like it had been lived in yesterday, his mother having kept the room immaculate. Stepping into it was like stepping back into high school with the school pennant on the wall and several photographs of Mike, the high school jock, winding up for a pitch, shooting a free throw, poised to zing a pass. Wes sat on the edge of the bed and wept.

As he got up to go, thinking he would give the reception another shot, if only for his parents' sake, he

found Roger standing in the doorway. They had played Little League together and remained good friends in high school but had drifted apart since then, although both were attending NYU. They still liked to shoot baskets together in the gym now and again.

“You okay?” Roger asked.

“Well as can be expected.”

“Want to get out of here? Go for a ride or something?”

“I’ll be okay.”

“I could use some air.”

That’s all it took. Wes followed Roger out the back door, and they walked out the long driveway to the sidewalk and began strolling through the neighborhood.

“You have any Arab friends?” Wes said after a long silence.

“That’s an interesting question. You mean, do I think they’re spies? Yeah, I’d be worried about that. Why? Do you have any?”

“No, I was just wondering.”

There was another silence.

Wes said, “When it happened in the first tower, I tried to take the elevator up to find Mike. I thought he must have a hell of a view up there. Then the plane crashed into our tower, and everything went crazy, we all had to use the stairs to get out of there. On the way down I heard a woman cry for help, and I checked it out. There were two Arab women, and one of them had sprained her ankle. I carried her out.”

Wes stopped. Roger said nothing, and they continued walking.

Finally Roger said, “And ... ?”

“And what?”

“Is there a point to this story?”

“Not really. I was just wondering how she must be feeling now.”

Roger looked at him strangely.

“What’s wrong?” Wes asked.

“Thousands of people get killed. Your brother. Why are you bringing up a fucking A-rab with a sprained ankle?”

The hatred and anger in Roger’s tone couldn’t be missed. Wes had no energy for an argument and shrugged the question off, finally saying he’d better get back to the reception to please his parents, but as soon as they rejoined the gathering, Wes again slipped away, this time to his room, where he closed the door behind him.

6

NOT EVERY FAMILY gave a missing loved one a funeral. Not every family buried its missing and presumed dead. Testimonies to the human capacity for hope against all odds sprang up throughout the city in makeshift bulletin boards on building walls and kiosks on utility poles, in window displays and sidewalk memorials, and New York was awash in photographs of persons missing since the attack. None of these photographs was of Mike, of course, who had been put to rest. Evelyn still prayed for a miracle but did so secretly, not wanting her more logical husband or son to believe she had lost her mind.

Even stronger than hope was the capacity of New Yorkers for survival. The best defense against those who want to destroy our way of life, they were told by their mayor and their president, was to live life normally,

steadfastly, doggedly refusing to let grief and fear destroy the freedoms Americans held most dear. Of course, there must be more security precautions now. But as much as possible, life must continue on as normally as possible. Americans gamely tried to follow their president's advice.

Classes at NYU, which had begun the day after Labor Day, started up again. Wes had a meeting with his advisor. He was in the second year of his M.F.A. program in Fiction, and this year most of his energy would be devoted to writing his thesis, a novel. Two days prior to the attack he had given his advisor an outline of his proposed project, an historical novel based on the life of the great French playwright Moliere, a story Wes was calling *The Comedian In Spite Of Himself*. There had been a rumor during Moliere's lifetime that he had married his own daughter, and the novel would focus on the psychological consequences of this in Moliere's life and work. The meeting with the advisor was brief, the professor's only comment being "Most ambitious," and Wes walked away with his thesis proposal approved.

Walking across campus after the meeting, he saw a woman in traditional Arab dress ahead of him. Could it be her? Wes trotted up beside the woman but when she turned to face him, he saw that it was not Hayaam.

"What do you want?" the woman said, her voice shaking with fear in the new America.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

Then the next day he did see her.

Wes was working in his carrel in the library. Hayaam hobbled in on crutches. Today her hijab was a red robe with a white headscarf. As she passed the window of his carrel, he smiled but she didn't notice him.

Wes put down his pen and stood up. He left the carrel and followed Hayaam into the book stacks.

He found her trying to fetch a book that was on a shelf too high for her. Quickly he came to her rescue.

“Let me.”

He brought down the book and handed it to her.

“Thank you.”

And then she recognized him. She lit up.

“Hello! I was wondering if I might ever run into you.”

“How’s the ankle?”

“I’m supposed to let it rest. Not so easy when you are a student. And are you also a student?”

“I’m studying for my M.F.A. in writing.”

Wes noticed the title of the book he had fetched for her, *The Puritan Way*.

Seeing his expression, Hayaam said, “I’m majoring in Comparative Religion.”

Wes cleared his throat.

“Listen, if you’re not busy, I was about to grab a cup of coffee.”

“Tea would be nice.”

Wes fetched his book bag from the carrel, and they left the library together. Wes let Hayaam determine their pace toward the Student Union. There was an awkward silence as they walked slowly across campus.

The coffee shop was on the ground floor. Wes told Hayaam to get a table, asked her what kind of tea she wanted, and got in line to order their beverages.

An hour later he couldn’t believe how easily he had opened up to her. In fact, he had monopolized the conversation. He told her about how disappointed his mother (but not his father) had been when he decided not to go to law school, choosing the graduate creative writing program instead. He told her about how guilty he felt that Mike had died in the south tower when he himself had survived. Somehow knowing how irrational these feelings

were didn't reduce their hold on him.

"You didn't kill anyone," said Hayaam. "Quite the opposite. You saved my life."

Wes looked puzzled.

"If you hadn't come along, I could have still been in there when the tower collapsed."

Wes never had thought of it this way. He certainly didn't feel like a hero.

"You are my life saver," she repeated. "Thank you."

Wes felt embarrassed and wanted to change the subject.

"Where are you from?"

"Indonesia." She read surprise in his expression. "You thought I was an Arab, didn't you?"

"I guess I did."

"There are more Muslims in Indonesia than in any other country."

"I didn't know that."

She talked about growing up in Jakarta but the more she talked, the more confused Wes became because nothing she was sharing fit his preconception of a Muslim woman. She was verbal and smart, with excellent English skills, and she showed no hesitation in expressing her opinion. Was this because he was an American? Would she talk so freely in the presence of a Muslim man? Although Wes had never studied Islam, he had grown up believing (learning by the osmosis of American culture) that Muslim women were weak and subordinate to their men. Yet there was no sign of such gender reticence in Hayaam.

Finally Hayaam said she had to go. Wes accompanied her outside, figuring to go back to his carrel.

A SMALL CROWD had gathered in front of the library. At first Wes thought nothing of it but as they approached, it was clear that some kind of commotion was going on.

“Abdul!” Hayaam suddenly cried out. She made an effort to move faster on her crutches.

“What is it?” Wes asked.

Then Wes saw what the trouble was: half-a-dozen guys, jocks and fraternity types by their varsity jackets, had surrounded a foreign student, whom Wes assumed was Abdul, someone known to Hayaam, and the American students were clearly harassing him.

“Foreign fuck.”

“A-rab asshole.”

Abdul looked frightened as he turned quickly around, looking for an opening in the circle surrounding him.

“Let him go!” Hayaam shouted.

She stopped, put her weight on her good leg and raised one crutch high over her head in a gesture of threat.

The jocks thought this was very funny.

“Hey, sweetie pie. What do you plan to do with that?”

Another said, “Why you got that scarf covering your hair? I bet you got pretty hair.”

This one stepped forward as if to see for himself, and Hayaam swung the crutch to keep him away.

“Oh, my!” said the intruder, stepping back.

Wes came forward.

“Hey, fellas, what’s going on?”

“You tell us.”

With the jocks distracted, Abdul slipped out of their circle and hurried beside Hayaam.

“Hayaam, this is not your fight,” he said.

A jock said, “Who said anything about a fight? We just want you to go the fuck home where you belong.”

“I am student here,” said Abdul, “so today this is my home. Hayaam, let’s go.”

They started away. Wes, staying behind, wondered if Abdul was her boyfriend.

“Something we can help you with?” a jock asked with menace, as if one confrontation was as good as another in the new America.

“No. I was just leaving.”

He caught up with Hayaam.

Abdul asked Hayaam, “Who is this?”

“He’s the one I told you about.” To Wes she added, “This is my brother, Abdul-Hakeem.”

Her brother! Wes couldn’t help but smile.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Wes.”

He offered his hand. Abdul hesitated before shaking it briefly.

“I give you gratitude for helping my sister,” Abdul said.

“I’m sorry for what happened back there.”

“Your countrymen decided I am a terrorist.”

Wes didn’t know what to say.

“Hayaam, we must go.”

“Thank you for the tea,” she told Wes.

“Maybe we can do it again sometime.”

She gave him a sweet smile. Abdul clutched her arm, a gesture repeating that they must go. She balanced her crutches and took the first swing of her leg to start forward.

Abdul glared at Wes as if he were about to say something unpleasant. Then he, too, turned and left.

Wes watched them go. Her brother didn't like him. But it could have been worse, much worse. He could have been her boyfriend.

8

EVELYN WOULD CRY without warning. Over laundry, in the supermarket, on the phone. Tonight it happened at dinner.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, getting up from the table.

Wes couldn't bear to look at her for fear he'd start crying himself.

"Evelyn, it's okay," said Walter.

"Stop saying everything is okay!"

Evelyn hurried away into the kitchen.

Walter let out a sigh of exasperation.

"I meant crying is okay."

Wes nodded.

They continued eating in silence for a moment.

"Dad ... do you know any Muslims?"

"We used to have a lawyer in the firm who was Muslim. Why?"

"If he was still in the firm, would you suspect him of

being a terrorist?"

"Of course not. Why do you ask?"

"There was a scuffle at school today. Some jock types hassling a foreign student from Indonesia."

"We're going to see a lot of that, I fear. Stupidity and patriotism make a volatile mix."

Wes encountered evidence of the truth of his father's observation the very next afternoon. He was shooting baskets in the gym at school with Roger.

"I ran into Hayaam," Wes said.

Roger gave him a puzzled look, then made a long jump shot. Three points.

"The girl I carried out of the tower before it collapsed. She's a student here."

"Don't tell me you've gotten interested in an Arab girl."

"She's from Indonesia. We had coffee."

Wes shot from outside the key and missed. Roger scrambled after the rebound.

"No big deal," said Wes.

"Then why are you talking about her?"

Roger threw a hard pass to Wes, which he fumbled. When he recovered the ball, Wes shot again and this time got only net.

"Do me a favor," said Roger after grabbing the rebound. "If you get involved with this Arab girl, keep it to yourself."

9

SEVERAL DAYS PASSED before Wes ran into Hayaam again. He was working in his carrel, which had a window overlooking campus as well as one looking into the library. He was having a hard time getting started on the novel about Moliere despite his outline. In the new America, the life of a 17th century Frenchman, however famous, seemed irrelevant. The year-long excitement that Wes had carried for the story, eager to get to his thesis-writing year so he could explore the incredible notion that Moliere might have married his own daughter, was gone. Why should he or anyone else care about Moliere when America was under attack?

Looking out the window, he saw Hayaam hobbling across campus on her crutches. He left the carrel immediately.

Outside he caught up with her and, out of breath, said, "Hey."

"Hello."

He decided she had the sweetest smile in the universe.

"You have a class now?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And afterwards?"

"I have a long break. Three hours."

"Time for tea?"

"That would be very nice."

They arranged to meet after her class in the coffee shop in the Student Union. She was late but Wes didn't give up on her. He would have waited for as long as it took. It never occurred to him that she might not appear.

"I think you're angry with me," Hayaam said after

Wes had accepted her apology for being late. She'd stayed after class to talk with her professor.

"No way."

"You look upset."

In fact, he was upset -- but not about Hayaam. Under the social façade of returning to normal existence, this being the official national defense against those who would destroy American freedoms, everyone in New York, indeed everyone in America, was breathing behind a veil of anxiety. In the new America, a brooding stress and uncertainty were becoming a way of life, hanging in the air like storm clouds. If the enemy, these terrorists, could bring down the twin towers so easily, what else could they do?

"What is it?" Hayaam asked.

"I still can't believe what happened."

"I know."

Hayaam's smile was different now, less sweet and more maternal.

Wes said, "Do you want to take a walk? Get off campus? I guess it's hard for you ..."

"No. As long as you don't mind walking slowly."

"Nowhere to go to and no time to be there."

Love happens in the present tense. The cynics among you will scoff at this. But it doesn't matter what cynics think. All that matters is what Wes and Hayaam now began to feel in one another's company.

They left campus – and everything changed. The tragedy of the recent past and the stressful uncertainty of the future were forgotten. Suddenly only the present moment mattered. Wes and Hayaam became totally focused on one another, totally in sync, attentive and caring, bonded by mutual interest and curiosity and for the moment devoted exclusively to getting to know one

another. It was as if the universe had been compressed into the small space occupied by their adjacent bodies as they strolled slowly along, going nowhere in particular, needing only to be together.

Oh, give them a break, for God's sake! Suspend your disbelief long enough for them to explore this moment. Magic is at work. Just because you failed at love doesn't mean that they must.

Wes tells Hayaam about the pressure he felt in high school to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, his father, and his older brother to become a lawyer. In high school, he had considered his future undergraduate studies as predestined, a sequence of courses (it hardly mattered what they were) leading to law school. Yet he'd already felt his calling, identified the passion of his life, and this was to become a writer. Of course, it was unlikely he could make a living at it. Growing up among so many lawyers had given him a solid foundation in the economic realities of life, and so he prepared, first in his heart of hearts and finally in the selection of his college courses, to become a writing teacher. When he finally found the courage to share this decision with his parents, his father congratulated him and his mother wept.

Hayaam tells Wes about growing up in Jakarta. She had an easier life than most children in her country, her father a successful businessman, and until she entered her teens she could have been called spoiled, or at least sheltered, with all the poverty and political uncertainties in her country filtered from her day-to-day experience. Then her mother died. Hayaam was sixteen, and the beautiful bubble of her daily existence burst before her eyes.

She became a rebellious teenager, she tells Wes, laughing when she sees how strange the notion strikes him. Yes, teenagers in other cultures rebel! For the first time she looked carefully at her city and her country, and what she saw was poverty and unhappiness and political turmoil. She tells Wes that she then became a political activist, working for more freedom and opportunity for

Indonesians, particularly women. When her father sent her to the United States to go to college, she believes it was first to get rid of her, only second to provide her with a good education.

They share their stories in snippets, trading vignettes of biography as they walk across campus or sit on the grass or linger at sidewalk cafes in nearby neighborhoods.

They are at a table at what has become their favorite café when Hayaam says, "I take my exam next week."

"You have midterms already?"

"Not at the university. For my citizenship."

Wes waits for more.

"I didn't tell you before."

"Let me make sure I understand. You've been studying to become an American citizen?"

She smiles and nods.

"Hayaam, I think that's great. So you plan to stay in America?"

"I have not decided. I will be a citizen of both countries. First, I have to tell my father. He is visiting us next month."

"Will he approve?"

"He would not want me to live here, I think."

Wes starts to say something but stops himself. He looks away.

"What is that look?" Hayaam asks.

"What look?"

"Like you don't believe I'm strong willed."

"I've seen you strong willed."

"You think I must do everything my father says."

Even though I am an adult. You think this because I am a woman. Especially because I am a Muslim woman.”

“No, I was just reacting to what you said.”

“What do you think I said?”

“You had to get permission from your father—“

“No, I did not say this. I said I haven’t told him yet that I will become an American citizen. But this is my choice. He has nothing to say about it.”

Wes is silent because he fears that whatever he says will escalate the conversation even deeper into what is beginning to feel like an argument.

“There is that look again,” Hayaam says.

“I have no idea what look you mean.”

“That I am a Muslim woman.”

“Well, you are!”

“And what does this mean to you?”

“I don’t know. I thought ...”

“What?”

“You know, Muslim women are different.”

“How is that?”

“They’re more submissive than in the west.”

Hayaam manages to smile and glare at him simultaneously.

Wes says, “Like how you dress, for instance.”

“What about it?”

“It’s very modest. I’m not criticizing it, I’m just pointing something out. Muslim women are different than American women.”

“Of course we are! We are more liberated.”

Wes can’t help but laugh, which he immediately

understands is the worst thing he could've done. Hayaam shifts her energy into a higher gear.

"Why does this amuse you? I dress like this because I refuse to be looked at as a sex object. I refuse to be a part of the sexism that is the basis of gender relations in the west. If a man wants a relationship with me, he must start by engaging my mind. There are no physical distractions. This is why I wear hijab, and this is why it is liberating."

She stops. Wes realizes that she is going to stare at him until he responds.

Finally he says, "I never thought about it that way."

"Maybe it's time you do."

10

WES COULDN'T GET Hayaam's words out of his mind. The more he thought about them, the more he flirted with the possibility that her point of view made sense. Twisting his mind around gender relations in this way, he found an explanation for something that always had bothered him.

There often was a great distance between what young American women he knew espoused in theory and how they behaved in practice, and in no area was this discrepancy more visible than in fashion. The ardent feminist who insisted she was not a sex object could enter a party wearing the most skimpy tease of attire, strutting flirtatiously through the night as if politics were in no way personal, a radical feminist by day, a vamp by night. Of course, this same young woman would say, if cornered on the contradiction, that there was no contradiction at all, the sex in this equation was unilateral, coming from the dirty mind of the patriarchal observer, the culturally

brainwashed eyes of the male held hostage by sex, and she, the passionate feminist, was merely expressing herself by her dress, or lack of dress, and not meaning to be sexual at all.

How different was the Muslim approach to fashion! That men were sexually tempted by women was assumed to be true, which meant that women should dress in a way that held off this natural biological energy. Men were animals by nature, and therefore both sexes should behave accordingly. At least this was the sense Wes began to make of Hayaam's haunting words.

"That is the biggest crock I've ever heard in my life," Roger said when Wes shared the notion one afternoon. They again were shooting baskets in the gym.

"If you think about it, there's a logic to it. Put yourself in the shoes of a woman."

"Listen to you. You're thinking with your cock, white man."

That's the point, isn't it? Wes thought. But he realized there was no point in pursuing the matter with Roger. They shot the rest of their baskets in silence.

When they were dressing at their lockers after a shower, Roger said, "Have you nailed her yet?"

"We're just friends."

"Bullshit. You can't talk about anyone else."

"Okay, I find her different. But we're just friends."

"Do I detect a certain sadness in your tone?"

"She's a Muslim."

"Exactly. You nail her, and they stone her in the street, right? Then her brother tracks you down and cuts off your dick."

11

COULD IT BE true? *You nail her, and they stone her in the street. Then her brother tracks you down and cuts off your dick.*

Knowing virtually nothing about Islam, Wes decided to learn something.

At the campus bookstore, he found a book shelved in the Religions area called *Islam: A Concise Introduction*. On his way to the cash register, he stopped to browse at a table full of books on sale. There was a paperback copy of *The Rubiyat of Omar Khayam*, which Wes bought as well because he remembered from high school a poem about a loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou.

His curiosity about Islam was challenged by the turgid prose of the book. He admitted that he actually wasn't interested in Islam so much as in Hayaam, in knowing how being a Muslim had made her different from other women he had known, American women, and how Hayaam was different from a more mainstream or traditional Muslim. Soon enough he read something that disturbed him, and he wondered if this had disturbed Hayaam as well. If so, he had been acting like an ignorant fool.

He soon had an opportunity to ask her. He'd taken the habit of watching for her from his carrel window, and one afternoon she passed below without her crutches. He stopped what he was doing, which was precious little (he still hadn't started chapter one), and raced outside to catch up with her.

"When did you get off crutches?"

The answer was obvious since he'd seen her with them yesterday.

"This is my first day. If I am careful, I am safe."

They walked a moment in silence as Wes prepared to say what was on his mind.

“I owe you an apology.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve been acting from ignorance. I mean, I know we’ve never really been completely alone together since we spend our time in public places, but I didn’t realize it was against your religion to date. Not that we’re actually dating. But we are, you know, sort of seeing each other regularly, which could be construed to be dating. I didn’t mean any disrespect by it.”

“You think I am forbidden to be alone with you?”

“I’ve been reading about Islam. It says you don’t date or spend time alone with the opposite sex.”

“I see. Then this is like my hijab, another example of my repression. You must feel so sorry for me.”

“I’m not trying to make you angry. I’m trying to apologize.”

“You *are* making me angry! Let me tell you something. I am a feminist. Yes, a Muslim feminist! Whatever book you are reading, I think you are getting bad information.”

There was something in the energy of her stepping away from him that told Wes not to follow, she wanted to be alone now. But he was not sure what had just happened. He couldn’t let it rest.

He found her in the library and sat down across the table from her. He leaned forward and spoke in low tones, surprising her by changing the subject.

“How’s the studying for citizenship coming?”

Hayaam decided not to stay mad at him. After all, he was an American, and Americans knew almost nothing about Islam. At least he was trying to understand.

“Good,” she said.

"I'd be glad to help. Quiz you, whatever you need."

"You would do this?"

"I'd like to."

"Even if we must be alone to do this?"

"I deserve that. Yes, even if we are alone."

"Then yes, you can help me."

"Great."

"When?"

"Soon. Let me get back to you."

His mind was racing with possibilities. One was inviting her to his house, where they could study undisturbed in the privacy of his bedroom. Besides, he'd like her to meet his parents.

At dinner that night Wes waited until Evelyn had cleared the table before telling his father about Hayaam's visit. He'd mentioned her to him before.

"I'm still seeing the Muslim woman I told you about. She's actually studying to become an American citizen. I thought I'd help her study."

"Is that a question?"

"I was wondering if it would be okay to bring her here. I mean, the way mom feels and everything."

"Of course you can bring her here."

"Thanks, Dad."

In his room, Wes decided to invite Hayaam to come over Saturday afternoon to study. If he'd had her phone number, he would have called now to ask. He wondered if Hayaam would consider it forward of him to ask for her phone number. The book said that Muslims didn't date and yet she had reprimanded him for even suggesting such a notion. No doubt there were as many varieties of Islam as of Christianity, and Hayaam practiced on the liberal end of

the spectrum. If she was not afraid to be alone with him, she probably was not afraid to come to his home, to study without a chaperon in his bedroom.

12

WES' ADVISOR WAS Professor Adams, a stout, balding Blake scholar near retirement. With still no progress on the novel (not even an opening paragraph written down), Wes stopped by his office to confess to what appeared to be writer's block.

"Moliere seems so irrelevant to everything going on today," Wes said.

"Aha."

There was a long silence.

Professor Adams said, "But you were so excited by the possibility that he'd married his own daughter. There are obvious dramatic possibilities there."

Wes shrugged, as if to say, *So what?*

After another silence, the professor asked, "What do you think about historical fiction?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"How were you going to imagine how Moliere felt, a man who lived what, three plus hundred years ago? How were you going to get into his head?"

After a silence, Wes said, "I was going to imagine myself in the same situation, I guess."

"Exactly. You were going to make the leap that there is a common human condition than transcends time and culture. Am I right?"

“I guess so.”

“Which means that all things that happen, no matter when they happen, can be made relevant to the human condition. In fact, this is your very job as a writer, isn’t it? To show us why Moliere, and the turmoil he went through, matters to us today. What it can tell us about ourselves. Or do I misunderstand your intentions?”

Wes nodded without speaking.

“Remember, Moliere lived in very turbulent times himself,” said the professor. “A history novel is always a contemporary novel.”

“I see what you mean.”

Professor Adams grinned, which seemed to inflate his face and make him look stouter than he was.

Wes said, “I just needed someone to talk to, I guess.”

“Of course. Glad to help.”

That night at home Wes wrote the first three pages of his novel. He wasn’t sure if they were any good but at least it was a start.

13

ON SATURDAY WES met Hayaam in front of the library on campus. When she’d accepted his invitation for a study session and he’d started giving her directions to his family’s home on Long Island, he could tell right away that she wasn’t used to taking the train. He told her he’d meet her on campus so they could travel together, taking the subway to Penn Station and the train to Glen Cove, the Nassau county village where Wes had grown up and his parents lived still.

It was, it turned out, Hayaam’s first train ride in

New York. For Wes this made the routine commute an adventure, and by the time they disembarked and walked to his car in the parking lot at the Glen Cove station, they both were in good spirits, looking like a young couple in love, which was how they were beginning to feel, though neither was prepared to admit this to the other. In public they were guarded and restrained, trying to behave like casual friends. Only when they knew they were alone did their guards come down as they moved into the temporary, present-tense realm of lovers.

Wes opened the passenger door of his Toyota for her. Before climbing in, Hayaam said, "If you have a car, why don't you drive to New York?"

"Spoken like someone who has never driven in New York."

The family home was close to town, a large two-story colonial on a sprawling corner lot. Wes parked the Toyota beside his father's Mercedes in front of the garage and hurried around the front of the car to open the door for Hayaam. To his surprise, she was getting out of the car herself before he had a chance to be chivalrous.

"I'm so nervous," Hayaam said. All the same, Wes had never seen a more beautiful smile.

"Trust me, my parents are great. A friend of mine is a friend of theirs."

Which was exactly what Walter soon suggested, standing in the doorway with a wide grin as they came up the steps.

"Saw you coming," he said.

"Dad, this is Hayaam."

"I thought it must be. It's very nice to meet you, Hayaam. A friend of Wes' is a friend of ours."

"It is a pleasure to meet you.'

"Well, come in."

Wes gestured for Hayaam to enter first, and both father and son waited for her to pass. Walter winked at Wes.

“Is mom around?” Wes saw that she was nowhere to be found.

Walter said, “I think she went on an errand.”

Wes could tell his father was lying. Earlier, in fact, as Walter and Evelyn watched the Toyota approach, standing back from the dining room curtains so as not to be seen, Evelyn abruptly had said, “I’m not ready for this,” and bolted for the stairway.

Now it was Wes’ turn to move for the stairway, saying, “I’m helping Hayaam study for her citizenship test.”

“I believe you mentioned that,” Walter said.

Wes led the way upstairs. At the top of the stairs, he noticed that the door to his parents’ bedroom was closed. He imagined his mother hiding in there, determined not to meet Hayaam because of what had happened to Michael. Wes remembered how his grandmother, Evelyn’s mother, had refused to ride in a VW all her life because the car was made by Germans. Xenophobia ran in his mother’s side of the family.

Wes waited for Hayaam to enter the bedroom first. And then they are alone.

For a moment, stepping inside, Wes thinks of shutting the door for privacy but at the same time he doesn’t want to give the wrong impression. He leaves it open.

An open door does not relieve the nervousness he feels about being alone with Hayaam in his bedroom. She seems to be taking her time taking the room in, as if trying to extrapolate insights about him from the NYU banner and the NY Yankees poster, from the long desk he made himself from plywood and bricks, which supports a computer on one end and stacks of books on the other.

"You can sit at the desk," Wes says.

Hayaam sits down and opens her backpack. She takes out a folder and hands Wes a booklet.

"These are sample test questions," she says.

But she is not quite ready to start.

"You like baseball?"

"Especially the Yankees."

"I tried to watch a game on television. I don't understand it."

"Maybe we can go to a game sometime."

"You would have to explain it to me."

"I can do that."

She smiles. By then Wes is so nervous he looks away.

"Shall we start?" she asks, rescuing him.

It doesn't take long before he realizes that she knows more about American history than he does. There are one hundred sample questions, arranged in sections, and her answers to each come quickly and confidently.

Reaching the Famous Quotations section, Wes says, "Give me liberty or give me death!"

"Patrick Henry."

"These are the times that try men's souls."

"Thomas Paine. I have one that's not in the book. No taxation without representation."

She stares at him, waiting.

"I know that one," he says.

But he's not sure.

He guesses, "Samuel Adams."

"Very close. Samuel Adams was his law clerk."

“Really?”

Wes has no idea who it might be.

“John Adams,” he says, a wild guess.

“John Adams called him the First Patriot.”

He rattles off a few more names, which exhausts his limited knowledge of the American revolution.

Hayaam says, “James Otis.”

“James Otis. I’m not sure I ever heard of him.”

“I know. He’s not in the book of questions. I read about him in a book from the library. Do you know what he meant by no taxation without representation?”

“Since the colonies couldn’t vote, they shouldn’t be taxed.”

“What did James Otis want to do about it?”

“To become independent. The colonies went to war over it.”

“This is not what he meant. He wanted the colonies to be represented in English Parliament. He didn’t want independence or war. When war came, he went crazy. They had to carry him out of Boston in a straightjacket. The citizenship book doesn’t tell you this. In Indonesia, the government only tells you what they want you to know. Is it the same in America?”

Wes isn’t sure what to say. He is amazed, listening to her, not only by her knowledge but by the confidence with which she relates it. At the same time, her British accent adds an irony to her tone, as if the losers had to tell the winners what had really happened.

Wes says, “At least you could get the whole story in the library.”

Hayaam says, “This is true. I think the history of your country is fascinating.”

They continue through the booklet, and Hayaam

doesn't miss a question. As far as Wes is concerned, she couldn't be more ready to take the citizenship test.

When they are done, he asks her if she would like to go out for ice cream or a snack. Glen Cove has a great bakery and a great café. Hayaam says she'd better be getting back because her brother would be expecting her. They leave his bedroom and reenter the world.

Wes insisted on driving her home, rather than seeing her off on the train. He could drop her off at her door and avoid the hassle of parking in the city.

On the drive into the city, they conversed little, not so much from nervousness now as from contentment, quietly happy in the silence of one another's company. Their eyes met often, and they almost always smiled then, as if astonished at how comfortable they felt together. Although the present tense magic of being alone in his room was gone, they still shared the embrace of intimacy.

Hayaam shared an apartment with her brother in Greenwich Village within walking distance of campus. She directed him to her apartment building, and Wes stopped in the street, double-parking. This time he hurried around the car before she could get out. He opened the door for her, then offered his hand to help her out.

Wes noticed Abdul looking at them from a front window. When Hayaam saw her brother, she said, "He didn't want me to come. He's afraid we're dating."

She seemed to be waiting for Wes to say something.

Finally she asked, "Are we dating?"

"I don't know. I mean, then it's allowed?"

"If I choose to, yes. Remember, I am a feminist."

"I keep forgetting."

"Are we dating?"

"Well ... what do you think?"

"Please answer the question."

Wes saw that Abdul was still staring at them from the window.

Wes said, "Yes, we're dating. I mean, I would like to think that we are."

"Good. I like dating you."

She flashed him the sweet smile, which melted him as always, and then she waved to Abdul. She ran up the few stairs to the building's entrance.

A car beeped its horn for Wes to move on. He hurried behind the wheel, looked quickly to see Hayaam disappear inside, and drove off.

14

AS SOON AS Hayaam entered the apartment, she faced Abdul, who had positioned himself to intercept her. He looked angry.

"Did you manage to get any studying done?"

"That's all we did. He asked questions from the book, and I answered them."

"Seeing him will not lead to anything good. You must know this."

"This is my decision, not yours."

"And Papa's decision?"

"Papa is not here."

"He will be soon enough."

Abdul said this in a way that made Hayaam believe he was keeping something from her. She stopped feeling defensive, her focus turning to her father. What had Abdul learned?

Abdul relished the power he had at this moment. He didn't give his sister the satisfaction of saying more.

"Abdul, what is it?"

He smiled, his signal of victory.

"A letter came today. His papers have been approved."

"How soon will he leave?"

"Only a matter of weeks now."

In her excitement, she embraced her brother. Abdul broke away, not comfortable with this gesture of overt affection for every happy moment of a day. The gesture was too American.

"Papa will not approve of what you are doing," he told her.

Hayaam was quickly defensive again.

"Papa knows me better than you do."

With this, she retreated into her room, closing the door behind her. It had been a year since her father's last visit, and she had changed so much since then. She still hadn't told him, or Abdul, that she was becoming an American citizen. Papa, she thought, would understand her reasons more than her brother would. Her father might not approve but she believed he would respect her decision once she explained that this meant she was a citizen of two countries, not that she was giving up an allegiance to Indonesia.

However, her father would not understand nor approve of her desire to live in America. This would be the last news she would tell him, and she would wait until he'd gone back home before sharing it in a letter. If she told him this in person, he might pull her out of school on the spot.

15

WES FOUND HIS mother in the back yard at twilight, cutting flowers. He watched her from the den, and when she came into the house with a bouquet for the dinner table, he was waiting for her.

“Mom, are you okay?”

“Do I look that bad carrying flowers?”

“You know what I mean.”

Yes, she did know, but Evelyn was in no mood to discuss the situation. She continued on into the kitchen. For a moment she was thankful that Wes had not followed her but he appeared after all, just as she started trimming the stems of the flowers.

“She’s studying to become an American citizen,” Wes said.

“Who is?”

“Why can’t you accept her?”

She set down the scissors and looked at him. How could she even begin to explain how she felt?

“I just wish you could get interested in an American girl.”

“I told you, she’s studying to—”

“She’s a Muslim. You know nothing about her. For all you know, she may be...”

“What? A terrorist? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Muslims are different. Look what they did.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

“What would your brother think?”

“Mike wasn’t a bigot.”

“So I’m a bigot now?”

She picked up the scissors and went back to work, wishing against hope that he would just leave her alone.

“You’re supposed to be a Unitarian,” Wes said. “You’re supposed to be tolerant.”

“I’m a Baptist.”

“What?”

“I’m a Baptist. We go to the Unitarian church because it’s the only one I could get your father to go to. I was born a Baptist, and I’ll always be a Baptist.”

Wes stared at her in disbelief. The family had been going to the Unitarian church all his life.

Evelyn moved to the sink and filled a vase with water. She began to arrange the flowers.

Wes lingered a moment, then retreated and climbed the stairs.

The door to Mike’s room was open. Wes saw his father inside, sitting on the bed, bent forward with his head resting in his hands. He appeared to be crying.

Wes hesitated at the doorway, not sure what to do, to enter and comfort his father or to respect his privacy. Walter didn’t move, giving no sign that he was aware of Wes’ presence.

Finally Wes continued on to his room and gently closed the door behind him.

16

NOW THAT THEY were officially dating, Wes and Hayaam ventured farther from campus, talking long walks in the

city, enjoying free time together in Central Park, strolling through Chinatown and Little Italy, going to the Guggenheim and the American Museum of Natural History. Wes felt like a tourist guide, showing Hayaam's the highlights of New York, and he enjoyed doing it.

On a Saturday afternoon, as they sit together on a blanket in Central Park, Wes brings out the volume of *The Rubiyat* and reads to her. He'd been rehearsing this moment for days, carefully selecting the verse he'd begin with, reading aloud in his room in hopes that familiarity would make it less likely that he'd stumble over words in his nervousness.

But despite all his practice, his voice wavers as he reads to her:

“Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.”

Wes feels himself blushing, his face hot, and he has to look away for fear of appearing more stupid than he already feels.

Hayaam takes the book from him. She flips through the pages, stopping when she finds what she's looking for. When she reads, her voice is soft but confident with its British accent:

“Ah, fill the Cup! – what boots it to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn tomorrow, and dead yesterday,
Why fret about them if Today be sweet!”

If only a moment ago he couldn't look her in the eye, now he can't look away. Wes experiences a connection with Hayaam that makes him dizzy and speechless. He wouldn't know how to begin to describe it, other than to

say that he had fallen in love with her.

Hayaam speaks first.

"I'd better go home."

"You're sure?"

Immediately he regrets asking. Of course she must leave, lest they make love on the spot. There is enough sexual energy between them to destroy all inhibitions, should they respond to it. Both are hesitant and frightened by the possibility.

Hayaam says, "Yes."

She shifts her position, getting ready to rise, and Wes bounds to his feet to offer his hand. He lifts her to her feet. They almost fall into one another's arms.

"Will you come to church with me on Sunday?" he asks.

For a moment the question seems to puzzle her.

"If you like," she says.

"I would like it very much."

"Then I will."

17

WES DIDN'T TELL his parents about the invitation. Habitually they all went to church together, but Wes had agreed to pick Hayaam up. She'd insisted that he meet her at the edge of campus rather than at her apartment. Wes left the house with the curt announcement to his father that he'd meet them at church.

As soon as Wes was out the door, Evelyn came into the living room and said, "Is Wesley ready?"

“He said he’ll meet us there.”

“He’s going to church alone?”

But as soon as she said this, Evelyn suspected the truth. He was bringing the girl to church.

This knowledge ruined for her what normally was a pleasant scenic drive from Glen Cove to Muttontown, where the small Unitarian Universalist fellowship met in a converted farmhouse. Evelyn was torn between telling Walter to turn around and return home, knowing full well it wouldn’t take much of an excuse for him to do just this, and convincing herself that she was wrong, Wesley was not with them because he had other plans, with the Muslim woman no doubt, but certainly there was no reason why this woman, this Muslim, would want to come to a church that wasn’t of her faith. To a Unitarian church to boot, which in Evelyn’s opinion didn’t seem to belong to any faith, at least none that struck her as actually being religious.

Hayaam’s mind also was racing with thoughts as Wes drove through the woods of northern Nassau County. When she had accepted the invitation to church, she’d expected to be taken somewhere in town. She remembered passing several churches in Glen Cove on her first visit. But Wes didn’t stop in his home village at all, continuing north along the highway. Finally he turned off onto a smaller road, and they drove through woods for a while until he turned again onto a long driveway that led to the farmhouse that was the church.

“We’re here,” said Wes, stating the obvious. A dozen cars were in the small parking lot. He maneuvered the Toyota beside his father’s Mercedes and rushed out to open Hayaam’s door for her.

Stepping out, Hayaam said, “I didn’t think American men opened doors for women any more.”

“I confess it’s a first for me.”

“Because I’m from Indonesia?”

“No. Because I want to make a good impression.”

“It’s really about good manners, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I think it is.”

He was bold enough to take her hand, and when he did, she smiled. They started toward the front entrance.

Walter had insisted on saving two seats, even though Evelyn was now almost sure Wes was not coming. When she noticed that people seated in front of her were craning their necks to stare back at the entrance into what originally had been the large dining room, converted now into a space more resembling a business meeting hall than a sanctuary, she shifted in her seat and was faced with the shocking sight of Wesley, who walked toward her holding the hand of the Muslim woman. Walter saw them, too, and quickly stood.

Evelyn assumed the worst immediately: Wesley had fallen in love with this woman.

“Hayaam, good to see you again,” said Walter.

Wes said, “Mom, this is Hayaam.” And to Hayaam, “My mother.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Hayaam.

Evelyn managed to smile but couldn’t bring a single word to voice.

The Muttontown Unitarian Universalist Fellowship had been formed because enough people living in upper Nassau County on Long Island had become tired of driving into New York to meet with those of kindred spiritual beliefs. It was already formed by the time Walter and Evelyn moved from the city to Glen Cove, and for a while Evelyn went alone to a nearby Baptist Church, just as she had done in the city. As they began to make friends, several of their best ones turned out to be Unitarians. Almost on a whim one Sunday morning, getting ready for church, Evelyn asked Walter if he’d like to go to the Unitarian

church. She had read in the Glen Cove Record-Pilot that the fellowship, which had been meeting in private homes for years, had purchased and converted a farmhouse in Muttontown into a sanctuary. Services – or were they called meetings? – were held each Sunday morning at 10:30 a.m., late enough so Walter could still watch Sunday Morning on television. To Evelyn's surprise, Walter agreed, and they ended up signing a book to become official members of the fellowship less than a year later. That was two decades ago, and the size of the congregation had held steady between 30 and 50 ever since.

Today no more than two dozen had come to listen to the Reverend Dr. Sally Downs speak on, "Does Evil Exist?" Of course it existed, Evelyn thought. What was September 11th if not a manifestation of evil? This was what she couldn't understand about Unitarians, they always tried to make simple questions complicated. But at least she and Walter did something together each Sunday morning, usually taking a drive afterwards and having lunch at some roadhouse they'd never been to before, and she was willing to put up with Unitarians in order to preserve the pleasures of their Sunday routine.

Wes couldn't focus on the sermon. He was aware that he'd upset his mother by bringing Hayaam. More than anything else, he wanted Hayaam to be comfortable now, and he made an effort to smile whenever their eyes met so she'd know how happy he was to have her there with him. She was wearing her usual hijab, today's robe as orange as a flame with a dark brown head veil. She looked beautiful, and the Unitarians around her all beamed when they looked at her, as if her presence provided the visible truth of their creed of universal tolerance.

Hayaam found the sermon both interesting and puzzling. As a comparative religion major, she was naturally interested in the question of evil, and the woman giving the sermon had done her homework on the subject. What puzzled Hayaam was that this lecture – and this appeared to be a lecture, not a sermon – was occurring in a

church, or what was presented to be a church. Yet there was not a single reference to God or Jesus Christ through the entire morning. Once, after the lecture ended, the woman mentioned the Great Spirit before inviting the congregation to pray, but this was as close as the Unitarians got to what Hayaam expected to be Christian, or even religious, behavior. She had come out of curiosity to learn how Unitarians, practiced their religion but found the entire experience more confusing than enlightening.

Afterwards, as the small congregation stood in line to greet their pastor on their way out, Unitarians beamed again at Hayaam, and she began to feel self-conscious. Wes grasped her hand tightly and tried in his smile to encourage patience, that soon enough all of this would be over.

Wes and Hayaam were in line just ahead of Walter and Evelyn. No one spoke until it was their turn to greet the Rev. Dr. Sally Downs.

“Rev. Downs,” Wes said, “this is my friend, Hayaam.”

The Rev. Dr. Sally Downs showed off her excellent teeth with a broad smile.

“Thank you so much for coming!”

“She’s studying to become an American citizen,” said Wes.

“Well, this is an honor. I hope we see you again.”

“Thank you,” Hayaam said.

As Wes led Hayaam away, he heard the pastor behind him greet his parents, “Thank you for bringing Hayaam.” If the Rev. Dr. Sally Downs only knew how little good Unitarian tolerance inhabited the Harding household!

Outside Wes didn’t really want to wait for his parents but he wanted less to face the possible wrath that might greet him later if he rushed off with Hayaam now. So

they waited, and congregants came one after the other to meet Hayaam, perhaps the first Muslim any of them had met before, or the first since September 11th.

Finally Walter bounded forward like a lawyer after a victory verdict.

"I assume you'll join us for lunch," he said.

Wes read from his mother's expression that this was a unilateral invitation. Before he could invent an excuse, Hayaam said, "I'm sorry. I must get home."

Walter looked as disappointed as Evelyn looked relieved.

"Some other time then," he said.

In the Toyota, driving slowly in order to keep Hayaam's company as long as possible, Wes learned that Hayaam didn't have to get home at all.

"I said what you call a white lie," she said. "Is that the expression? I have the afternoon free."

Wes shot her an inquisitive look.

Hayaam said, "Your mother doesn't like me."

"Of course she does."

Immediately he regretted the clear transparency of the remark.

"My mother is ... she was raised a Baptist. They aren't very liberal-minded about religious matters. But she's come a long way, believe me. I didn't even know she was a Baptist myself until recently."

"If she is a Baptist, why is she going to a Unitarian church?"

"Because my father wants to."

Hayaam smiled.

"What?" Wes said.

"I was just thinking ... American women are so submissive and repressed."

Later, walking through a small park along the shore in lower Long Island, Wes asked if she had liked the service.

"I was surprised. It is not what I expected."

"In what way?"

"I heard nothing about God or Jesus Christ. Even in the prayer, it was the Great Spirit who was prayed to. I thought only your American Indians prayed to the Great Spirit."

"Most Unitarians are refugees from other religions. God and Christ sometimes bring bad memories of how they were brought up."

"This is a strange foundation for a religion."

"It's not official doctrine. But I think it's true."

"Would you like to come to a mosque?"

The question surprised him, although it made perfect sense for Hayaam to return the favor.

"I would, yes."

"When?"

"Whenever would be appropriate."

"I don't know what this means. How would it be appropriate?"

"Hayaam, I will come whenever you invite me."

"Next Friday at noon. This is our large community worship. You actually can't participate but it would be appropriate for you to be there as an observer if you like."

Her grin revealed that she was making fun of him.

"Just tell me where to go," he said.

"There are several possibilities. Let me tell you next

week.”

18

WES HAD NOT been reading the library book on Islam from cover-to-cover. When he'd first taken it home, he immediately searched the index for information on women, the hijab, sexual attitudes, and dating practices. The term “hijab” was especially confusing because sometimes its meaning was abstract and sometimes concrete. Thus the author wrote in one place, “Hijab is the long dress and veil worn by many Muslim women,” but in another, “women wear the abaya (robe or dress that covers arms and legs) and hijab (scarf covering the head),” and in still another, “Hijab is an Arabic word meaning 'the covering' and refers to the Islamic dress code of women.” So hijab could describe the practice of dressing modestly, collectively the robe and scarf that expressed this modesty, or just the headscarf. The bottom line was, a Muslim woman dressed so only her face and hands remained uncovered.

Returning home on Sunday, Wes picked up the book again and looked in the index to see if there was anything about the rituals of worship in a mosque.

He was astounded by what he found. The rituals of Islamic worship were so numerous and complex that he'd be stressed to the point of canceling if he were expected to participate in them. Before worship Muslims removed their shoes and performed a detailed and ritualistic washing ceremony: washing the hands to the wrists three times, rinsing out the mouth with the right hand three times, sniffing and blowing water from the nostrils three times, washing the face three times, washing each arm to the elbow three times, wiping the head with the fingers once, cleaning the inside of the ears with the index fingers and

the back of the ears with the thumbs, both once, wiping the back of the neck once, and finally washing the feet up to the ankles three times.

Wes was exhausted just reading about it – and this was only the preparation for worship, which had a ritualistic order no less complicated. He was relieved not to have to participate but also fascinated by what he'd read and curious to see such a complex procedure of worship in action. The Catholics had nothing on the Muslims for embracing rituals.

At school Hayaam told him to go to a mosque located only a few blocks east of Central Park. She normally attended a smaller mosque closer to her apartment in Greenwich Village, she explained, but this one was larger and more likely would have other guests beside himself. Guests sat apart from the worshipers, and he might not feel as conspicuous if he had company. She also told him to go right on in without her. Someone would direct him to where the guests sat. She would be worshiping in the separate women's section upstairs, so she couldn't visit with him until after prayers. Then she'd find him outside the mosque, and they could spend some time together.

Next Hayaam said something that he hadn't thought about.

"Of course, some people will think you're an F.B.I. agent."

"What?"

"Paranoia works both ways. Americans see a Muslim and think, a terrorist! Muslims see an American in a mosque and think, Why is he here? He must be spying for the F.B.I."

This was life in the new America.

19

WES LOCATED THE mosque early on Friday, arriving thirty minutes before worship began. The building occupied a corner of the block, a round building of brick and sandstone, red and brown, with a dome overhead near which a tall thin tower rose. He walked past the mosque several times, nervous enough to realize that the visit would be stressful after all, even if he couldn't participate. People would stare at him, knowing he didn't belong there. A few probably would conclude he was a spy for the F.B.I. As ridiculous as the notion was, it scared him a little. What if someone confronted him about being there? He wished Hayaam were around to accompany him inside. But, of course, she couldn't do this. The sexes worshiped separately. What was so liberal or progressive about this? What did the feminism to which Hayaam claimed allegiance have to say about it?

He walked around the block, then a second and a third time. As he approached the mosque again he heard a loud, recorded voice, sounding like some kind of chant, and he saw that people were beginning to enter the mosque, and Wes stopped half a block away to watch them. They arrived in larger numbers than he expected, of all ages, the woman always wearing a veil, though otherwise there was more variety in their dress than he expected. He watched, trying to get the nerve to follow them inside.

Hayaam appeared with her friend, Areeba, and they entered. This was the boot in the butt Wes needed. He strode briskly to the entrance, which was marked by a large, ornate open door, and he followed people inside.

Everyone ahead of him was taking off their shoes and slipping them into a cubbyhole in a large open case. Wes did the same. Cloth slippers of various sizes were available, and Wes slipped on a pair. As he looked around, wondering what to do next, a man with a thick black beard smiled at him and said, "Are you visiting us today?" When

Wes nodded, the man gently took his arm and said to follow this way.

The man led Wes to a side wall of a large open room where two young men already sat silently on small rugs. Wes nodded and joined them, kneeling down on his knees on his own small rug.

In the large room men were arranged in long lines, all facing the same direction. Wes noticed a balcony, and this was where the women were waiting, also sitting or kneeling in long lines.

The sound of chanting had been coming over loudspeakers since Wes had entered. He couldn't tell if anyone was paying attention to it or not. He glanced a look at his two companions, guests like himself, and wondered what had brought them here. He wondered if they were F.B.I. agents.

Suddenly the men in the room rose to their feet. Glancing to the balcony, Wes saw that the women had done the same. But his two companions remained seated on their small rugs, so he didn't move. Apparently the worship service had begun.

Afterwards Wes was amazed at how quickly the experience had passed by. The ritual itself was full of repetitions, a sequence of kneeling and bowing forward to touch the head to the floor, which was covered by a green carpet, then rising to one's feet to speak, then kneeling and bowing again, in an order and rhythm that gave the entire ritual the appearance of a dance. It must take a Muslim child years to learn how to worship without error, from the details of preparation to the complicated sequence of the religious dance.

Then everyone was leaving. No one was lingering to socialize. Wes followed the crowd outside, keeping to himself.

Outside the mosque, Wes looked around for Hayaam. For the first time he noticed two New York City

policeman standing on the sidewalk nearby, and he wondered if they were there for a special reason or from routine in the climate of the new America.

Wes saw Hayaam and Areeba walking down the sidewalk. They must have exited before he had, and he worried why Hayaam hadn't waited outside near the door for him. Had he done something to embarrass her, even though all he'd done was to remain on his small rug to watch? Then she saw him and waved. He hurried to join them.

By the time he arrived, Areeba already had continued on alone.

Wes wanted to clear the air right away.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"I don't understand this question. Do you feel like you did something wrong?"

"You seemed to be walking away."

"There are many traditional Muslims here. They would be offended if we socialized too conspicuously."

"I understand. Shall we walk?"

They walked away from the mosque in an awkward silence.

"What did you think?" Hayaam finally asked.

"Do you know the expression blown away? I was blown away. It must take a Muslim child years to learn the right order for doing everything. It looks so complicated."

"It is not so difficult when you learn as a child. It's no harder than learning a language."

Of course not, Wes thought. It was exactly like learning a language. In a sense, religious worship, when expressed in such detail of ritual, was a language.

After they were a few blocks away from the mosque, they turned back and made a large semicircle into Central

Park. As they strolled slowly in the direction of the Village to the southwest, Hayaam takes his hand.

Hayaam can tell that the gesture surprises him.

“You don’t want to hold hands?”

“Of course I do. I wasn’t sure if it was allowed.”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.”

He walks her all the way to her neighborhood in Greenwich Village. He is not used to walking as far as she is, and he can feel the sweat on his back and the first hints of what will be tomorrow’s soreness in his legs. Hayaam, it appears, walks everywhere. If Wes can’t take the subway, he is used to hailing a cab.

Hayaam stops a block from her apartment and says, “I’ll say goodbye here.”

“So your brother won’t see us?”

“He’s more traditional than I am. He doesn’t approve of dating.”

“I don’t ever want to get you in trouble, Hayaam.”

“I don’t need help to get into trouble!”

She laughs, giving him no choice but to grin along with her. He feels like kissing her but isn’t sure how to start, isn’t sure if this is too far an extension beyond holding hands in the strange world of proper Islamic behavior. He has no time to fret about it, however, because she quickly says she’ll be studying in the library tomorrow if he happens to be on campus, and before he can reply she is skipping down the sidewalk, the long walk from Central Park not affecting her stamina at all, looking very much like a young woman in love.

20

THAT EVENING AT dinner, Wes said, "I'd like to invite Hayaam for dinner."

Evelyn froze, then set down her fork. Both Wes and Walter watched her.

In a moment Walter broke the tension by turning to his son.

"Wes, it may be too early for that."

"Why?" Evelyn asked in a tone of reprimand. "He's obviously determined to keep seeing her. What will make the situation better if he doesn't ask her until next week or next month?"

"What I meant is, maybe you'll be able to accept her more graciously later."

"Graciously? Is that what I'm supposed to do?"

She stood.

"Those people killed my son. How can I be gracious about it?"

"Mother, you make it sound like she's a terrorist. She's becoming an American citizen."

"How wonderful for her."

Evelyn stepped toward the kitchen, making an effort to walk deliberately, no emotional storming off but a slow, calculated departure.

The men watched her go.

Walter said, "Wes, I don't think this is a good time right now."

21

THE SAME EVENING, in the Village, Hayaam was studying in her room when her brother appeared in the open doorway. He waited until she noticed him.

“Tell me it isn’t true.”

Hayaam immediately knew what he meant.

“You want me to lie?”

“Why did you do it?”

“He is curious about Islam. He showed me his church. I wanted to show him mine.”

“You went to his church?”

“They call it a church. It was more like a meeting.”

“You know what father would say about this. He arrives next week.”

The revelation pushed Hayaam between joy and apprehension. On the one hand, she loved her father and was eager to see him after almost a year; on the other, he was traditional and would not approve of her dating, especially dating an American, a non-Muslim.

“He will tell you not to see this man,” Abdul went on. “You know he will.”

Yes, she knew, though she did not admit it to her brother.

“When does he arrive?”

“His plane comes in Wednesday night.”

Hayaam had a hard time falling to sleep that night for all her worrying about her father. She wanted to tell him about Wes before Abdul did because she, and only she, could explain the full context of what she was doing. In the darkness her mind raced with the words that she would tell

her father.

Father, this is not how you think. This is not courtship. I know I can never marry this man, there are too many differences between us, our worlds are too far apart, and yet I enjoy his company here in America more than the company of anyone else I've met, more even than the company of Areeba, and so I see no harm in seeing him, in spending time with him, especially since we both know the limits and the boundaries of our relationship. We are friends, father, that is all. I know you think it is impossible to be just friends with a man but this is America, where many things are possible that are not possible elsewhere, in other traditions. We are friends, just friends, good friends. Father, you must trust me.

It was a good speech, she decided, but the fact didn't help her fall to sleep. Repeating the words, and variations of them, in her mind, she soon was doubting them, and herself, and her feelings about Wes – she began struggling with the admission that she cared for him more deeply and more recklessly than the careful and guarded explanation to her father implied. And it was in this struggle that she finally fell to sleep because now sleep was an escape.

22

“YOU STILL SEEING the Arab lady?” Roger said.

They were shooting baskets in the gym. Wes, getting set for a shot, broke his concentration and dribbled the ball.

“She's from Indonesia.”

“I take it that's a yes.”

Wes ignored him this time. He set up and shot, missed.

He rushed to the basket to get his own rebound.

“Why?” Roger asked as Wes dribbled back to the key. “I just don’t get it.”

“What’s there to get?”

“Why an Arab, of all people?”

“She’s Indonesian. Look, I’m just trying to feel like my life is normal again. What’s wrong with that?”

“Life will never be normal again.”

Wes shot. This time the ball bounced in off the backboard.

Roger dropped the subject. They shot baskets some more, then showered and went their separate ways to classes.

Later Wes met Hayaam in the Student Union. As usual, they got coffee and tea and sat at a table.

Hayaam did most of the talking. She was excited because her citizenship examination had been scheduled. It was only two weeks away. She was confident that she would pass.

Watching her, Wes noticed a strand of dark hair that had fallen from the band of her veil, and he realized he had never seen her hair before. How extraordinary! Was her hair short, long? He had no idea. He found himself wanting to reach out and touch the strand of hair where it fell from behind the veil. The thought became an obsession.

He realized he hadn’t been listening to her when she said, not for the first time, “Wes? Where are you?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Is something the matter?”

Wes couldn’t stop thinking about her hair and was bad company for the rest of the afternoon.

23

A FEW DAYS later an extraordinary thing happened.

They are in Central Park. Wes has brought along a Frisbee, and Hayaam has never thrown a Frisbee before. At first Wes just demonstrates how to throw it, letting her emulate him, but she is twisting her wrist when she throws, which she continues to do even after he points it out. He moves behind her and reaches around her, meaning to guide her hand and wrist and arm in the proper movement of throwing. Suddenly he freezes. He can feel how tense she has become and knows why. From behind, he practically is embracing her. They have never been this physically close before.

“Show me,” Hayaam says.

Wes guides her arm, saying, “Wrist relaxed and release,” repeating the motion again, “Wrist relaxed and release.”

He lets her keep the Frisbee and moves a distance away. He tells her to toss it to him.

“That’s better,” he says.

Now she begins to get the hang of it, and in no time they are throwing the Frisbee back and forth across the grass. Hayaam tells him to move farther back, then in a while tells him again. She is throwing better and longer all the time.

They are about twenty yards apart when Hayaam’s veil comes off from the exertion of a throw. Seeing her hair, Wes loses concentration and drops the Frisbee. When he retrieves it and looks back, Hayaam has removed the veil entirely. She stands before him, twenty yards away, with dark hair falling past her shoulders.

Carrying the Frisbee, Wes slowly walks toward her. Hayaam walks toward him. When they meet, they stop,

standing close. Hayaam's face is wet with perspiration. Without makeup, she has the face of a woman emerging from a shower.

Wes says, "You have beautiful hair."

"I know."

"I don't know why you cover it up."

"Because it's my decision who gets to see it."

"I'm glad I got to."

"So am I."

Perhaps you are too cynical to remember a moment like this: Wes can feel his heart pounding in his chest.

"Can I touch it?" he asks.

"If you like."

Wes reaches out and gently touches her hair, letting his fingers rest lightly against the side of her head, just above an ear. Her hair is damp. Hayaam closes her eyes.

"I want to kiss you," he says.

Without opening her eyes, Hayaam turns her head, offering him her cheek. He leans forward and gently kisses it.

No, he did not grab her breast. They did not suddenly collapse in a passionate embrace to make love on the grass. This is not a popular romance novel. This is not *The Bridges of Madison County*. This is not a Hollywood movie. This is the story of Wes and Hayaam.

Hayaam opens her eyes and looks at him.

"I have never kissed a man before," she says.

As she bends forward toward him, Wes expects a kiss on the lips but at the last moment she swerves and her lips touch his cheek. Her kiss is as soft as the landing of an insect.

Neither knows what to say. Hayaam breaks the

silence.

“I’d better get home.”

“I’ll walk you.”

They hold hands, as they often do now. They are silent, as if the new physical contact between them, however slight, has opened a dimension of communication beyond language, and their contentment in being together needs no explanation, no interpretation, no words to define it. They are learning to communicate through the pores of their skin.

You may have forgotten how this can happen. Trust me, it is happening to them. They are still too young to be cynical about such things.

They continue silently along, hand in hand, like two halves of the same person, leaving the park and rejoining the world.

Outside her apartment building, Wes finally spoke.

“I want to kiss you again.”

“I know. But not now, not here.”

“I know.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You certainly will.”

They didn’t even embrace. They exchanged smiles and moved apart, Hayaam into the building and Wes down the sidewalk.

Wes felt high, elated. He felt strangely powerful. He decided to return to campus to his carrel. Hayaam was like a muse, infusing him with creative energy, and he wanted to work on his novel.

A few blocks away Wes was stopped by the appearance of Abdul beside him. Abdul was out of breath.

“You must stop seeing my sister.”

"I don't want to do that."

"You must, for her own good."

"Hayaam doesn't want to stop seeing me either."

"Our father arrives in this country next week. He is very traditional. You will only cause family trouble."

"I get the impression Hayaam does exactly what she wants to do. If she wants to see me, she will."

"You are right. This is why I am asking you to do the honorable thing. Stop seeing her. Prevent our family from this trouble."

"I'm sorry, I can't."

Wes started away but Abdul grabbed his arm and drew him back.

"Why do you do this? You think she will marry you? Even as radical as she is, she will only marry a Muslim. She will not sleep with a man before marriage. What is in this for you?"

"I love her."

Abdul laughed, not because anything was funny but because the notion was so ridiculous.

"What do Americans know about love? All you know about is sex."

"I don't see any point in this conversation."

But when Wes started off again, Abdul jumped forward to block his way.

"I have asked you to do the honorable thing, to honor our family. If you betray this request, then you will pay the consequences."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Stop seeing her."

There was hate in the final look Abdul gave him before leaving. Wes watched him hurry off, half expecting

him to return with another warning.

Before reaching campus, Wes changed his mind. The muse had left him. He had no energy to write. He hailed a taxi for the ride to Penn Station, where he caught a train home.

24

WES WAS STUDYING in his room when Walter appeared in the doorway. It was almost ten o'clock at night.

"Hayaam is here to see you," Walter said. "She insisted on waiting on the porch."

As soon as Wes came outside, Hayaam practically leapt into his arms. They held one another for a long moment. This was the most physically aggressive thing she had ever done but it worried him. Something must be wrong.

Hayaam pulled away.

"How did you get here?" Wes said.

"I took the train alone. I'm very proud of myself."

"What's the matter?"

She wanted to walk. Along the way she told him that her brother had confronted her, demanding she stop seeing him, and also had told her about confronting Wes.

"I'm so sorry he talked to you that way."

They stopped walking, standing close on the sidewalk. Wes released her hand.

"Hayaam, I don't want to cause any problems for you. But I also want to keep seeing you."

“I want to keep seeing you, too.”

“Abdul said your father won’t approve.”

“He’s been angry with me before.”

“I feel like I’m between a rock and a hard place.”

“What is this?”

“A saying. I don’t know what to do.”

“Father will always love me. Even when he gets mad at what I do.”

“I think maybe you have to lead the way here. I don’t want to force you to make your father angry.”

“You think you can force me to do something?”

Her smile caused Wes to smile.

“Of course not. A slip of the tongue.”

“Kiss me.”

Wes bent forward and kissed her on the cheek.

“Not there,” Hayaam said.

She closed her eyes and puckered up. Wes almost laughed aloud, she looked so silly. But she was waiting, so he gave her a gentle kiss on the lips.

Hayaam opened her eyes.

“Again,” she said.

They kiss a second time. His lips press against hers more strongly now, more confidently, and she begins to kiss back. Suddenly Hayaam throws her arms around him, and they begin to kiss with growing passion.

Can you remember such wonderful abandon?

They start walking again, but they can’t walk for ten yards without stopping to kiss. Wes caresses her head veil as they kiss, wanting to slip it down so he can feel her hair, but he fears the gesture will be too forward. Their slow progress through the neighborhood, walking and kissing,

circles back until they find themselves where they started, standing in front of the Harding home.

"It's late," Hayaam says. "I still have studying to do."

"I'll drive you home."

"No. Just to the station."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I like riding the train by myself."

He drove her to the Glen Cove station and parked. As he reached for the door handle, she stopped him.

"No matter what happens, I will never forget tonight."

"Neither will I," said Wes.

But he was thinking, *What can happen?*

Hayaam said, "Now I understand something."

"What's that?"

"Why a woman would want to."

"To kiss?"

"That, too. But I was thinking of the other. Why a woman would want to sleep with a man before she was married."

She kissed him quickly on the cheek, a peck as comfortable as one coming from a wife.

"Don't come in with me," Hayaam said. "I am a very independent woman. I can ride the trains by myself!"

He watched her race into the station. Just before entering, she turned and waved an arm vigorously over her head, and even from a distance, under the lights outside the building, Wes recognized the happy radiance in her smile.

He waved back, though he doubted she could see him. After she disappeared, he started the engine. For a

long time he stayed in the parking lot, unable to put the car in gear. It was as if leaving now would be to drive away from more than he wanted to put behind him, as if something of what they had been together tonight had stayed behind, begging not to be abandoned.

25

WES RAN INTO Professor Adams in the hallway.

“Mr. Harding, I was just thinking about you. How goes the writer’s block?”

“It’s gone.”

“Good, good. So my advice helped.”

“Absolutely.”

And Hayaam, his muse, was helping, too, Wes thought.

“When do I get to see some pages?”

“When do you want to see them?”

“You have the first fifty yet?”

“Close.”

“Terrific. Finish them, polish them up, and let me have a look. Say in a week or two?”

“I can do that.”

“Excellent! Ciao.”

The stout professor waddled on down the hallway.

“You’ve never shown me your writing,” Hayaam said later after he’d told her about running into his advisor. As often, they were at a table in the Student Union coffee

shop.

“That’s true.”

“I’d like to read something.”

“I don’t like to share work-in-progress. I mean, I have to show my professor. But that’s different.”

“I understand. Then you’ve never published anything?”

“I’ve published some short stories.”

“How exciting! I want to read every one of them.”

He promised to bring her copies but as soon as he made the promise, he worried about what she might think about them. He didn’t want anything coming between them, especially not his writing.

26

HAYAAM AND ABDUL stood in the crowded terminal, looking for their father among the passengers coming in through the gate.

Abdul saw him first and shouted, “Papa! Papa!”

It took Hayaam a moment to find him.

“Papa!” she cried.

Jamal, their father, picked them out in the crowd. He smiled and waved. Suddenly two men wearing dark suits stepped in front of him.

Hayaam grabbed Abdul’s arm.

“What is it?” her brother asked rhetorically. “What are they doing?”

The two men in suits had positioned themselves on each side of their father and were leading him quickly to a side door.

“Papa!” Abdul called.

He started maneuvering through the crowd toward the men who were leading their father away. Hayaam stayed close behind, stepping quickly into the spaces in the crowd that Abdul cleared with increasing aggression, trying desperately to reach their father before he disappeared through the side door.

But they were too late. By the time Abdul reached the door, it was shut and locked. He pounded on it, yelling, “Papa! Papa!”

A young man in a white shirt and tie rushed up to them.

“What’s the problem here?” He was looking at Hayaam.

Abdul whipped around from the door, his eyes blazing with anger.

“Some men took my father in there! I demand to know what is going on.”

“Come with me,” the young man said.

“I demand--!”

“Abdul!” Hayaam interrupted. She waited for her brother to look at her. “Let’s go with him and find out what this is about. Please.”

The young man led them down a hallway and through another door, into an office. He told them to sit down and disappeared through still another door.

“This is an outrage,” Abdul said.

Hayaam nodded.

After a moment a different man appeared, wearing a dark suit like the men who had led their father away.

Hayaam and Abdul quickly rose to their feet.

“Your father is being detained for questioning,” the man said.

“Questioning for what?” Abdul wanted to know.

“That’s all I know right now. You are free to go.”

“Who are you anyway?”

The man took out his wallet and opened it, flashing some kind of badge at Abdul.

“Sorry,” he said. “F.B.I. Special Agent O’Connor.”

He quickly put the wallet away.

“Why is the F.B.I. interested in my father?”

Hayaam touched her brother’s arm.

“Abdul, let’s do as he says and go.”

“Good idea,” said the man. “Unless you want to be detained yourself.”

“We can’t help father if we get arrested,” Hayaam said.

Abdul glared at the man.

“This is an insult, and someone is going to pay for it.”

In the taxi, Abdul raved on all the way back to Greenwich Village, repeating what an outrage and insult it was to arrest their father, how something like this just showed how racist America was after the attack on the twin towers, arresting a man just because he looked Arabic, continuing on so loudly and repetitively that Hayaam worried that the taxi driver, a black man with an English accent, was going to pull over and tell them to get out with all their anti-patriotic sentiment in the new America.

Hayaam didn’t know what to think. She loved America and was less than a week away from taking her citizenship exam. But she well knew how differently some

people had been looking at her since September 11th. She tried to assess the situation from the point of view of the F.B.I., charged with protecting national security after such a large failure in doing this very thing. She could understand how they might go overboard in their suspicions of entering foreigners, especially those coming from Middle Eastern countries. She could understand how they might want to question any foreigner entering the country. But then she remembered that other foreigners had come in through the gate before her father had entered, and none of them had been arrested. Why her father then? It was all as confusing as it is upsetting.

Abdul was on the phone as soon as they returned to their apartment, calling friends to share the terrible news. Hayaam thought he was assuming the worst too soon. Maybe their father would be released as soon as the F.B.I. questioned him, released as soon as later tonight. Then they would all sit around the table and laugh at the outrageous mistake. Imagine thinking that Jamal, a man so traditional and conservative in his ways, could be so bold as to become a terrorist! Yes, they would have a fine laugh about such a ridiculous suspicion. Hayaam wished Abdul would get off the phone so the line would be free to ring with the good news, but by the time he hung up she already was in bed and asleep.

27

FOR SEVERAL DAYS Wes couldn't find Hayaam on campus. When he phoned her, no one answered. He tried calling at different times through the day, using a pay phone on campus, but there still was no answer. At home he called her from his room. This time Abdul answered.

“May I speak to Hayaam, please?”

“Who is this?”

Wes hesitated, then said, “It’s Wes.”

“I told you to stop seeing her.”

Abdul hung up on him.

The next day Wes saw Areeba walking ahead of him on campus. He ran to join her.

“Hi. Have you seen Hayaam?”

Areeba glanced around nervously, as if in fear that someone might be watching them.

“What’s the matter?” Wes asked.

Areeba started to speak but stopped.

“What’s going on? I’m worried about her. Tell me ... please.”

Areeba spoke softly, hurriedly.

“Her father was arrested. They think he’s a terrorist.”

Areeba wouldn’t elaborate, and Wes let her scoot along on her way. Once she glanced back furtively, as if wishing he already had disappeared.

Wes wasn’t sure what to do. In his carrel he couldn’t concentrate on his writing. He finally gave up, skipped his last class of the day, and left campus.

He took a subway to the financial district, where his father had an office. When the secretary looked up and recognized him, she broke into a broad smile. It had been many months since he’d visited his father at work.

“Wesley! How nice to see you.”

“Is Dad busy?”

“Go right in. I’ll buzz him you’re coming.”

Wes walked down a long hallway to his father’s

office. The door was open, so he stepped inside. Walter was already on his feet, waiting for him.

“This is a pleasant surprise.”

“Hayaam’s father’s been arrested. Apparently the F.B.I. think he’s a terrorist.”

“Was this at the airport?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“It was in the paper. So he’s Hayaam’s father?”

“If it’s the same guy. How many foreigners are they arresting these days?”

“It’s a dangerous new world,” Walter said. “I take it you believe he’s innocent.”

“He must be. I can’t picture Hayaam having a terrorist for a father.”

“Then there’s an ulterior motive that brought you here.”

“Dad, he’s going to need a lawyer.

Walter nodded and said, “Let’s get some coffee.”

They chose a coffee shop down the street. Although there was an outside patio in the shadows of the towering skyscrapers, Walter led the way inside to a private corner table in back.

When they were settled in, Walter said, “I don’t mean to pry, son, but how well do you really know this girl?”

“Well enough to believe that she doesn’t come from a family of terrorists. Dad, I like her a lot. I want to help her.”

“I can understand that.”

“Her father’s going to need a lawyer. A good lawyer. You’ve always been a champion of the underdog.”

“And in today’s climate, you can’t get more

unpopular than being a suspected terrorist.”

His father stopped, and Wes patiently waited for his decision.

Finally Walter said, “I’ll speak to him. That’s all I can promise you.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

He tried calling Hayaam again to share the good news. No one answered. He continued to phone several more times through the day, and when Abdul finally answered, he hung up on Wes as before.

Instead of catching the train in time to get home for dinner, Wes walked to Hayaam’s apartment. Standing outside the building, trying to get up the courage to go inside and find her, confronting her brother if necessary, he saw her in a front window on the ground floor. He moved closer, hoping she’d glance out and see him. Apparently she was in her bedroom, which faced the street. He moved to the window and tapped on it.

Hayaam jumped. When she saw him, she looked shocked, then happy. She rushed forward and opened the window.

“What are you doing here?”

“I heard about your father. I have to talk to you.”

“Wait for me at the corner.”

Hayaam joined him five minutes later. They fell into one another’s arms as if no act could be more natural. Lost in the moment, Wes kissed Hayaam on the lips.

“I’m sorry,” he said, breaking the embrace.

“Don’t apologize.”

“I heard about your father. I feel so bad for you.”

“I think they will let him go soon. They have no reason to keep him.”

“Hayaam, my dad’s a lawyer, one of the best in the

city. He's going to talk to your father. Maybe he'll represent him."

"Your father would be his lawyer?"

"He has to talk to him first."

"Why does he care?"

"He cares because I care."

Hayaam looked as if she might cry. She settled back into his arms.

We'll keep them in one another's embrace for a while. They aren't bothering anyone.

28

THE NEXT MORNING a guard led Walter to a visiting area for prisoners in the Federal Building. Walter waited almost fifteen minutes before another guard led Jamal in. The graying man was shackled at the wrists and feet, wearing white slippers and orange prison garb.

The guard shoved Jamal into a chair across the table from Walter, then stepped back to observe from the back of the area. No other visitations were in progress.

"I'm Walter Harding. I'm a lawyer."

"Are you a Muslim?"

"No."

"Why would I want a Christian lawyer?"

"Actually I'm not a Christian. I'm a Unitarian."

"What is this, a Unitarian?"

"We don't have much time. I'm here at the request of my son. He's a friend of your daughter."

“Hayaam knows your son?”

“Yes. Do you know why you’ve been arrested?”

“They say I am a terrorist. This is a lie!”

“That’s a good place to start.”

While Walter met with Jamal, Wes and Hayaam waited in a restaurant near the Federal Building. Wes, who had missed breakfast at home, poked at a plate of scrambled eggs, but Hayaam was too nervous to eat. She sipped tea, trying not to think about her father.

“Dad’s a great lawyer,” Wes told her, not for the first time. “He’ll do what’s best, believe me.”

“Everything is so different now. The way people look at me, wondering if I’m a terrorist.”

“That’s not true.”

“I see how they look at me.”

“Only a few maybe. You saw how welcome you were at church.”

“I still don’t understand why you call this a church if there is no mention of God.”

“We define God as spirit.”

“God is more than spirit.”

Wes didn’t want to argue with her. He continued eating silently.

Hayaam said, “I think my father will be very upset by this. Even when he is released. He won’t understand their point of view, how everyone is so scared now. He will take it personally. He will see it as an insult to his character.”

“You can understand how a mistake like this can happen, can’t you?”

Hayaam thought a moment before replying.

“I would understand it better if they had let father go

last night.”

Walter joined them shortly after the waitress had taken away what was left of Wes’ breakfast.

Standing by the booth, he said, “I’m going to represent him until he can find a Muslim lawyer. This will give me a chance to make a motion for bail right away.”

“How is he?” Hayaam said.

“Under the circumstances, better than I actually expected.”

Wes wanted to know if bail would be a problem.

“Could be,” said Walter. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

Walter couldn’t linger and hurried back to the office. Graciously, he picked up their check on the way out.

Coming out of the restaurant, Wes suggested to Hayaam that they skip classes, take a walk in the park and maybe catch a movie. They had a lot on their minds and deserved a little distraction.

“I don’t like to skip classes,” said Hayaam.

Wes skipped class anyway and spent the afternoon in his carrel, trying to get his creative juices flowing. Mostly he stared out the window.

29

ABDUL STOOD OUTSIDE with two friends, Omar and Imad, across from the campus library. Abdul held a pair of binoculars, which he raised intermittently to look at the front entrance.

“There he is,” Abdul said when Wes finally came

outside. He raised the binoculars, then passed them to Omar.

“Get a good look so you’ll recognize him,” Abdul said.

“You want us to do it now?” Imad said.

“No. I’ll give my sister one more chance. I want you to follow him, find out where he goes. Stick to him like glue.”

Abdul laughed.

“Isn’t this a wonderful expression? Stick to him like glue!”

Omar and Imad followed Wes across campus, where he met Hayaam coming out of a classroom building. Wes and Hayaam embraced before strolling off, holding hands. Omar and Imad followed them off campus, keeping far enough behind not to be noticed.

“Will you come to church with me Sunday?” Wes asked as they walked along in the direction of the Village.

“Are you trying to convert me?”

“I just want you to see that you have friends there.”

Hayaam stopped and pulled away her hand. Omar and Imad stopped, watching the couple carefully.

Hayaam said, “Suddenly everything is so complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be. Does it?”

“What is our future?”

The question stabbed him like the prick of a pin.

“Haven’t you thought about this?” Hayaam said.

“Of course I have. But I prefer thinking about now, the present tense. I know I want to spend as much of it with you as I can.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Maybe that’s enough for now.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never felt this way before. Everything is starting to feel so complicated.”

“Don’t let it.”

Wes leaned forward to kiss her but Hayaam stepped back.

“I’m sorry. I think I need to be alone now. It’s not you. It’s me.”

“You’re worried about your father.”

“Yes.”

“Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Of course. Don’t think I’m angry with you.”

“I don’t.”

She surprised him by giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

Wes said, “Sure you don’t want me to walk you home?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Wes waited a moment, watching her go. Behind him Omar and Ibid also waited. When Wes started walking again, they followed behind.

Wes walked to a corner bar called Rhonda’s and entered.

“What do we do?” Imad said as they reached the corner.

“We go in,” said Omar.

Wes was sitting at the end of the bar as they came inside. There were two empty stools down the way, which they took. Both looked around nervously.

“Holy shit.” The remark came from an unshaven man sitting alone at a table. “Since when is this a watering

hole for fucking A-rabs?”

The bartender said, “Hold your tongue, Charlie.”

He stopped in front of Omar and Imad.

“I gotta serve you, but you might want to think about it. Charlie’s got a bad temper.”

Imad stared at Omar, waiting for a response.

Wes said, “You guys look familiar. You go to NYU? I think I’ve seen you on campus.”

“Yes,” Omar said.

“Can I buy you a beer?”

Imad stood up and said, “We don’t want to cause trouble.”

“Get them two beers,” Wes told the bartender.

Now Omar stood.

“No, please. You are very kind, but we should go.”

They hurried out the door.

The bartender came over to Wes.

“Well, aren’t you something.”

“Fucking A-rab lover,” said the unshaven man at the table.

Wes gulped down his beer. He slid off the barstool.

“You got something to say to me?” the bartender wanted to know.

“No, sir. I don’t.”

Outside Wes didn’t notice Omar and Imad hiding in a doorway down the street. A cab approached, and Wes ran out into the street to grab it but it was occupied. What the hell, he’d take the subway.

Omar and Imad followed him as far as Penn. Station, where they watched him disappear into a train.

30

WES FRETTEd ABOUT which story to share with Hayaam. He'd published three ("only" three, as he put it to himself), all in literary magazines. His favorite, called "Teddy At the Pool," was a tour de force, a retelling of J.D. Salinger's story "Teddy" with a different ending. The usual interpretation of Salinger's story was that Teddy, the boy genius, committed suicide by diving into an empty swimming pool. Wes had never accepted this ending. For starters, he believed the internal evidence in the story put water in the pool. In his ending, Teddy pushes his little sister into a full swimming pool, and the story is about how Teddy has an emotional life after all.

This was all too esoteric to share with Hayaam, who likely didn't know who Salinger was anyway. Wes ended up selecting the only extra copy of *Prism International* he had, which contained his story "The Sentence." This was loosely based on something that had happened to his Uncle Don and Aunt Hilda. After his stroke, Don pretended to have aphasia with his wife, refusing to speak at all, but she later learned that he regularly gabbed away with the pretty nurses. It was a story of marital and family dysfunction, a popular theme for a young American writer.

Wes brought the literary magazine to school to give to Hayaam. He thought of signing it but couldn't decide what to say. Maybe an autograph was too pretentious, as if he were a famous writer or something.

They met in the coffee shop as usual, and immediately Wes sensed that something was wrong. Hayaam couldn't keep still, fidgeting constantly while they made small talk.

Out of nowhere, she said, “I have no doubt that I’ll pass.”

Wes was taken aback for a moment – then remembered what day it was. She took her citizenship exam today. He felt like an idiot for forgetting. He’d been too wrapped up in choosing the short story to give her.

Wes said, “Of course you will.”

Across the room, Abdul sat with Omar and Imad, watching them.

Wes reached across the table and took her hand. He squeezed it.

Hayaam pulled her hand away.

“I don’t want to be late,” she said.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

“This is something I have to do myself.”

They stood up together. Wes moved around the table to embrace her. Her mind was elsewhere, and she did not return his embrace.

“Good luck!” Wes said as she started away. “I know you’ll do great!”

Hayaam mumbled, “Of course I will,” but too softly for Wes to hear.

Across the room Abdul got to his feet.

“Wait here,” he told his friends.

Abdul caught up with his sister outside the Student Union.

“You still are seeing him,” he said.

“Are you spying on me?”

“I’m a terrorist,” Abdul said mockingly. “That’s what terrorists do, they spy on people.”

Hayaam kept on walking.

“You will break father’s heart when he learns this.”

Hayaam stopped and glared at her brother.

“His father is helping us. He’s the best lawyer in New York.”

“We don’t need his help.”

“Of course we do. He’s very important. He knows people.”

“I’m asking you one more time, stop seeing him.”

“I will not stop seeing him.”

She started off again.

Abdul called, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Again she stopped.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“How can you break father’s heart? Especially now, with what he is going through. You have no future with this man.”

Hayaam didn’t reply. She hurried quickly away, and Abdul didn’t stop her

Back in the coffee shop, Abdul sat down at the table with Omar and Imad. For a moment everyone was silent, watching Wes across the room.

Abdul broke the silence.

“Do it tonight,” he said.

31

TAKING A BREAK from studying, Wes wandered into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator door but the cola that was there yesterday was gone.

“Are we out of pop?” he yelled, to no one in particular.

As he returned to his room, Evelyn appeared.

“Are we out of cola?”

“Looks like.”

She already held out money for him.

“Would you mind? And pick up some half-and-half?”

“No problem.”

It was a pleasant night. There was a convenience market down the hill on the highway, less than a mile away, and Wes decided to walk. He didn't pay any attention to the car parked across the street.

In the car Omar and Imad made eye contact. Omar nodded, and they got out of the car.

As Wes continued down the hill to the highway, Omar and Imad kept half a block between them. Wes reached the market and entered.

“What do we do?” Imad said.

“Let me think a minute.”

In the store Wes bought a six-pack of Dr. Pepper and a pint of half-and-half. At the counter he added a Tootsie Roll, picking it out from a box near the cash register.

He was halfway up the hill when Omar and Imad jumped him. They came out from behind a hedge, attacking him so quickly that Wes was on the ground and being kicked before he comprehended what was happening. He tried to fend off their kicks but they outnumbered him, it was all he could do to protect his face.

Suddenly a car approached. The driver, seeing what was happening, started beeping his horn.

Omar and Imad looked up. The man pulled the car to the curb.

Imad took a quick step down the hill but Omar grabbed him. They started running up the hill, toward their car.

The man was just getting out of the car as they rushed past. He let them go and hurried to Wes, who was struggling to sit up.

“Are you all right?” the man asked.

It was the same question his father asked him in the hospital.

Wes tried to make a joke.

“You should see the other guy.”

Evelyn bit her fist, her expression filled with horror. Walter managed to smile but it was clear that neither parent was in the mood for humor. Their seriousness made Wes feel worse than he already felt.

They stayed longer than he wanted. Finally he yawned, though he was not sleepy, and his father took the bait and said they’d best let him get his rest. His mother nodded. She hadn’t spoken since saying “My God” when she first saw him.

As soon as Evelyn was out the door, Wes said, “Dad? Can I talk to you a sec?”

Walter said something to his wife, then walked back to the bed.

“Has Hayaam called?”

“Not that I know of. Maybe you’d better ask your mother.”

“I don’t think she’d tell me.”

“You may be right.”

“Her brother warned me to stop seeing her. Obviously I didn’t.”

Walter paused for more before saying, "You think he's behind this?"

"I don't know. Would you call Hayaam for me? I tried but her brother answered. He hung up on me. I'd like to see her."

"I was going to call and bring her up to date anyway."

"You have news?"

"It's not looking good for her father."

"Tell her I want to see her."

"I will."

"Thanks, Dad."

Waiting for the elevator, Evelyn said, "See where it all leads? Will you stop now?"

"Pardon me?"

"Representing that man. Wes seeing that girl. Look what comes of it."

"I won't dignify that with a response."

"I lost my son, Walter. I can't help how I feel."

"You can't wrap everyone in the same blanket just because they're from the Middle East."

"The city will never be the same again. The country. I don't see how you can represent one of them."

"I'm a lawyer. Even if he were guilty—"

"I know the speech. I just don't believe it anymore. I can't help how I feel."

A bell rang, and the elevator door opened. The elevator was empty. Evelyn entered first.

They didn't speak to one another for the rest of the day.

32

LOOKING FOR WES, Hayaam spotted Areeba in the coffee shop. She reached the table grinning, and as soon as Areeba saw her she started grinning, too.

“I passed!”

Hayaam didn’t stay long because it was Wes she wanted to tell the good news. But she couldn’t find him anywhere, not in the library or in his carrel. She didn’t learn what had happened until evening when Wes’ father called. The news was bad all the way around, her father not likely to get bail and Wes beaten up and in the hospital.

After hanging up, Hayaam stormed into her brother’s room. Abdul was reading.

“How could you!”

“How could I what?”

His cocky smile convinced her that he had been behind the attack on Wes.

“You have no right to interfere in my life this way!”

Hayaam stormed out, as if quick movement was the only release she could find, and she was halfway down the hallway when she heard, “You have no right to destroy our family!”

It took her over an hour by bus to get to the hospital. Mr. Harding had given her the room number on the phone, which was a blessing since she felt overwhelmed and lost in the enormity of the building. So many people were sick in America. She located the elevator.

On the seventh floor, she wandered aimlessly down several hallways before a nurse inquired if she needed help. As the nurse gave directions, Hayaam looked confused

enough that the nurse stopped and said, "Come with me"

The nurse escorted her to the door, which was cracked open. Hayaam slowly entered and quickly stopped. She was shocked by his appearance, his face and arms badly bruised, his chest wrapped in bandages. He appeared to be sleeping. As Hayaam watched him from across the room, struggling to hold back tears, Wes opened his eyes and saw her.

"Hey," he said. "Thanks for coming."

Hayaam stood still, unable to speak for fear her emotions would get away from her.

"I look worse than I feel," Wes said. "You should see the other guy?"

"Who is the other guy?"

"There were two of them actually."

"Indonesians?"

Wes didn't reply.

"They were, weren't they. This is my fault."

"No. Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm so sorry."

"It wasn't anybody's fault. Please sit down. You make me nervous. Like you might leave all of a sudden. I don't want you to leave."

She sat down in the chair beside the bed. Wes slid one hand to her edge of the mattress, and she reached out and held it. Touching made them feel connected.

"How did you do on your exam?" Wes asks.

"I don't want to talk about my exam."

"You didn't pass?"

"I passed."

"That's wonderful!"

Wes grimaces, as if so much excitement is painful.

“It seems so small a thing now.”

“No, it’s wonderful. So what’s the next step?”

“I take my oath as a citizen.”

“I’d like to be there.”

He squeezes her hand. Hayaam has to look away.

“What’s the matter?”

She turns back to him.

“You have to ask what’s the matter? My brother put them up to this. What kind of future do we have?”

“Hayaam, listen to me. I just have to be more careful. I don’t want to stop seeing you.”

She looks away again. Her eyes glisten with tears.

“Do you want to stop seeing me?” Wes asks.

Hayaam shakes her head, no. He squeezes her hand again.

On the bed stand is the copy of the literary magazine with his story. Wes reaches for it.

“For you. I have a story in it.”

She takes the magazine.

“Thank you. I’ll read it tonight.”

“No hurry.”

She is on the verge of tears. Wes doesn’t know what to say. He suddenly feels very tired. He closes his eyes.

As Wes naps, Hayaam sits in the chair beside the bed, holding his hand, watching him sleep.

Shortly after he wakes up, his friend Roger visited. Hayaam shook his hand and told Wes that she’d be back tomorrow. It was easier to leave with other company for him there.

She caught the bus to campus but gave up studying in the library, unable to concentrate, and walked home. She encountered Abdul in the living room.

“I found a lawyer for father,” he said.

“He has a lawyer.”

“A Muslim. He’s Pakistani.”

“Wes’ father is a very good lawyer. He also is representing him for no charge.”

“So will he. He’s a Muslim, he knows what we are going through.”

Hayaam stared at her brother.

“Who are these men you got to beat him up?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Could she be wrong? She didn’t think so, despite a momentary doubt.

Abdul said, “You visited him at the hospital, didn’t you?”

“Of course. He’s my friend.”

“The longer you see him, the worse everything will turn out.”

Hayaam didn’t respond.

“You are not as stupid as you act,” said Abdul. “You know what you’re doing has no future. You know how much it will hurt father when he finds out.”

“And you will tell him, won’t you?”

“See? Even you are ashamed for father to know this.”

“I will tell father myself.”

And now sooner than she had planned.

33

WES WAS RELEASED from the hospital the next day. He walked with a limp and looked like he'd been lucky to survive a car wreck but nothing was broken, except perhaps his spirits. He was having second thoughts about the wisdom of seeing Hayaam, at least so often and so blatantly. Selfishly, he wanted to keep seeing her but he realized that if they continued dating, she might become the victim of violent harassment instead of himself. They needed to sit down and discuss their future. At the very least, they had to be more careful.

Evelyn picked up Wes at the hospital. She didn't seem particularly glad to see him, and Wes knew what was bothering her.

"It's nothing serious, Mom," he told her on the drive home.

"What?"

"Between Hayaam and me. Relax about it."

"Relax about it?"

She let out an are-you-crazy laugh.

"It's nothing serious, really."

Which was a lie, of course. Wes spent most of the day trying to get the nerve to phone Hayaam. Of course, if her brother answered, that would just make things worse. It would be safer to track her down at school.

He'd meant to catch the train in time to meet her on campus after her last class but had made the mistake of stretching out on the bed. By the time he awoke, it was too late.

As it happened, Hayaam had phoned the hospital

and learned Wes had been released. She wondered if he were well enough to come to campus. She didn't feel comfortable visiting him at home; she sensed his mother didn't approve of her.

Hayaam was sitting with Areeba in the coffee shop, a part of her hoping that Wes would walk in, when Areeba said, "I worry about you."

Hayaam shook her head.

"Not you, too," she said.

"We are so different from people here. I have to tell you, I'm thinking of returning home."

"Not before you graduate."

"Yes. I can finish my degree in Jakarta."

"But an American degree is so prestigious. If you took such a degree home, you could do anything."

"I've never been comfortable here. Now, of course, it is so much worse."

"Your parents wrote you, didn't they? They asked you to come home."

"Yes, and they are right. It is not safe here. You of all people should know that."

Hayaam glanced around the room, which was filled with students. Everyone was ignoring them.

"They get used to us," she said.

"Not everyone. The people who beat up your friend – don't you think there are Americans who would do the same to you?"

"I've not met these Americans. Tomorrow I will be an American myself. I take my oath."

"Have you told your father?"

"They won't even let me visit him."

"See there?"

“This is a temporary problem.”

“It will get worse. Anyone who looks Arabic will be considered a terrorist.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Hayaam, you are so naïve.”

Was she? The possibility worried her. She tried to imagine what it would be like to be an American, to watch in horror as your greatest city is attacked, the Pentagon is attacked – of course, you would do things differently after that, anyone unknown to you would be a suspect. She tried to retain her belief that her father would be released, even though they’d held him far too long already.

All her worries were swept away as soon as she entered the apartment to see Jamal, her father, grinning at her. She ran into his arms.

34

WES LEARNED AT dinner that Hayaam’s father had been released. Walter had gone to the jail to visit him but he wasn’t there.

“All charges have been dropped,” Walter said.

Evelyn shook her head, ever the skeptic, and silently continued her dinner.

“Your reputation probably scared them, Dad,” Wes said.

“I won’t flatter myself. As a matter of fact, he was being represented by someone else. A Pakistani.”

The news made Wes want to talk to Hayaam even more. What were they going to do? He finally phoned and

for once Hayaam answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi. It’s me.”

“How are you?”

“I’m home.”

“I’m so glad. How do you feel?”

“I want to see you.”

There was a silence.

Wes said, “We at least need to sit down and talk about what we should do now.”

“I agree. I’ll see you at school tomorrow, okay?”

“Great.”

“I take my oath in the morning.”

“Wow. I didn’t realize it would be so soon.”

“When I see you, I’ll be an American.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Tomorrow, then. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“I feel great now.”

“I read your story.”

There was a silence.

Hayaam said, “It’s very sad. But I liked it.”

Another silence.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Hayaam.”

Later, in bed, Wes wondered if becoming an American would make Hayaam behave more like an American, in particular to dress like an American. Weren’t there modern Muslim women who wore dresses instead of the hijab? In this way, she would be able to blend in and

look less conspicuous, less foreign, less threatening. They would be able to walk down the street together as inconspicuously as any couple in America.

He is wrong, of course. In the new America, even as in the old, there are those who would disapprove of Wes and Hayaam being together as a couple.

35

HAYAAM LEFT THE apartment early, even though the oath-taking ceremony in the Federal Building didn't begin until nine. She didn't want to risk the possibility of her brother, or even her father, trying to stop her. When she finally told her father what she'd done, it would be after the fact. She suspected, however, that Abdul would tell him first. Yet even Abdul didn't know how quickly she would become an American citizen – in a matter of hours now!

She found a coffee shop near the Federal Building. She had almost two hours to kill but she'd brought a book from school. She never was lacking for school assignments to read.

As Hayaam studied, waiting to take her oath of allegiance and become an American citizen, a very different future was being planned for her. The experience of being arrested had not settled well with her father. In the morning, even as Hayaam studied across town, Jamal told his son what was on his mind, speaking in their native tongue.

“Abdul, how have you been treated here?”

“How do you mean?”

“In this country where they arrest an innocent man. Do you feel like a free man here?”

“I have learned to look over my shoulder. Especially

now.”

“That’s what I mean. I could not sleep last night. I kept waiting for a knock on the door, the police have changed their mind, they haul me away into the night, and I’m never heard from again.”

“Father, what is it?”

“I’m going home. I should never have come.”

“Then I will come with you.”

“This is what I prayed for you to say. And Hayaam must come, too, of course.”

Abdul was silent.

“She is such an adventurous girl,” said Jamal. “Does she like it here?”

“She feels the same hostility, I am sure. But, of course, you are right – she is adventurous.”

“Will you tell her we are going home?”

“Of course. When?”

“As soon as possible. Is there a problem?”

“No. I will tell her today.”

But later Abdul couldn’t find her on campus.

Nor could Wes. In the morning, working in his carrel but making no progress, in a sudden moment of frustration he’d ripped up the top sheet of the yellow pad on which he’d been writing. He left the carrel to look for Hayaam.

He couldn’t find her in the coffee shop, though he did find Abdul sitting alone in a corner table. Wes went to class.

Later he found Areeba in the coffee shop.

“Have you seen Hayaam?”

“She didn’t come to class after taking her oath this

morning.”

“Maybe she felt like celebrating.”

But wouldn’t she have wanted to celebrate with him?

“Her father’s home,” said Areeba.

“I heard. Great news.”

But something in her manner told him she was hiding something.

“What is it?”

Areeba looked away.

“Areeba, tell me.”

She looked him straight in the eye.

“Abdul says they are returning to Indonesia.”

Wes waited for more.

Finally he said, “When?”

“Right away, I think.”

He used a pay phone in the Student Union but no one answered. He dialed again, just to make sure, but got the same result.

Wes didn’t know what to do. He left campus and started walking. He refused to believe that Hayaam was returning to Indonesia, certainly not right away, at the beginning of the school year. Areeba must have gotten it wrong.

He kept walking and ended up at Ground Zero, or at least as close to it as he could get. The scene was no less shocking than before, maybe even more so, with its great expanse of rubble and the courageous activity of the workers and volunteers who were hauling it away. It was far past the time when live bodies might be discovered. Now all effort was focused on cleaning up the mess of a war zone.

Wes kept watching the workers. It seemed to him

that it would take months, years, to clean up the mountain of rubble. What a thankless task. What a dark depressing image of the new America.

36

WHEN HAYAAM CAME out of the Federal Building, carrying a small American flag, Abdul was waiting for her.

“Areeba told me you would be here. We’re going home.”

“This is my home now.”

Abdul let out a long breath of frustration.

“Home to Jakarta. Father is making reservations for all of us.”

“I’m an American now. Why are you doing this?”

“You have to ask? They treated him like a terrorist. They treat us no better, only you are too blind to see it. Father wants nothing to do with a country like this. I agree with him. He expects you to come home.”

“But I’m in school!”

“We both can finish school in Jakarta.”

“No, I won’t do it!”

She tried to rush past him but Abdul grabbed her arm.

“If you think you are not going, you have to tell father this yourself. You will break his heart.”

Before going home, she raced through campus, looking for Wes. She couldn’t find him anywhere. On her second visit to the coffee shop she saw Areeba across the

way but just the sight of her made Hayaam realize how upset she was, how fragile now, and she feared that facing her friend would reduce her to tears when she needed to be strong, strong to face her father and tell him what she wanted to do with her life. As she walked home to face him, her heart was pounding.

Jamal was sitting in the living room, reading. He looked up from his book when he heard her enter.

“Hayaam, you look more like your mother every day.”

Hayaam couldn’t find the words to begin.

“But you look so serious,” Jamal said.

“I became an American citizen today.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I wrote you about it. About my dream.”

“That was last year. I thought it was a passing fancy.”

“I took the oath of allegiance today.”

“What is this? What does this mean?”

“I have the rights of an American citizen.”

“But you are born in Jakarta. You already have a country.”

“I am a citizen of both countries now.”

“And you want to live in America? Is this what you are trying to say?”

“I want to finish my schooling here.”

“How can you feel anything but disgust with such a country?”

“I am so sorry for what they did to you. But it was a mistake. They let you go.”

“It is the greatest humiliation of my life.”

“Father, I understand how you must feel. The Americans, after what happened, they are not always thinking clearly before they act.”

“I cannot stay here.”

“I understand.”

“I want us all to go home.”

“I have two homes now. I want to finish school here.”

“And then?”

“I always planned to return to Jakarta after I graduate.”

“But you don’t have two homes. I don’t understand how this is possible.”

“Father, I want to finish school.”

“What would your mother say?”

Hayaam looked away, unable to meet his stare.

“Look at me. Tell me you will break up our family like this.”

She stared back at him.

“I am not breaking up our family. You know how much I want to graduate from American university. You know how long this has been my dream.”

Jamal sighed and looked down at his book.

“You are not safe here alone,” he said without looking up.

“I can move into a dormitory. I will be perfectly safe.”

He sighed again.

After a moment, Hayaam gave up and walked slowly to her room. Passing Abdul’s room, she saw him studying at his desk, looking up from his work when he heard her.

She couldn't concentrate to study. She wanted to talk to Wes. She dialed his number but no one answered, and she didn't leave a message.

Hayaam stretched out on the bed. Stress was a strong sedative. She fell asleep quickly and didn't stir until her room was dark with evening shadows. She went to the desk, flipped on the light, and began to study.

Soon she heard something, a sound against a windowpane. She stared at the window. The sound came again. Hayaam stood up and walked to the window.

37

WAITING FOR HIS train at Penn Station, Wes felt a terrible foreboding, as if to suggest that if he left now, if he caught the train and went home, he might never see Hayaam again. He had to stay in the city until he learned what was going on. Did she become an American citizen this morning and, if so, why the sudden news that she was leaving the country? Was she in trouble with her father? He simply had to find Hayaam and talk to her.

He decided to go straight to her apartment. He had no idea what he would do when he got there. He took the long walk briskly, letting exhaustion distract him and calm him down.

When he arrived outside her building, he saw her through the front window, sitting at her desk, studying. He looked around for a pebble, not something easy to find in a neighborhood without rubble, and found several in the gutter, road debris kicked away by traffic.

Wes chose the smallest and tossed in under-handed at the window. A bull's-eye. He waited, then tossed

another.

Hayaam looked toward him. Could she see him? She rose from the desk and approached the window.

Wes stepped quickly forward to meet her. When she saw him, she started, then lifted the window open.

“What are you doing here?”

“Areeba told me you’re leaving.”

“Wait a minute.”

She stepped back into the room, leaving the window open. When she returned she was carrying a light jacket. She handed it to Wes, who stepped back as Hayaam climbed out the window.

Without a word, they embrace. Wes closes his eyes, holding her tight. Hayaam closes her eyes and breathes deeply. It feels wonderful to be in his arms.

Hayaam is the first to speak.

“Where can we go?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Get away from here.”

Wes takes her hand, and they start walking. She carries the jacket in her other hand. No one speaks for several blocks.

“Is it true?” Wes finally asks.

“Father wants us all to go back to Jakarta immediately because of what happened to him. I told him I want to stay here and finish school. But it is very hard to say no to your father. You understand what I mean? Even if I go, I will come back. I want to live in America.”

“Then you really are leaving?”

“I don’t know. I can’t think straight.”

“If you go, I’ll wait for you.”

Hayaam smiles but there is sadness in it, as if she's reproaching a child about something he doesn't understand.

"Please don't say this," she says.

"I mean it."

"We don't know what the future brings."

"Hayaam, I love you."

He finally said it. Hearing it, he feels relieved, even a little angry with himself for not saying it sooner.

As if from habit, they are heading from Hayaam's apartment in the direction of campus

"In my country," Hayaam says, "a bride is expected to be a virgin. I never questioned this before."

The remark makes him too nervous to respond.

"This is something that only happens once, with only one man. You understand what I am saying?"

"I'm not sure."

"I want this man to be you."

Wes' breath quickens.

"That's the sweetest thing anyone ever said to me."

"Tonight," Hayaam says.

Wes swallows. This is the last thing he expected her to say.

"We are leaving very soon," she goes on. "We may not have another chance."

"But your classes..."

"When father makes up his mind, there is no waiting. I cannot say no to him, not after what happened. So we must do this tonight. Unless you don't want me."

"Of course I want you."

“Then you are in charge. I have no such experience.”

“I don’t have all that much myself.”

“You don’t know what to do?”

“I know what to do.”

They are at the edge of campus by now, but no longer holding hands. To an observer they would have looked awkward, like strangers having a difficult time beginning a conversation.

Wes says, “This way,” and takes her hand again.

38

THEY LEAVE CAMPUS, heading to where Wes knows there are hotels. He tries not to think about what is happening, lest he lose nerve or question his motives, and maybe hers as well. He tries to take charge, as she requested, and take care of business.

He stops at the first hotel they come to and says, “Let me do all the talking.” He leads the way inside.

He feels conspicuous, as if everyone in sight – the desk clerk, an old woman in the lobby, a couple waiting at the elevator – knows what they are up to. To his surprise, checking in goes smoothly, although an eternity seems to pass before the small machine approves of his credit card. No one asks why they have no luggage. No one asks if they are really married, as he’d told the clerk (“A room for me and my wife, please”), why neither of them are wearing a wedding band. When they enter an empty elevator and the door closes behind them, they embrace again and kiss deeply and long until the door opens on the seventh floor.

Try to imagine their anxiety as they move down the

hallway to room 714. Hayaam, after all, is a virgin. She feels apprehension despite her feelings for him, which she, too, is beginning to call love. How much will it hurt to lose her virginity? This is not a coherent question, more a tight feeling in the gut, apprehension, stress. At the same time, she has no second thoughts, this is the man with whom she wants to do this singular and unrepeatable act.

Wes is nervous for similar reasons. He has never slept with a virgin before. In fact, he only has slept with one other woman before in his life, this in the back seat of a stranger's car in the gymnasium parking lot at high school, and he was intoxicated enough to be unclear about most of the experience. Above all else, he feels strangely honored, fully aware of how special this moment is, how special he is to Hayaam for her to want to share this moment with him. Of course, he wants everything to go smoothly, a responsibility that scares the hell out of him. But he doesn't want her to know how nervous he is, how scared and apprehensive, so he tries to act cool, as if there's nothing to worry about, he has everything under control.

Wes unlocks the door and stands aside so Hayaam can enter first. The thought of carrying her across the threshold occurs to him, but only fleetingly, a moment's whim.

Hayaam stands at the end of the bed. Wes joins her, and together they look down at the huge, King-sized mattress.

"I don't think I've ever seen a bed so large," Hayaam says. She giggles nervously.

"They have room service. Are you hungry?"

"A little, yes."

"Do you drink champagne?"

"Not normally. Do you want to?"

"I think we should get a bottle."

"You can afford to?"

"Everything goes on the credit card."

"I keep forgetting."

"There must be a menu here."

He finds it on the table next to the television set.

They both order hamburgers and fries. And a bottle of champagne. Waiting for the food to arrive, Wes sits on the edge of the bed, and Hayaam sits in the stuffed chair across the room. No one knows what to say.

"I've never taken a girl to a hotel before," Wes announces, breaking a long silence.

"Then I'm glad to be the first."

"Actually, I ..."

It would sound too silly to go on.

"Actually what?"

"I'm not very experienced."

"You don't sleep around? This is the right expression?"

"No, I don't."

"I thought all Americans did this."

"Only in movies."

"Of course, that's how we know about Americans. Until I came here, of course."

"And what do you know now?"

"Are you trying to change the subject?"

"Probably." He laughs nervously.

"Are you as nervous as I am?"

"Of course not. I'm in complete charge here. I hope."

"This doesn't feel very romantic, does it?"

"I know."

Hayaam is silent.

Wes says, "We'll eat. Then maybe we should take a walk. The city can be so beautiful at night."

"I think that's a good idea."

39

CHAMPAGNE GOES TO Hayaam's head. She is no more experienced in the drinking arts than in the sexual arts. After they finish their hamburgers and fries, she kicks off her shoes and dances around the room.

"I like this feeling!" she keeps saying, with more lilting music in her tone of voice than Wes has heard before. He isn't quite sure how to respond to this new side of her, the intoxicated extrovert.

"Be careful," he says, "champagne will sneak up on you."

"It didn't sneak. It was very direct!"

She leaps like a ballerina and almost loses her balance. She giggles some more.

"When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a ballerina. But I was too fat."

"I can't imagine you fat."

"I'm still fat."

"That's ridiculous."

He can't imagine that she thinks of herself as fat. She is thin, small breasted – if anything, a tad underweight.

Hayaam says, "I feel ... what is the word? Tipsy?"

“Tipsy, right.”

“I feel tipsy! How long will it last? I like the feeling.”

“Probably until you go to bed.”

He regrets saying the B-word, *bed*. It echoes in his ears like a great obstacle.

“Maybe we should get more champagne,” says Hayaam.

“Maybe we should take a walk.”

“Yes! What a good idea. Where are my shoes?”

Somehow one shoe has ended up under the bed. When she’s finally ready to go, Wes waits at the door, holding it open for her. For some reason she gets another giggling fit passing him, which continues as he leads her down the hallway to the elevator that will return them to the world.

Outside Hayaam settled down, as if the night air worked to sober her some. They started down the sidewalk, and Hayaam took his hand, smiling up at him. Wes resisted the urge to kiss her right then and there. They were no longer alone. The city engulfed them.

They slowly sauntered along, holding hands, quiet, sometimes turning at a corner and sometimes not, randomly moving through the New York night. Wes was glad to be out of the hotel room, away from the stress of having to make love to a virgin, even if this woman was Hayaam. He wished he’d ordered more champagne so he could match her giddiness. Maybe he’d get another bottle after they returned.

They continued walking until they turned a corner to see lights and activity ahead, and Wes realized they were approaching Ground Zero.

Wes stopped. .

“What is it?” Hayaam asked.

“Maybe we should go back.”

“No. Not yet.”

It was her turn to lead, and they continued toward the chain-link fence that marked the physical limits of their curiosity. Lights illuminated a scene of busy effort as workers and machines continued the huge task cleaning up the rubble of the tower buildings. The scene of devastation was hard to comprehend, even though it stretched out unmistakably in front of them.

At the fence, they watched silently. The lights made the area as bright as day.

Hayaam said, “My father said he was never so humiliated. This is why he must return home.”

“I’m so sorry that happened. At least they let him go.”

“They had to. He was innocent.”

There was a silence.

“You understand why I have to go back, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

But Wes had said this only for her benefit. He thought she should finish school in America.

As if reading his mind, Hayaam said, “I will get my degree in Jakarta. Then in two years I will come to America for graduate school.”

“In Comparative Religion?”

“Maybe not. Maybe I will become a translator for the United Nations.”

“Sounds good.” But the response was automatic, he already was feeling how much he would miss her.

“People from many nations died here. Not just Americans. People from Indonesia, too.”

“True.”

“Some Americans forget this. They think they are the

only ones who suffer.”

“A minority, though.”

Hayaam nodded. They watched the workmen beyond the fence for a moment, busy under the bright lights, apparently undaunted by the overwhelming task before them.

Wes said, “Shall we head back?”

“Yes. I haven’t forgotten.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“But it’s what I meant.”

Walking back, each was aware that soon they would be making love – but since neither knew how to talk about this, they remained silent as they made their long, slow way back to the hotel.

40

HAYAAM INSISTS ON getting ready for bed first. She goes into the bathroom, closing the door behind her, and Wes sits at the foot of the bed, channel surfing with the remote. After a while he hears the shower go on. He notes to take a shower himself.

After the shower goes off, Wes waits for her to make an appearance. Nothing on television interests him, so he finally turns it off. He sits on the bed, waiting.

“Hayaam?” he calls. “Everything okay?”

“I’m ready to come out,” she calls back. “Will you hide your eyes?”

He has a better idea.

“I’m going to the pop machine. A Pepsi okay?”

“Diet!”

“I’ll be right back.”

He is back in five minutes. Hayaam is in bed with the sheet pulled over her. She won’t meet his eyes.

He puts both Pepsi’s on the small table at what apparently is now defined as his side of the bed.

“Here’s the pop. I won’t be long.”

But he was gone long enough. When he returned, wearing only his shorts, he saw that her eyes were closed. He started to speak but quickly changed his mind. Something in her breathing told him she was passed out. He tossed his clothes onto an empty chair. He approached the bed.

He carefully turned down the bedspread. Hayaam was on her side, facing him, her eyes still closed. She was wearing panties and a bra. Her skin was beautiful, inviting him to touch it, but he resisted. He slipped into bed beside her, careful to move the mattress as little as possible.

She was breathing heavily, not quite snoring. He shifted his position. Hayaam gave no response of having felt this.

Wes watched her for a moment. Then he turned off the light.

41

WES AWOKE EARLY in the morning with an erection. He’d been dreaming, though the erotic inspiration for his desire was lost to him now. Slowly he became aware that Hayaam was beside him, a new kind of inspiration. Her

breathing, soft now, hung in the hotel bedroom like a summons. It would be so easy, Wes thought, still not fully awake, to roll over and make love to her, and the thought itself almost pushed him over the edge. He slipped out of bed and hurried into the bathroom, where in less than sixty seconds his right hand relieved the pent-up energy of his morning fantasy.

He showered and dressed. When he came back into the room, Hayaam was still asleep, or at least appeared to be. Wes went downstairs and bought a newspaper.

She was in the shower when he returned, her second shower in less than twelve hours. By the time she came out, dressed and looking like she was ready for school, he was reading the sports section for the second time. If she was hungover, she didn't look it.

"Good morning," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Terrible. Why do people drink if this is how they feel? I must look terrible."

"You look fine. We'll get you an aspirin at the restaurant."

Wes was famished and ordered a full breakfast but Hayaam settled for cereal and fruit. Even at that, she only picked at it.

"This morning..." Hayaam began.

"Yes?"

She spoke softly, looking down at her cereal.

"There wasn't any blood."

"I know."

"Then we didn't...?"

"No."

"Why didn't you...?"

"If it happened, I wanted you to remember it."

Hayaam looked him in the eye.

“Thank you.”

Leaving the restaurant to enter the hotel lobby, Wes said, “I might as well check out.”

“Not yet. I want to show you something.”

“What?”

“It’s a secret.”

She took his hand and led him toward the elevator.

Whatever was going on, Hayaam was being very mysterious about it. Wes let her have her fun, not having a clue what she was up to. In the hallway at their door she said, “Let me in. Then you wait here for five minutes. Then you can come in.”

Wes thought about it a little too long.

“This is very important to me,” she said. “Will you do it?”

“Sure.”

Hayaam seemed to be blushing as he unlocked the door. She darted inside and swung the door shut behind her.

Wes looked at his watch. Five minutes. But before it was time he heard her call from inside the room, “Come in!”

He didn’t know what to expect. Certainly not what he saw as soon as he entered the room. He is blown away.

Hayaam stands beside the bed, stark naked.

“Please close the door,” she says.

Wes quickly complies.

Coming back, he finds her still there, still naked.

“No man has ever seen me naked before. You are the first.”

Words escape him. He can only stare.

“Do you think I am beautiful?”

“More than I can find words to say.”

“Good. Now you can go, so I can dress. I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

He didn’t seduce her like Brad Pitt would have. He didn’t insist on staying. He didn’t go downstairs and pout. Waiting in the lobby, as improbable and as laughable as this may seem, he thought he had just participated in something like a miracle.

42

THE MOMENT HAD lasted only a minute but their bond became stronger because of it. Each knew this though they didn’t speak of it. They didn’t have to. Some things are too clear, too essential, to need to discuss. The things that matter most aren’t seen on Oprah.

They came out of the hotel.

Hayaam asked, “What time is it?”

Wes looked at his watch.

“Almost nine.”

“I’d better get home. I still have to pack.”

“What are you saying?”

“We may be leaving soon. Even tonight.”

“Tonight!”

“I don’t feel like walking. Can we get a cab?”

“You didn’t tell me you were leaving tonight.”

“I’m sure not we are. But it would be just like him. I’ll call you when I found out.”

Wes couldn’t believe what he was hearing. So many mixed emotions and thoughts raced through him that he became immobile.

“Would you get a cab?” Hayaam asked again.

“Sure. Of course.”

In the cab, Wes said, “I’m coming to the airport to see you off. Whenever it is.”

Hayaam considered this.

“You don’t want me to?”

“Of course you can.”

“Will it upset your father?”

He already assumed it would upset her brother.

“I would like you to meet him.”

“He knows about me?”

“No, not yet.”

They held hands in silence until the cab pulled to the curb in front of Hayaam’s apartment building.

Wes said, “Let me know the minute you find out.”

“I will. This has been good. I have a very special night to remember.”

“Me, too.”

They kissed, a long deep farewell.

43

ABDUL WAS STANDING near the door when Hayaam entered the apartment.

“You spent the night with him,” he said, glaring at her.

“What if I did?”

Without warning he slapped her. Her mouth dropped open in shock as Abdul grabbed her arm and pulled her into the living room. Her father was standing, as if waiting for her.

“She spent the night with her American boyfriend,” Abdul said.

“Is this true?” Jamal asked.

When Hayaam didn’t quickly respond, Abdul slapped her again. Her father did not object.

“Is it true?” he repeated.

“Yes!”

Jamal came forward until he stood right in front of her. Abdul still clutched her arm, holding her close. Then her father spat in her face.

“Cut her hair,” he said.

44

WES COULDN’T KEEP still. He paid the cab fare and started walking away, briskly at first in case Hayaam’s brother were watching from a window. He ended up on campus as if from habit, then wondered what he was doing

there. He was in no mood to write or sit in a classroom. He wandered into the coffee shop, where he bought a cup of black coffee to go. On his way out he saw Areeba sitting at a table across the way. She saw him as well and immediately got up and rushed off in the other direction.

Hayaam was leaving as soon as tonight. It was hard to accept. Everything was changing so swiftly that he was lost in a maelstrom of confused emotions.

His father was talking to his secretary when Wes approached the desk. He had come as if on automatic pilot, reaching an unconscious destination after a long period of walking, as if only exhaustion could shut off his mind.

“Wes. What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you, Dad.”

For a moment, behind the closed door of his father’s upscale office, with a view of the city that no longer included the striking presence of the twin towers, Wes came close to letting go, to breaking down, but he caught himself before slipping and got a grip. What was he doing there in the first place?

“What is it, son?”

“She’s leaving.”

“What?”

The words had come so softly Wes wasn’t sure if he’d spoken them or merely thought them.

“Hayaam is going back to Jakarta. Her father pulled her out of school.”

Saying it didn’t help. In fact, it made his discomfort worse because now his father was trying to comfort him, which made Wes feel awkward and unmanly. He fled the office, telling his father they’d talk more at home.

He bought a ticket to a movie but had not been staring at the screen for thirty minutes when he bolted up

and escaped.

Wes almost never felt like getting drunk but he did now. At the same time, he was determined to see her off at the airport. He would do nothing to jeopardize this obligation, should her departure be this very night.

He tried to convince himself that the situation wasn't as dire as he felt. Hayaam had said she'd return for graduate school. She was a junior, so could be back in two years. In the meantime, they would correspond, they would continue to grow closer. He would wait for her, and she would wait for him. This didn't have to be a bad thing.

This didn't have to be a bad thing. It was the thought that got him through the rest of the day.

45

HAYAAM HAD BECOME hysterical, and Areeba was summoned to calm her down and help her pack. Jamal had been able to book a flight to leave the country this very night.

Areeba gasped when she saw her cousin. Hayaam's hair was as short as a boy's, an effect exaggerated by its uneven length with patches of near-baldness adjacent to ragged bits of protruding hair. Her head looked like a forest after a raging wildfire.

Hayaam was on the floor in a corner of her bedroom, both arms grasping her knees. Her eyes were red and swollen. She'd barely kept her composure long enough to leave a message for Wes before collapsing on the floor in tears.

Abdul, having let Areeba into the room, stood in the doorway, watching.

“Can we be alone?” Areeba said.

Abdul thought a moment before leaving.

“Hayaam, what happened?”

Hayaam didn’t have the energy to relate more than an outline of the horror that had happened to her. Her own father had held her in the bathroom while Abdul chopped off her hair with a pair of scissors. This was punishment for shaming the family by having sex before she married, and with a non-Muslim no less. Hayaam explained that although she and Wes had spent the night together, they had not had sex.

Spending the night with Wes was enough to shock Areeba. All she could say was, “Oh, Hayaam.”

Hayaam didn’t want sympathy. She wanted a favor.

“I wrote a letter,” she said. “You must deliver it for me.”

She got up and went to her desk. The letter was in an unmarked envelope.

“Will you do this?”

Areeba would have preferred to have no part of it but she couldn’t say no to her cousin, not in the condition she was in.

She said that, yes, she would give him the letter the next time she saw him on campus.

Areeba helped Hayaam pack two suitcases of clothes, the only thing she would be taking on the plane. Abdul had arranged for the rest of their belongings to be shipped home later.

In her mind, Hayaam began to believe she would be able to get through this after all. She would finish college in Jakarta. If she was accepted to graduate school in America, no one, not even her father, could stop her from coming. After all, she was an American citizen now.

Later her father had shocking news. Areeba had

gone home, and they were waiting for the cab to pick them up for the ride to the airport. Earlier Abdul had brought in a black hijab for Hayaam to wear, black for mourning and shame.

“I’ve arranged for your marriage,” Jamal said.

Hayaam thought she must be hearing things. This could not possibly be true.

“Malik has kindly consented to take you as his bride.”

Malik was one of her father’s business partners, a man in his fifties.

“I will not do this,” she said.

“Of course you will. You have shamed the family enough. You have shamed the memory of your mother enough. Malik is a good man. He is a good friend. He doesn’t have to do this.”

Hayaam knew, more than ever, that she could not return to Indonesia, she could not live her life this way, not any more. She felt like she was being held hostage. She felt like she was being kidnapped. She would kill herself before she married this man.

46

THE CAB GOT caught in traffic. Ahead were blinking police lights and an ambulance.

“Sorry, folks,” said the cabbie. “Nothing I can do.”

In the back seat, Jamal exhaled in exasperation. Abdul nodded in agreement with his father. Hayaam, wearing the black hijab, prayed that they would miss the plane.

Walter gave Wes the message the moment he came in the door. Hayaam had been very upset when she'd called, he said. Wes phoned a cab immediately.

He was waiting outside when Evelyn joined him, carrying a small bouquet of six yellow roses, the joy of her garden.

"She might like these," she said.

Wes embraced his mother, who held out the bouquet to keep it from getting crushed.

Soon Wes, like Hayaam, sat in a cab heading for the airport. He clutched the bouquet with both hands.

47

"HURRY!"

Abdul, clutching his sister's hand, led the way to the gate. Jamal struggled to keep up.

Across the terminal, Wes entered and looked around for a directory of out-going flights.

When their boarding gate was in view ahead, Hayaam tugged on Abdul's hand and said, "I have to use the bathroom."

The restrooms were just ahead.

Jamal caught up, out of breath.

"She wants to use the bathroom," said Abdul.

"You check us in. I'll wait for her."

Jamal escorted Hayaam to the door of the women's restroom.

“Hurry,” he said.

Inside Hayaam headed straight for a stall. She closed the door, flipped down the toilet seat and sat down, thinking.

The plan had come to her on the cab ride. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced it would work. At the very least it would keep her off the airplane. This certainly was the first step if she wanted to remain in America. After that, even if she ended up doing time in jail, it would be worth it. And once she explained everything, they might not even put her in jail. They had released her father in the end. American justice sometimes was slow but it worked. America was the land of the free.

Hayaam came out of the stall and hurried to the paper towel dispenser. Ignoring the other women in the room, she pulled out a handful of towels, which she took back into the stall.

She set down the towels on the top of the basin behind the toilet. She fetched a full roll of toilet paper. Carefully she wrapped the roll in the paper towels.

48

WES TROTTED ALONG, following the signs to the gate. It had taken him a long time to get through security, the guards even going through his small bouquet of roses, flower by flower. He was afraid he had missed Hayaam’s departure.

As he approached the gate, he saw a commotion ahead. Some people were scattering, and others were frozen in their tracks.

When he saw her, his chest tightened. Hayaam was

holding something wrapped in paper towels above her head, screaming, "I have a bomb! I have a bomb!"

Jamal had known something was wrong as soon as she'd come out of the restroom. Even before she'd started yelling, he'd seen it in her demeanor. Her eyes had the glaze of a mad woman. Once he understood what she was doing, he fled in the direction of the gate.

Abdul rushed up, saying, "What is going on?"

"She says she has a bomb."

"That's ridiculous."

"This is her way of staying."

"Father, let her go. We have to board while we can."

Jamal looked across the way, where people were both in panic and curious, some running away from Hayaam and others staring at her with dark fascination.

"Yes, we must board," he said.

Wes tried to work his way through the crowd to get closer to her. Hayaam was still screaming that she had a bomb. She looked crazed in her black hijab.

"Hayaam!"

She didn't hear him.

"Keep away! I have a bomb!"

A gunshot rang out, coming from behind Wes, so loud that his ear started ringing. Hayaam grasped her stomach and fell, and the guard who had fired the gun rushed past Wes to his victim.

Wes knew immediately that she was dead. In fact, she wasn't. Hayaam was rushed to the hospital, where she died three hours later. By that time, the jetliner with her father and brother on board finally had been cleared and had taken off to escape the new America.

The guard, it turned out, had not meant to shoot her, let alone kill her. He had drawn his pistol by instinct

(critics would say from fear) and somehow, as he approached her, it had gone off. He felt terrible about what had happened. It was only his second month on the job. After being cleared at an inquiry, he resigned to find less stressful work.

49

THE WEEKEND PASSED before Areeba saw Wes in the coffee shop and gave him Hayaam's letter.

Dear Wesley,

I am writing this on the day I am leaving. I will give it to Areeba to deliver to you. I need to explain so you will understand what has happened to me.

I cannot go back. My father has changed. He has arranged a marriage for me, which of course I cannot go through with. I would kill myself first.

I have to choose between my family and my life. I choose my life.

I am not getting on that plane. I'm not sure how I'm going to keep off but I will create a scene if I have to, making them think I am crazy and dangerous. I am not getting on that plane.

I am telling you this in case you see me acting crazy if you come. You will know that I am – how do you say it? – crazy like a fox. I will do whatever I have to do.

Maybe what I do will land me in jail. This is fine because the jail will be in America. I am an American now. I am free to live my life as I choose.

I want to tell you something else. I am sorry I

drank too much champagne. Do you understand what I am saying? I am sorry that the first man was not you. Maybe one day it will be you if this is not too much to hope for. I try not to think too far into the future.

If I am in jail when you read this, will you come and visit me? Maybe your father can help me. I did what I did only so I can stay in America.

I love you, Wesley. I think about you all the time. I hope you think about me, too. I will never forget you.

Love always,

Hayaam

50

WES FELL INTO a deep depression. He had tried to see Hayaam's body before it was flown to Indonesia. He wanted to pay his respects. But he was not family and not even his father could pull the legal strings that would have permitted this final gesture.

He stopped going to school, instead spending the day alone in his room, sleeping as much as he could because when he was asleep he wasn't miserable. His mother told him that he would feel better if he lost himself in his studies so often that one day he took her advice and returned to campus. He stayed long enough to officially withdraw from the university.

He flew to San Francisco. He wanted to live somewhere he had never been before. He chose San Francisco because Mike had lived there.

He managed to get a writing job on an alternative weekly newspaper. He found a studio apartment he could afford on his meager salary.

Now and again he would see a Muslim woman in the city. When her hijab was bright and cheerful, he was reminded immediately of Hayaam. He had never met a woman like her before. He assumed he never would again.

He did and he didn't. He fell in love with a woman who taught art at the same high school where he'd been hired to teach English. Of course, he was expected to go back to school to get his permanent teaching credential to replace the provisional one on which he'd been employed. This was in San Francisco, which he now called home.

He met Heather after a short period of dating women casually, which began almost a year after Hayaam's death. Now and again he slept with someone. But no woman made him feel the way he had felt when he was with Hayaam.

Heather was tall and slender and dark. She reminded him a little of Hayaam physically, a resemblance which he never shared with her. In fact, they'd been married six months, with a child on the way, before he mentioned Hayaam to Heather at all.

They were having coffee at a sidewalk Starbucks when a Muslim woman walked by wearing a purple and orange hijab. As soon as Wes saw her, which was just as he was taking a sip of coffee, he gagged, the hot liquid entering his windpipe, and he started to cough violently.

"All you all right?"

It took him a moment to recover.

"Do you know that woman?"

"What?"

"You looked like you just saw a ghost. I thought you knew the woman."

"Oh, her."

“Yes, her.”

“Right. I mean, she reminded me of someone.”

He didn't tell his wife everything, or even most of it. He didn't explain how Hayaam had let him see her naked in the hotel room, which in memory seemed like the most romantic and intimate encounter he had ever experienced. He did not tell her how she had died or about the letter she had written him.

“You never told me you were a hero,” Heather said. He'd just recited the story of how he had met Hayaam in the hallway of the south tower on September 11th.

“Hardly that.”

“Sounds to me like you saved her life.”

This was the last time Wes talked to his wife about Hayaam. Sooner than he expected, he stopped dreaming about her. More and more when he thought of Hayaam he seemed to be remembering things that had happened to a completely different person from the man he was today, a high school English teacher, with a wife and child, a grandchild whom his parents loved to spoil. This person in the past, this memory of his former self, had been capable of happiness. Today Wes concluded that happiness was beyond his reach. Contentment, yes. He was content. But happy? Happiness was something that happened in movies. Happiness was something that when claimed by other people was immediately suspect. What dark secrets were they hiding? What self-delusions were they embracing? These people lacked the courage to face life head-on with all its pain and treachery and unfairness. Happiness, like romantic love, was an illusion.

By the time Heather was pregnant with their second child, Hayaam would not have recognized the man to whom she had offered her virginity. Wes often was distant and moody. He brooded a lot. He was impassionate.

One Saturday afternoon he was working at the

dining room table when Heather came in from a trip to the market.

“I can use some help unpacking the car!” she yelled from the kitchen.

When he ignored her, she came into the dining room. Wes immediately tore off the sheet of yellow paper from the pad on which he had been writing and wadded it into a ball.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

In fact, he had been trying to make a new start on his novel about Moliere. He’d been thinking about it a lot lately. He would continue thinking about it in the future, although with decreasing frequency. This would prove to be his last attempt to write anything down.

He stood up and said, “I’ll get the groceries.”

Some months later Wes was walking to the faculty parking lot after school when ahead he saw one of his favorite students, a bright girl named Mary, in an intimate embrace with a young man wearing a varsity jacket. They groped at one another, standing under a tree just off the walkway, only a few feet from where he would pass. Wes stopped walking.

Their mouths were locked together, and Mary had one leg wrapped around the boy’s thighs. They were in their own world, bodies bound in the obsessive oblivion of first love. Wes stared at them not with longing but with sadness, as if they stood on the edge of a great precipice from which he was helpless to rescue them.

Their passion outlasted his patience. I’m sure you’ll understand completely when I tell you that Wes took a circuitous path to the parking lot in order to avoid them.

At home he found Hayaam’s letter. He held it for a long time without reading it. Finally he ripped it up,

crushed the pieces into a tiny ball and flushed it down the toilet.

Although he still thought about her from time to time, and more than once regretted destroying the letter, Wes never mentioned Hayaam to anyone again.

END

BAUMHOLDER
1961

Dedicated to Monterey Marys everywhere

1/

Sgt. Malinowski took several steps into the Enlisted Men's Club and stopped. He had never seen the linguists of Processing Company this drunk, this loud or this disorderly. Everyone was yelling at once, small groups trying to make their conversations heard over their loud neighbors. Someone stood on a table, his pants dropped, mooning the universe (the sergeant didn't recognize the buttocks) while other linguists clapped and yelled catcalls. My God, thought Malinowski. May their mothers never learn about this, or recruiting into this man's Army would crash to a standstill. What mother would send her son to a school of drunken debauchery?

The E. M. Club was located in a Quonset hut no larger than a basketball court, and Malinowski scanned the small room for Sullivan. This was Sullivan's short-timer's party, he realized, and the linguist would be devastated by the news the sergeant had for him. This was why Malinowski had two M.P.s waiting right outside, just in case Sullivan took a swing at him. A short-timer's emotions were unpredictable on any occasion, and an Irish short-timer's provided twice the uncertainty, certainly more considering the unfortunate news the sergeant brought. Malinowski had considered waiting until breakfast before breaking the news but by then Sullivan would be packed,

waiting for the bus to take him to the airport. Better to tell him tonight, let him blow up, and if he caused sufficient trouble, tuck him away for the night in the small cell in Headquarters Company built just for such an occasion.

Seventy-odd men sat along the row of double-tables the men had pushed together across the center of the room. Over half the company of Russian linguists were there, almost all of them wearing civvies – Malinowski had never been in an outfit where there was such a rush to change out of uniform. Beer bottles and cans cluttered every table, four or five times as many containers as drinkers, bottles of German beer and cans of American beer, some full, some empty, each obscenely inexpensive on a Nickel Night like this, beer so cheap that most linguists bought them five at a time, slapping an American quarter or a Deutsch mark at Jake, the German national who ran the club. Sullivan had made sure his going-home party took place on a Nickel Night.

Bass, whom everyone called Bear, held his guitar and was entertaining troops at the far end of the long table. Malinowski couldn't hear what he was singing but the sergeant had heard rumors that sometimes Bear sang anti-military songs of his own composition. Malinowski wouldn't put it past any of them to harbor such feelings. They were college boys who had joined the Army Security Agency a step ahead of being drafted. Not a career soldier among them. Foot soldiers called the linguists "Monterey Marys" after the Language School in Monterey, California, where they'd learned Russian. In Baumholder, 30,000 infantry, paratroopers and special forces were stationed across town at Smith Barracks. The "Animals" spent most of their time training for war in the surrounding farmland but this weekend were in town on pass, which is why the Marys stayed up on their hilltop base. The Animals frightened them, and the sergeant didn't blame them.

Closer in, Malinowski saw the overweight linguist nicknamed Buddy-pooh holding court, gesturing wildly as he talked, or yelled, over the din of everyone speaking at once. A major trouble-maker, Buddy-pooh. Malinowski

had heard that he'd put Hitler speeches to memory to recite for free drinks to the farmers in the local gasthaus.

Buckley, one of the few Negroes in the company, sat next to Buddy but looked dazed, even frightened. Buckley was a newk and not yet seasoned to the wild party habits of college boys turned soldiers – if translating Russian could be called soldiering. Malinowski, who had fought in Korea, had mixed feelings about this.

Finally the sergeant found Sullivan in the crowd, his ruddy complexion redder than normal from so much drinking, laughing and carrying on.

“Hey, Sarge!” somebody yelled. Only a few people heard this and turned his way. Malinowski nodded and stepped toward the troops. He stopped when he stood behind Sullivan.

“Sullivan,” he said, bending forward so his lips were close to an ear.

Sullivan straightened up and turned.

“Hey, Sarge,” Sullivan said.

“Come with me a minute.”

“What’s up?”

“It’s important. Follow me.”

Malinowski started toward the exit. Halfway there, he saw Sullivan saying something to the group he was sitting with. When the linguist finally moved forward, Malinowski continued on.

Onside the sergeant told the M.P.s to move off but stay alert. He didn’t want to freak out Sullivan by their presence but he wanted them close in case there was trouble.

In a moment Sullivan exited the Quonset hut.

“What’s going on?”

“President Kennedy gave a speech tonight,” Malinowski began.

“Yeah, I read something about that.”

“Then you know the shit Khrushchev’s been pulling in Berlin.”

“A little. What’s this got to do with me? You know I ship out tomorrow, right?”

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Kennedy said Berlin is in a crisis. He extended everybody with less than a year left of his tour."

There, he'd said it. Malinowski watched Sullivan carefully, tense, ready to duck if the linguist started swinging. Sullivan was short and slight and Malinowski large but the linguist had an Irishman's temper.

Sullivan grinned and shook his head.

"This is a very sick joke you're pulling, Sarge. Come on in, and I'll buy you five beers."

Before Sullivan could turn away, Malinowski had a large hand on his shoulder.

"No joke," he said. "You don't go home tomorrow."

Sullivan's mouth dropped open but no words came. Then the mouth contorted into a grimace, and Sullivan appeared to be in great pain. Finally he yelled an excruciating declaration of agony.

Malinowski saw the punch coming and ducked aside. The two M.P.s appeared quickly from out of the shadows. When Sullivan saw them, he stepped back, palms held forward as a shield against their approach.

"What am I, under arrest for getting screwed?" Sullivan asked.

"You're not under arrest unless there's a reason to be," said Malinowski.

"This is really fucked, Sarge."

"Welcome to the Army."

"Why me? I mean, what the fuck does it matter to the safety of America if I'm here or home?"

Malinowski didn't think such an unpatriotic question deserved a response.

Sullivan shook his head again.

"Okay," he said.

After a silence, the sergeant asked, "You going to be okay?"

Sullivan nodded.

"Do you know how long I'm extended for?"

"I think three months. Not that long."

"Fuck no. What's three months? I've been two years in this shit hole. What's three months?"

He started nodding again.

"Well," said Sullivan, "if I'm not under arrest, I think I could use a beer. Offer's still open, Sarge."

"I'll take a rain check. You take it easy tonight, Sullivan. Don't do anything stupid after the club closes."

Sullivan nodded and reentered the club.

"You are totally shitting me," said Bass when Sullivan told him the news.

Bass and Sullivan were tight enough that Bass recognized as soon as his friend returned that something was terribly wrong. Displeasure was in Sullivan's body language, in the way he stormed back to the table and chugalugged a beer with the ferocity of a man wanting to disable his senses. Bass quickly finished the song he was singing (a Weavers' tune called "Lonesome Traveler"), put the guitar in its case, slid the case under the table and hurried to Sullivan's side to see what was up. Sullivan leaned close and told him the news in a broken voice.

"Three months," Sullivan added. "It might as well be for eternity."

"Damn," said Bass. He couldn't think of anything to add, so gave a quick squeeze of Sullivan's shoulder.

"I want to go to town," said Sullivan.

"The Animals are in town," Bass reminded him.

"Maybe I'll pick a fight with a paratrooper."

"Yeah, right."

"The president thinks I'm a soldier, thinks I'm worth extending. Maybe it's time to prove myself by punching out a paratrooper."

Across the room, somebody yelled, "Fuck Kennedy!"

"I think the word's spreading," said Bass.

Buddy-pooh appeared and said, "Sullivan, you hear the news?"

Sullivan nodded.

"I think some songs are in order," Buddy-pooh told Bear.

Bass said, "I don't think I'm in the mood."

"He's right," Sullivan said. "I want to sing every anti-Army song you ever wrote." Then he started singing at the top of his lungs, words Bass had written to the tune of "Ragmop":

"I say F ... I say F, U ... F, U, C ... F, U, C, K ... F-U-C-K A-R-M-Y, fuck the Army, beetle-leet bop-be-da-ba ... fuck the Army, beetle-leet bop-be-da-ba ..."

As soon as other linguists heard Sullivan, they joined in, many standing and moving to gather around Sullivan and Bass, faces straining to sing louder than a neighbor, everyone spelling out the Fuck the Army Ragmop song. Someone fetched Bass' guitar and brought it to him. Buddy-pooh suggested the next song, and Bass started it alone, to the tune of an old labor song, strumming along as he sang:

"I don't want your spit shine, mister. I don't want your shiny brass. As far as I am concerned, mister. You can shove them up your ass."

By the time Bass reached the last verse, dedicated especially to the Russian linguists with their top secret codeword clearances, everyone was singing in a loud chorus, defiant and solemn, as if the song were an anthem:

"I don't want your secret clearance. I don't want your world-wide badge. All I want is a pair of my civvies. And the freedom I once had."

No one wanted to stop when Jake decided to close at midnight. Buddy-pooh led a delegation to buy beer to go, filling up paper cups, which was the only way Jake would let beer out of the club. Box tops were gathered to serve as trays for the cups of beer, and volunteers recruited to carry them to the baseball field at one end of the kaserne, which was enclosed by a security fence. Across the fence were the officer billets, and in the past their post-club excursions to the ballpark had gotten several of the linguists in trouble, especially Buddy and Sullivan as ringleaders. But this didn't seem to matter on a night when short-timers found themselves extended. If ever there was a night to lament being a soldier, it was this one.

Bass wasn't sure when he lost track of Sullivan. He had meant to keep an eye on him. About half the crowd in

the club made the march to the ballpark to keep drinking. They sat in the bleachers and passed around the cups of beer. Bass was persuaded to sing another song. He chose a traditional folk ballad, hoping to keep the crowd quieter than they'd been in the club. He thought it was time to settle into a more subdued state of mourning. When he finished the song, Bass realized that Sullivan wasn't in the bleachers any more.

"Where's Jim?" he asked the crowd.

"That way," a linguist said, pointing toward the billets.

"Maybe he crashed," suggested another.

Buddy-pooh laughed.

"Not Sullivan, no way. I think he's up to no good."

Bass and Buddy left the others to finish the beer and headed for the billets. They found Buckley in the Day Room, shooting pool by himself.

"You seen Sullivan?" Bass asked.

"I saw him walk by outside a moment ago."

Back outside, Bass and Buddy-pooh looked in a direction opposite from the ballpark. If Sullivan were headed for the Operations Building, he'd have gone across the central parkway before reaching the billets. Either he was going to Headquarters Company, where the kaserne's maintenance, transportation and other support personnel were housed in their own billets, or continuing on to the Command Building.

Buddy said, "He's going to piss on the captain's avocado plant."

Bass shot him a confused look.

"I'm serious. When we saw *Mr. Roberts* a few weeks ago, Sullivan said somebody should piss on the captain's plant."

Bass had skipped the weekly movie because he'd already seen it and was in the middle of reading "Grapes of Wrath." He remembered how in an act of defiance in the film, Henry Fonda had thrown the captain's potted tree overboard. Would Sullivan take this as inspiration to do something similar?

"Better check it out," said Bass.

If Sullivan had pissed on the avocado plant in the hallway outside the commanding officer's door, he'd finished by the time Bass and Buddy-pooh found him. Now Sullivan was carefully burning all the notices and rosters on the duty board, carefully blowing on each sheet of paper so it would hang off its thumbtack as a delicate ash.

"Come on, Jim," Bass said. "This isn't going to get you home any earlier."

"Look at this," said Sullivan. Half a dozen shapes of ash hung off the corkboard like skeletal flowers. "This is art, is what it is."

"Beautiful. Let's go home."

Bass put an arm around Sullivan and gently started leading him away. A few steps later he noticed that Buddy-pooh was finishing up the job, blowing on a duty roster he'd just set on fire.

"Damn it," said Bass. "Let's get out of here."

Sullivan wanted to go back to the ballpark. Bass didn't think it was a good idea.

"I'm going back," said Buddy-pooh. "You can come with me," he told Sullivan.

"I don't need a fucking chaperon."

Bass said, "You don't need to get in trouble either. If you got company punishment, or court-martialed, God forbid, they could extend you even more. I heard guys as short as you only got extended three months. Three months is nothing."

"I'm still going back to the ballpark," said Sullivan.

Bass went along, too. He didn't trust Sullivan to be left on his own or in anybody's care but his. But as much as Bass tried to keep Sullivan out of trouble, once again the short-timer slipped away.

This time it happened when Bass went under the bleachers to take a leak. When he climbed back into the bleachers, Sullivan was gone.

"Where's Jim?" he asked again.

Buddy-pooh looked around.

"He was right here a second ago."

"He went to town," said Bass, thinking aloud.

"The Animals are in town."

“He said he wants to fight a paratrooper.”

“He’s that fucked up?”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“Honey,” said Buddy-pooh, “I’d never be so fucked up that I wanted to fight a paratrooper.”

“I’d better go get him.”

“Are you crazy? The Animals are out there. Probably pissed, too, if they got extended.”

“They always re-up. That wouldn’t bother them.”

“You’re right. But it’s still dangerous in town. What is it Sgt. Davis is always saying? I’d rather fight than eat.”

Sgt. Davis, like Sgt. Malinowski, was a soldier of the old school, somehow assigned to a company of Russian linguists for whom military duty had nothing to do with physical exertion or violence. The linguists translated and analyzed military communications of the Russian army in East Germany. No fighting, thank you very much. Monterey Marys. Period, end of story.

Bass said, “I’ll find him before he finds a fight.”

“There’s wishful thinking if I ever heard it.”

“Fuck you.”

Bass started away.

“Do you have a pass?” Buddy-pooh asked after him.

Bass turned.

“I’m officially on leave. I just hung around for Sullivan’s party. I go to Denmark tomorrow.”

“You have a ticket to Denmark and hung around for a party in the club?”

“A special party,” said Bass. He headed off again.

Although he had leave papers, Bass decided to skip the hassle of showing them to the guards at the front gate and instead ducked out through a hole in the fence behind the billets. It was the standard way linguists came and went if they had had too much to drink or wanted to avoid the guards for some other reason. Every now and again Support wired up the hole but the repair never lasted more than a few days. Support soldiers from Headquarters Company used the hole themselves.

The walk to town was about a mile down a twisting two-lane road. The moon overhead dropped a pale light to

mark his way. Walking along, Bass realized it was unusually quiet, no sound of artillery coming from across the fields. The Animals were off maneuvers and in town to drink, screw and fight.

At the bottom of the hill the road veered left for another hundred yards, passing Gasthaus Konrad, the local establishment most favored by the farmers who remained in the area, living off their land leases to the American army or the bars some had invested in. Now and again the linguists stopped at the gasthaus for local color, an experience that typically went from shocking to puzzling to darkly comic. Most of the farmers in the area were unreformed Nazis, some of whom viewed the recent World War the way Americans view the World Series, a best-of-seven conflict which had the Americans ahead of the Germans two wars to none – but with considerable future battle left to do. Around ten p.m., after the last routine visit of the German police, Konrad, the owner, sometimes went to the jukebox, opened it, and put on several banned Nazi marching songs for the delight of the farmers. On more rare occasions, especially near the end of the month when they were broke, Buddy-pooh led a contingent of thirsty linguists to the gasthaus, where he recited Hitler speeches he had memorized in German. For this entertainment the farmers kept the beer flowing for as long as Buddy tickled their nostalgia for the glorious days of Aryan superiority.

On the walk to town, Bass decided to rent a room for the night in the gasthaus. He'd made plans to catch the late morning train but this might have to be delayed, depending on whether or not he found Sullivan tonight. Bass didn't look forward to entering a bar filled with Animals but this couldn't be helped. Sullivan was his good buddy. Buddies looked out for one another, and Sullivan clearly was too upset to behave in his own best interests.

Bass was over halfway down the hill when it occurred to him that Sullivan might be going to town for a reason other than picking a fight with a paratrooper. He might be looking for Heidi. The more Bass considered this, the more likely the possibility seemed.

Heidi was a Russian spy, most of the linguists agreed to this now. All the same, Sullivan had fallen in love with her. Whether it was love or lust, Bass never could decide, but Sullivan, more than the other linguists Heidi had gone out with, took the plunge into emotional turmoil and personal obsession with more energy than anyone else. Sullivan had tried to convince Bass that the attraction was mutual.

"She loves me," Sullivan had told Bass on a night almost a month ago when they were drinking alone in the bleachers after the club had closed.

"She's using you," said Bass.

"I know she's a spy. Jesus, Bear, give me a break. I'm a spy, too. So fucking what? We love one another. We want to get out of the spy business."

"She's using you, Jim."

"After I get out and touch bases with my family, I'm coming back. I'm meeting her in Spain."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Fuck you."

"She asked you to defect. She wanted you to walk into the sunset in East Germany."

"And I told her I wouldn't do that. But I would start a new life in Spain with her."

"And she said yes?"

"Actually she said she'd think about it. Change is harder for her. I get discharged soon. She'd have to defect, so to speak. She loves me, Bear. I think she's going to do it. She's going to meet me in Spain."

"And if she doesn't?"

"She'll break my heart. But I have to try. I have to be there like I promised I would."

Extended, Sullivan wouldn't be able to keep his appointment. Maybe he was looking for Heidi to tell her. Sullivan, as far as Bass knew, hadn't seen her in over a week.

Bass remembered the first day he and Sullivan had seen Heidi in the gasthaus. They'd never seen anyone like her in Baumholder before. It wasn't only that she was pretty in a

fresh girl-next-door kind of way, with white skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, though a tad plump for Bass' tastes. She was reading *The Portable Faulkner* in English. Heidi, looking like a college student, was definitely out of place in a German village so transformed that the city newspapers had begun calling it Sin City.

New young women appeared in Baumholder all the time but they usually brought a pallor of tragedy in their expressions, a vacant longing in their eyes. Most had escaped from East Germany and thought they were going to work as waitresses, not barmaids for G.I.s at wages so low prostitution was not only encouraged but became necessary for survival. Bass had heard the rumor that a German syndicate orchestrated the sex trade serving American soldiers. For several days before the Animals charged into town with weekend passes and lustful appetites, Baumholder's thrice-weekly train schedule exploded to several trains a day to haul in all the girls ("Veronikas," the Germans called them) who would be needed for the weekend ahead. Sipping a beer in the bahnhoff, watching all the prostitutes parade in, was the most surreal experience Bass had ever had.

In this context, to find a beautiful young woman sitting alone in the gasthaus on a Wednesday afternoon was a significant break in the local pattern of introductions. And she was reading Faulkner!

Bear and Sullivan were working mids, which gave them a free day as long as they kept sober enough to go to work at midnight. They'd slept through the morning. They entered the gasthaus for a beer and bockwurst, a German lunch, before continuing on to town. And there she was.

"She's reading Faulkner," Sullivan noticed first after they'd taken a table with their bottles of German beer. "In English."

"Fishy," said Bass. They spoke in low tones, as if discussing a secret.

"Not necessarily."

"Yeah, Jim, she's a graduate student in American Studies who happened to drop by Sin City for a quiet week of working on her Ph.D."

“What are you trying to say?”

“Think about it. Look what she’s reading. Not just any Faulkner. The Portable Faulkner, with his name shouted in block print on the cover so you can read it across the room. Has any bait ever been more obvious?”

“Bait? Interesting. As in fishing for ...?”

“One of us, is my guess.”

“One of us.”

“A linguist. A spy.”

Sullivan laughed. The young woman, only a few tables away, looked up and smiled. Then she went back to reading.

Sullivan said, “So what you’re saying is, you think she’s a spy planted here to pick our brains?”

“It’s been done before.”

True enough. Not quite a year ago, a spy working as a barmaid had appeared at the Family Club, the linguist’s favorite bar in town. She’d appeared out of nowhere, was fluent in English, bright and attractive. She’d taken an immediate liking to Lt. Baker in the company, who reported her abnormal interest in what happened in Processing Company on the hill. Before sex and after, all she wanted to hear about what was what the linguists did on the hill. Baker reported her but before security had time to look into the matter, the woman was gone as suddenly as she had arrived.

“Spies hustle officers,” Sullivan said.

“Not necessarily. We know more secrets than the C.O. when you get down to it.”

What the linguists knew was a good deal about the chain of command and activity of the Russian army in East Germany. It would be useful if the Russians knew how much the Americans knew, just as it would be useful for the Americans to know how much the Russians knew about what really went on in Processing Company.

“Look at Harry Smith,” Bass added.

Harry Smith. No soldier was more controversial, even now, six months after his defection – if it had been that. What was known was that Smith and a Veronika Spy who called herself Ilse had disappeared at the same time.

Smith was always falling in love with one Veronika or another, so most of the linguists assumed he had been easy pickings for a pro like Ilse. But Sullivan was a dissenter.

"We don't know what happened to Harry," Sullivan said. "Excuse me. I'm going to check her out."

Bass watched Sullivan get up, move across the room and speak to the woman. Bass was shocked and speechless. Then Sullivan sat down with her. Bass went to the men's room and when he returned, the woman had joined their table.

"This is Heidi," said Sullivan. To the woman he said, "Everyone calls him Bear."

"This is your name?" she asked. Her English was almost without accent.

"Robert Bass."

"Nice to meet you."

They chatted for half an hour, Sullivan doing most of the talking, obviously smitten, and the more Bass listened, the more he was sure the woman was a spy. She said she was in town to visit an ailing aunt, a flimsy explanation at best. She was reading Faulkner because she loved American literature and hoped to study in the States one day. Yes, she'd heard all the stories that had given Baumholder its reputation as the Sin City of Europe, but this was where her aunt lived, so here she was. Heidi had no intention of frequenting the G.I. bars in town. She'd confine her movements between the gasthaus, where she had rented a room upstairs, and her aunt's home. She expected to be in town for a week.

In the gasthaus Bass found Konrad behind the front counter, where one signed in for a room. There always seemed to be vacancies. Given the late hour, only a few local farmers were inside, drinking beer and playing cards at a corner table.

"Das Bar," said Konrad. "Where are your comrades?"

"I was just going to ask if you'd seen Sullivan."

"Sullivan?"

"Young Werther."

This was the German's nickname for Jim. The first time the proprietor had met the linguist, Sullivan, much like Heidi later, was sitting alone at a table reading, in this case the Goethe classic, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Here, thought Konrad, is a melancholy American who always pines after what is lost, lost innocence and lost youth, but especially when the loss is a beautiful young woman. Thereafter Konrad called Sullivan Young Werther.

"Yes, he was here asking about Heidi."

"Heidi's still here?"

"No. I sent him to the Family Club. I heard she spends a lot of time there now."

Heidi at the Family Club. She finally was making the bar scene, looking for new victims.

Bass began filling out the card on the counter.

"I need a room for the night," he said. "I'll be back later."

2/

There were 57 bars in downtown Baumholder, a figure made astronomical by the fact that downtown consisted of nine square blocks. Most of the bars had names chosen to appeal to Americans: the California Club, the Florida Club, the Texas Club, Jazz Alley, Blues Alley, The Liberty Bar. Others tried to lure in soldiers with exotic names like The Golden Hirsch, Dancers A'GoGo, The Femme Fatale, Gangster Den. Bass believed the rumor that most of the bars in Baumholder were owned by a syndicate of German businessmen, most of whom lived in Berlin and Munich. But others were owned locally, the way Konrad was said to be a partner in The Family Club, which the linguists called their off-base home. Seeing how much money was being made by serving the troops, some local farmers joined the frenzy to make a quick mark off the Americans, who after all had more money to spend than the Germans had seen in a very long time.

The bars had come to Baumholder during the troop buildup of the Korean War. A Soviet invasion of Germany was a threat real enough to respond to, and the U.S. responded by bringing tens of thousands of soldiers to West Germany. Baumholder, before World War II a small farming community in southwestern Germany's Rhineland area, with a population never exceeding 3000, was chosen for the major American buildup because the Germans themselves had trained here, taking advantage of the bare, rolling hills for their military maneuvers and war games. The Americans did the same.

Almost overnight, new bars opened downtown to entertain and serve the American G.I.s. Bakeries became bars, barns became nightclubs. Because the American army was segregated at the start of the Korean War, the new bars became segregated. The Florida Club, for example, became a bar that only black troops frequented. The tradition of segregation had remained even after the army became integrated, and today if Bass entered The Florida Club, he would be one of only a handful of whites there, the others young Germans eager to hear the American jazz on the jukebox. The jukeboxes in the white American bars featured country-western music.

The Family Club became the hangout for the Monterey Marys because it was the first bar one reached coming down from the hill at the east end of town, which also made it the farthest from Smith Barracks, Baumholder's main post, where 30,000 Animals were stationed beyond the west end of town. There was a certain sense of security in the fact that a thirsty Animal would have to pass 56 bars before reaching The Family Club. Of course, under normal circumstances the linguists avoided the Animals at all costs and therefore stayed on the hill whenever the Animals came to town. The linguists, numbering only one hundred (with another hundred in Headquarters Company), knew full well that beating up a Monterey Mary would be considered great fun among the paratroopers and special forces after six or seven weeks of shooting at each other in war games in the field. It was always more fun to take hostility out on a stranger than on a comrade.

For Bass, tonight was far from normal circumstances. As he approached The Family Club, he expected to find Animals inside, not linguists, unless Sullivan himself was there.

The neon signs of the bars stretched blocks ahead of him. Surprisingly few Animals were on the street, perhaps because most had already had too much to drink. Bass climbed the steps – The Family Club was a converted home – to cross the porch and enter the bar. He had about an hour before the Army curfew began, and the M.P.s started checking for overnight passes. Even though he was officially on leave, Bass had learned never to trust an encounter with the military police. Some of those boys had a power complex.

The Family Club was only half full, testimony to its being the last bar on the trail from Smith Barracks. Unlike the linguists, most of the Animals came to town in uniform.

Bass looked around for a familiar female face and found Amazon hurrying his way. She was aptly named, over six-foot and over two-hundred pounds, with a honeycomb of black hair piled on her head that made her look even larger than she was.

“Vat is going on?” Amazon said in her German accent, moving so close Bass could smell the sour liquor on her breath. “You never come vit Animals here.”

“I’m looking for Sullivan.”

“I zee. Of course.”

“Have you seen him?”

“He come vor Heidi. Dey go.”

“Where? How long ago?”

“Dey vant to be quiet. I know notting vere dey go.”

A drunken paratrooper staggered past and, seeing Bass, did a double-take. He stopped and asked, “What outfit you in?”

Amazon jumped in to the rescue, taking the paratrooper by the arm and leading him toward the jukebox. Bass heard her saying, “You promise dance vit me, soldier-boy. You promise dance.”

Bass took advantage of the moment to slip outside.

Sullivan had been here and left with Heidi. What was Heidi doing in The Family Club with the Animals in town? They also had secrets of interest to a spy. How many soldiers were training in the field? A fact worth knowing.

Amazon said they'd left to go somewhere quiet. Usually a Chinese restaurant at the far end of town served this purpose but not with the Animals in town. Nothing would be quiet in Baumholder unless they walked somewhere off the main drag. Maybe to the soccer field. It had bleachers, they could sit and talk in the moonlight. Right up Sullivan's alley.

The main soccer field was about a mile south, in the "festplatz" park. Bass moved into a residential neighborhood, which was dark without the density of neon signs along the main drag. He marveled at how askew his habitual notion of Baumholder was, a three-block procession of bars, a town full of hustlers and prostitutes. Here, in the shadows away from the action, Baumholder resembled the tiny German village it had been before the American soldiers arrived.

The festplatz was empty. Bass sat in the bleachers to think a minute. Had Sullivan and Heidi already run off to Spain together? Not easy to believe. In fact, from the beginning Bass found it hard to believe that Heidi, a spy, had fallen in love with Sullivan, certainly not enough to run off into the Spanish sunset with him. It just didn't make sense. Sullivan hadn't given defecting to Heidi's side a second thought. Wouldn't her loyalty be the same?

Sullivan had been reluctant to admit that Heidi must be a spy. In the beginning, blinded by his attraction, he let himself believe that she wasn't seeing any other soldier except himself. He was spending as much free time with her as he could, which wasn't much because Heidi seemed to be spending most of her time with a sick aunt. But there wasn't a sick aunt.

Bass discovered this one afternoon when he went to town alone. Sullivan, unable to go on a picnic with Heidi because she was spending the afternoon with her aunt, had decided to stay on post, sulking in the E. M. Club, so Bass,

always eager for a change of scenery, had walked to town alone.

As he approached Gasthaus Konrad, he saw Buddy-pooh awaiting outside. Bass was about to call to him when Heidi came out the front door. She walked to Buddy and took his arm. They moved off like familiar lovers.

Bass followed them to festplatz park, where they bought rolls and sausages at a concession stand. They ate together at a picnic table as Bass watched from across the park, hiding behind a tree, trying to figure out how he was going to break this news to Sullivan. After eating, they began kissing, nothing hot and heavy but kissing nonetheless. Later Heidi took a small camera out of her purse. She took a picture of Buddy-pooh. Bass had seen enough and left.

He brooded over beer at The Family Club, wondering what to tell Sullivan.

"You look zo zad," said Amazon, joining him. "You vant to go upstairs?"

"I'm fine."

"No true."

"Do you know Heidi? She has a room at Konrad's."

"Heidi the spy?"

"I think that's the one."

"I never talk to her. Somebody like her comes, dey take deir pictures, and dey go."

"What do you mean, take their pictures?"

"Get many pictures of soldiers. Vind out vat dey can vind out. Den poof, on de train and back to East Berlin."

That night at the E. M. Club, Bass learned something else about Heidi. Sullivan had gotten drunk early and crashed, no doubt longing for his next date with the love of his life. Joining Bass at a table was Luke, another linguist, who sat down with a big grin on his face.

"I think I'm in love," said Luke.

"With a Veronika, right."

"With a student. She's here to take care of a sick aunt."

And then it came, a story just like Sullivan's, just like Buddy-pooh's if he cared to share it, the story of an

immediate attraction, a picnic in festplatz park, a little smooching – and Heidi taking his photograph. Bass wondered if the woman was trying to fill her photo album with the entire company of linguists.

At breakfast after mids, Bass couldn't hold back the news any longer. He told Sullivan that Heidi had gone out with Buddy-poo and Luke and probably more.

"Now will you believe she's a spy?" Bass asked.

Without replying, Sullivan stood up and walked out of the mess hall. Bass figured he was heading to town for a showdown with Heidi. He let him go.

Bass left festplatz park and took a circuitous route through the village to approach Gasthaus Konrad from the rear. He then walked around the two-story building and entered through the front entrance. His plan was to crash, get an early start in the morning to see if he could find Sullivan, and maybe still catch his train to begin the scheduled two weeks' leave in Denmark. But if he missed the train, he missed it. There would be plenty of departing trains the next few days after the Animals returned to the field. Riding a train filled with Veronikas would be something to write home about.

Konrad wasn't anywhere to be found. The group of farmers playing cards had gotten smaller. At the front desk, Bass pushed down the bell.

In a moment Konrad appeared. He looked surprised to see Bass.

"I need my room key," said Bass.

"Of course, of course. Did you find your friend?"

"No luck."

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe."

Bass took the key and headed upstairs.

As soon as the linguist was out of sight, Konrad gestured to the farmers, who had been watching closely. The proprietor raised both hands, as if to say, Who can figure out the Americans?

Konrad took the door behind the counter into his living quarters. In the sitting room, Sullivan and Heidi were huddled close, talking in low tones.

"Your friend is back," said Konrad. "He went to his room upstairs."

"Thanks," said Sullivan.

"You still want a room?"

Sullivan looked at Heidi. She said something that Konrad couldn't hear.

Sullivan said, "I'd better not."

"Where will you stay?"

Again they whispered to one another.

"I have a friend," said Heidi.

And more enemies than you know, Konrad thought, but he bit his tongue. The communists were more stupid than the Americans.

"How much longer you want to talk here?" asked the proprietor.

"We'll go now," said Sullivan.

They stood up. Sullivan took out his wallet.

"How much I owe you?"

Konrad looked at his watch, but before he named a price, Sullivan slipped him a bill and said, "Keep the change."

Konrad walked them to the door. As soon as they were gone, all the farmers started shooting Konrad questions at once in their native German.

"Does he know she's a spy?"

"Is he defecting?"

"What does he think he's doing?"

Konrad raised his hands in mock surrender.

"I'll bring over a bottle," he said.

Everyone gathered around a larger table. Konrad passed around glasses and set a bottle of Steinhager on the table. One by one, the farmers filled the small glass, drank and filled again, then passed the bottle on. At first there was little conversation, as if to initiate a new moment of the night, Konrad's favorite moment, when the gasthaus was officially closed and the proprietor could relax with a few men he had known all of his life.

It had not been easy for any of them after the war. Konrad naively had expected everything to return to normal. He would run the gasthaus as before, and the farmers, many his friends, would come for food and drink, and travelers would rent a room for the night. But then everything changed, and changed rapidly, because the world itself had changed.

What was different was that former allies, the United States and the Soviet Union, were suddenly engaged in a conflict for influence in Europe. With the Korean War, the communist quest for dominance was no longer just a political theory, and the Americans responded by deploying tens of thousands of soldiers to Germany's Rheinland area as insurance against a possible Soviet invasion of the country. Baumholder, with existing German military bases, was the immediate center of this effort – and Konrad, along with everyone else in the village, watched in shock and disbelief as thirty thousand American soldiers moved in. Farmland was confiscated so that the Americans could train and hold their military maneuvers. They would play war games six weeks at a time. But eventually they would need a little rest and recreation; eventually they would be given passes to come into downtown Baumholder.

Eastern European immigrants had arrived to open the bars and nightclubs the soldiers needed for entertainment. Quonset huts, even tents, went up almost overnight. Empty buildings were rented. Vacant barns were rented. From across Germany, and even farther, from the Netherlands and Scandinavia, prostitutes flocked into the former village to get part of the action. Suddenly the business of Baumholder was not farming but entertaining the American G.I.s. A mere five years after the war, Konrad's village had been transformed into a loud, raucous playground for American soldiers. The Sin City of Europe.

Those like Konrad who had been born here and who still called Baumholder home had watched this transformation with dismay. They felt like strangers in their own homeland. Only when it became clear that the soldiers were here to stay, despite official protests of civic

corruption and immorality by the religious leaders of the community, did Konrad and others decide to get part of the action themselves. Konrad rented rooms to Veronikas, women who if not prostitutes by profession nonetheless were willing to sell sex to soldiers for quick cash. Konrad also invested in several bars in town, mostly in The Family Club because it catered to a small company of Russian linguists who were more educated and less violent than the soldiers in the field.

The final step in the development of Baumholder's entertainment industry was its takeover by a syndicate of businessmen as part of a German-wide network of G.I. bars and Veronikas who worked in them. Most of these businessmen had companies in Berlin and Munich. The Eastern European immigrants who had opened the first bars were bought out whether they wanted to sell or not. A few local owners, like Konrad, were left alone as proof that a country-wide syndicate did not exist. This was the situation today, with all but ten of Baumholder's 57 bars owned by the syndicate, the rest by local farmers and businessmen.

"How's Karl?" a farmer named Hans asked.

Konrad's son was all he had left. His wife had died from cancer during the war. Both daughters had been killed during an attack on Frankfurt near the end of the hostilities. Karl was 24, his father's pride.

"His football team played in Idar-Oberstein. I couldn't go because Hermine took ill."

Karl coached a boys' football team, and Konrad tried to go to as many games as he could. Hermine, his bookkeeper, could run the gasthaus in his absence.

"Did they win?"

"I don't even know. Karl will give me a full report later."

Albert, a farmer who had bought into The Family Club at Konrad's recommendation, said, "Before he left, Fredrick said President Kennedy gave a tough speech tonight against Khrushchev. Maybe they'll be war."

"It's too soon for another war," said Hans. "The banks decide when it's best."

“What do you think, Konrad?” Albert asked.

Konrad shrugged.

“Khrushchev will go as far as he thinks he can without the Americans doing anything. And then he will stop. Only time will show how far that is.”

Konrad was weary of politics and world conflict. He didn’t like Germany being the stage for the conflict of Russians and Americans. When Germany rose again, as surely it must, the ideal must be self-sufficiency and border security. Konrad still believed in German superiority despite losing the war. Americans, who won the war, had no culture. All you had to do was step into a bar and listen to the music they played. What country could touch the achievements of Wagner, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms?

Konrad said, “I am tired. I think I’ll close up.”

When they were gone, Konrad went to the jukebox and played the opening of Brahms’ First Symphony, played by the Berlin Orchestra. It was still playing when Karl stepped into the room and said, “What’s going on with Heidi and the American?”

Konrad stood to embrace his son.

“Sit down. You want a drink?”

“No thanks. I came the back way to avoid all the soldiers in town. They were walking along like a nice young couple on their way home. Do you know what’s going on?”

“They rented a room here. Just to talk, they said. That seemed to be it. Then Young Werther’s friend rented a room, and he didn’t want to be here any more.”

“Why not?”

“He’s avoiding him. I think I know why. Same old story: Young Werther is in love with a woman he can’t have. He doesn’t want his friend to know how foolish he is.”

Karl laughed.

“Father, you know what she is. She wants his secrets.”

“If he has any worth knowing.”

“Well, they seemed very romantic, holding hands, strolling in the moonlight past the dark houses. I bet they

were going to the Jew Isaac's home. They say he rents rooms to soldiers."

"Yes, I heard that, too."

"Maybe we'll put him out of business. They should rent from you."

"There's enough soldiers to go around."

"I don't like Jews. I don't care what people think. Jews are as bad as communists. Americans aren't much better."

"Let's not worry about communists and Jews and Americans. Tell me how the game went. You're home late. You had a meeting afterwards?"

"Yes."

Karl belonged to an informal association of young men who called themselves *Deutsche Patrioten*, or German Patriots. Sometimes Karl wore a cap with D.P. on it in bright red letters.

Konrad said, "First tell me about the game, then tell me about the meeting."

Even though his son had turned down a drink, Konrad poured two fingers of Steinhager in a small glass.

"Cheers," he said, and the father kept holding out the glass until the son obediently picked it up and touched it to his own, the sound ringing like a bell, and then both men tilted back their heads to drink.

3/

Despite Konrad's nickname, Goethe's Young Werther sounded nothing like Jim Sullivan: "Ah, how the thrill of it shoots through me if my finger happens to touch hers or our feet meet beneath the table! I recoil as if from a fire yet some secret force draws me on again – and all my senses grow dizzy. And oh! her innocence and her ingenuous spirit do not feel what agonies these intimacies put me through. Indeed, if she places her hand on mine when we are talking and, excited by the conversation,

moves closer, so that her divine breath brushes my lips – I feel as if I shall sink into the ground, as if I had been struck by lightning.”

No, no, Sullivan had no appreciation for such romantic hyperbole, which struck him as juvenile and sappy, the stuff of afternoon soap operas. His literary tastes went in a more classical direction, as evidenced by the thesis on Alexander Pope he was working on when he realized he soon would be drafted – and therefore joined the army, like so many of his colleagues, in order to choose an office job over carrying a weapon in the field. Like most recruits with college degrees, Sullivan was put into the Army Security Agency and scored so well on the language aptitude test that he was sent to the Monterey Language School to become a Russian linguist, an intellectual foot soldier on the front lines of the Cold War.

Sullivan disliked sentiment and sloppy thinking and sometimes performed a routine that demonstrated as much. With a few drinks in him, he was known to recite a portion of a poem by William Blake to much delight and hoopla from his inebriated colleagues: “Tiger, tiger, burning bright,” Sullivan would begin, his blonde hair short but long enough to comb, which really meant long enough to look uncombed because Sullivan always had the shaggy look of an absent-minded professor, and as he began the poem, his hand would sweep the hair from his forehead in a theatrical gesture, “in the forests of the night, what immortal hand or eye, could frame thy fearful symmetry?” Here Sullivan would look positively baffled by the question, as if it had cosmic significance. “What the hammer?” he asked next. “What the chain? In what furnace was thy brain? What the anvil?” – and at this precise moment Sullivan would scrunch his ruddy face into an expression of speechless horror and bewilderment, as if the questions were too great for the contemplation of mere mortals, hanging in the air like painful reminders of human ignorance and insignificance – and after holding the moment for all it was worth, and perhaps making yet another theatrical sweep of his hand to brush hair from his forehead, Sullivan would shout with an exuberance that

never failed to set the first-time listener aback, “What the fuck!? WHAT THE FUCK!?”

This was not a forlorn Young Werther but a cynical Jonathan Swift. Sullivan, walking beside Heidi through the dark neighborhood, did not feel like he had been struck by lightning. He felt frustrated, unable to understand why Heidi wouldn’t go to Spain with him.

They had talked over the matter for an hour in the room at Gasthaus Konrad. Sullivan kept rephrasing the same argument, as if some language barrier blocked her understanding and if he kept using different words, eventually the right combination would enlighten her.

“I don’t see why this should be complicated,” he began in one of these permutations. “I love you. You know that. You’ve said you love me. I believe you. We belong together. We can’t belong together as long as our countries are enemies. I can’t ask you to come to the U.S., to renounce being German. And vice-versa. I can’t defect. You can’t defect. The only way to be together is to escape the world. To create our own world, together, in a country divorced from all the conflicts and tensions we’ve been caught up in. We can start a new life in Spain. We can start a new life together.”

Heidi smiled at him and said nothing but he saw the sadness in her smile. He understood that her answer was not yet yes and might never become so. She could not easily change her life in so profound a fashion.

Walking through the neighborhood, holding hands, Sullivan said, “At least you have three more months to think it over. Listen to me. You’d think I like being extended. If it gives you time to change your mind, maybe it’s a blessing in disguise.”

“Please. Let’s talk about something more pleasant.”

They rented a room for the night from a German whom Heidi called Isaac. The room was small but in the back of the house with its own entrance. They could go in and out without disturbing anyone.

Heidi, as if finding more comfort in sex than conversation, seduced Sullivan as soon as they were alone, covering his mouth with hers whenever he tried to talk,

whenever he tried to broach the subject of their future from another angle. Only after making love, as Heidi smoked in bed and Sullivan sat in a chair across the room, restless and somehow unsatisfied by sex tonight, did they talk again.

Sullivan said, "I may go to Spain right now."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been counting the days to getting out for eighteen months. I'm not sure I can stand three more. Even with the possibility that you'll change your mind. So I go to Spain right now. I'll get settled, and if you join me, you join me. The door will be open."

Heidi blew smoke at the ceiling and said, "I don't understand. If they find you, you go to prison for desertion."

"If they don't, I live happily ever after. Well, almost. If you'd come to Spain..."

Heidi shook her head.

"Such dreamers, you Americans. You think anything is possible."

"I don't think anything is possible. I don't think world peace is possible. I don't even think it's possible for the United States and Soviet Union to coexist."

"Then why you do this? You don't want your country to win?"

"Yes, actually I do. But I don't think my contribution to the cause matters. I can't save the world. I can only save myself."

"And you do this by running away to Spain. I don't understand."

Across the room, the end of her cigarette getting brighter and dimmer as she smoked, Heidi looked older to Sullivan than she was. She looked tired and resigned to her life. For the first time Sullivan felt in his gut that his case was hopeless, she would never join him in Spain. In her world, freedom was an abstraction, not the simple act of doing something because you wanted to do it.

"I think I'll leave in the morning," said Sullivan. "I could use your help."

"You need me to borrow a car?"

"It'd be safer for me to catch the train in Kaiserslautern. Can you get a car?"

"I can always get a car. Why should I do this? Maybe I want you to stay."

"Why would you want me to stay?"

"I like this. I like you. I don't want you to go when I can be with you for three months more."

"I didn't know you cared."

There was clear sarcasm in his voice that Sullivan regretted as soon as he heard it.

"I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I do believe you love me."

But did she really? There was a silence.

"Yesterday, I thought you were going to join me. I really did. Now I see I was wrong."

"I'm sorry. I try to believe this is possible. Everything is happening too fast. Please stay. I need time to think."

"I don't think I could stay without cracking up."

"Of course you can."

"Now you're the one believing anything is possible. I haven't seen you like this since you tried to get me to defect."

Had it been only two months ago? Sullivan had just learned from Bass that Heidi was seeing other linguists, Buddy-poo and Luke among them, going to the same festplatz park for a picnic, the same thing he'd done with her. She'd made sure to get a photograph of each "date." For the first time, Sullivan accepted the reasonableness of Bass' early conclusion that she was a spy. He left post in an outrage to find her but by the time he'd walked down the hill, he'd cooled off enough to accept the fact that a nice-looking young woman who spoke fluent English, read Faulkner, and did not hustle you by grabbing your crotch, would get hit on by every linguist on the hill. And if she was a spy to boot, well, this was something to talk to her about.

He found her sitting alone at a table at the gasthaus. The room was quiet, only a few farmers having lunch or sipping wine to pass the time.

Sullivan took the chair across the table from her.

“Learn any secrets today?” he asked.

“Yes. I learned you are angry about something.”

Sullivan leaned forward and lowered his voice.

“The rumor is, you are an East German spy trying to photograph as many linguists as you can without fucking them first.”

Heidi shot him a look he’d not seen before, her narrow eyes flashing with something close to hatred, but only in quick passing before she bit her lip and then smiled.

“We will talk in private. Come to my room.”

As he followed Heidi to the stairs, Sullivan exchanged glances with Konrad at the front counter. The proprietor winked at him.

Sullivan was surprised how small the room was, barely large enough for a single bed, a round table and chair at the window, and a small chest of drawers next to a small walk-in closet. He noticed a chamber pot peeking out from under the bed.

“Sit down,” said Heidi.

Sullivan took one of the two chairs at the table. Heidi remained standing, not quite hovering over him.

“You are a spy,” she said. “Maybe it takes one to know one.”

“What makes you think I’m a spy?”

Heidi laughed.

“This is common knowledge. You are all Russian linguists up there on the hill. You intercept talk by the Russian army in East Germany and you translate it for what you can find out.”

Sullivan was surprised by how much she knew of Processing Company’s charge. The official line was that they did clerical work up there, and a linguist could get court-martialed for saying otherwise.

Sullivan said, “And who told you this?”

“Everybody knows it. Konrad knows. All the prostitutes know it. The farmers know it. Are you denying it?”

“If I were spying on the Russians in East Germany, wouldn’t it make more sense if I was in Berlin?”

"You have spy planes. You fly along the border, crossing into Russian zone if you have to, against international law, and you intercept and record everything you can. They deliver the tapes to you on the hill."

Incredible. She knew their routine down to the detail.

Sullivan suddenly felt uncomfortable, as if other East German spies were waiting in the hallway to burst in and take him hostage.

"You know this because you are a spy yourself," Sullivan finally said.

"I told you, it takes one to know one. This is the expression?"

"Perfect. So where does that leave us?"

Heidi thought a moment. Finally she sat down. She reached across the table and enclosed his hand in both of hers.

"Let's say you are right. I am soldier, just like you. I am here to take photographs. Just like in East Berlin, one of you is pretending to be American businessman, taking certain people to lunch in order to snap a photograph for memory. Such a game we all play."

There was a long silence. Heidi still held his hand.

"I like you," she finally said.

There was the sparkle of tears in her eyes. Either she was an extraordinary actress, or Heidi was feeling something of the attraction Sullivan was feeling himself. He knew it was absurd to be attracted to a spy working for the enemy. He knew she might be manipulating the moment. Did she wonder about him in the same way?

"I like you, too," Sullivan said.

Heidi managed to smile.

"In a movie, we would run off to Spain together and live happily ever after."

"And in real life?"

"If I am a spy, then I try to sell you on the idea of defecting to East Germany. You would be treated much better than the army treats you. You would be treated like an officer."

"I don't want to be an officer."

"I see. Then I try something else. I say, If you came to East Germany, we could be together."

"Perfect. If I want to fuck you bad enough, I'll switch sides."

"You don't have to switch sides to fuck me."

For the next hour, there was little talk. As attractive as she was, Sullivan had not thought that taking her to bed presented a real possibility. He was awkward around women, even finding it difficult to tell a prostitute he wanted time with her. Now Heidi was seducing him, and he felt no power to resist, even as he assumed he was being used for a greater purpose. But he knew he would never defect, and he knew he would never tell her anything about his work on the hill. Sex, even great sex, would not change this, though it would change other things.

"Are you coming back to bed?" Heidi asked, stabbing out her cigarette.

"You're insatiable."

"What does this mean, in—"

"Insatiable. It means you're a nymphomaniac."

"A maniac?"

"You can't get enough sex."

Heidi laughed.

"This is good, yes?" she said. "Better than not liking to fuck."

"Yes, definitely."

At first Sullivan was shocked by her casual, easy use of the f-word, which if coming from the lips of an American girl suggested something other than the girl-next-door, which is what her appearance suggested to him. Then he realized that English was a second language to her, and she used *fuck* with no more native understanding than he used a German phrase like *Gehen Sie zum Teufel*, which he was told meant "go to hell."

"We fit good. This is how to say?"

"Yes," said Sullivan. "We fit good."

But he didn't move to the bed.

After a moment Heidi said, "You look very sad. I'm sorry I can't run away with you. I need time to think."

"Maybe it's a silly idea."

"Sometimes is nice to dream."

"Yes."

"Maybe in another life."

"I don't believe in other lives," said Sullivan.

"I don't know, yes or no."

"Buddy-poooh always says he wants to be reincarnated as a cunt hair."

"This is awful!"

Then she laughed.

"Sometimes the American sense of humor surprises me," Heidi said.

Sullivan stood up. He was in his shorts and T-shirt, his civvies piled on the floor beside the bed.

"You come to bed, yes?"

"Yes."

"We will have fuck like sleeping pill."

"A sedative," said Sullivan.

"Sedative," said Heidi, testing the word.

Sullivan walked across the room. Heidi pulled back the sheet for him. Damn, she was beautiful. He was going to miss her, no doubt about it. Maybe she was right, their destiny was to be together as often as possible in what time remained to them. He just wasn't sure he could last three more months in Processing Company.

"Now we have sedative," said Heidi.

Sullivan moved into her arms.

4/

Bass sat at the window of his room, watching the sun rise over the train station in the distance. To the south, a rare farmer who still worked his land was kicking up a cloud of dust with a tractor. Farmers started the day even earlier than soldiers. In the kaserne on the hill, they soon would be holding reveille, or more accurately Processing

Company's loose interpretation of the Army's morning ritual. With the linguists working on shifts around the clock, and a flexible policy that permitted them to trade shifts, no one really was sure who was required to appear at reveille and who not. Consequently the morning muster was done on a kind of honor system, and Sullivan's absence, even if noticed, would not be reported. The Company Commander, Capt. Pierce, who had only a year to go to reach thirty and retirement, gave the linguists a lot of freedom, much to the disapproval of Sgt. Malinowski and others of the old school Army. Pierce reasoned that his men had top secret codeword clearances and were on the front lines of the Cold War. As long as they did their work, which included frequent reports that went to the Pentagon, the C.O. ran his outfit more like a college campus than a military installation.

Bass figured Sullivan and Heidi had rented a room in town. There were usually plenty to be had, though the Animals in town might change this. But Bass had heard that Animals preferred taking a room over a bar for quick access rather than venturing out into the community for a bed. Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am, and they could be downstairs drinking with their buddies again.

If Sullivan and Heidi had stayed overnight, renting a room from a farmer, Bass thought there was a good chance they'd go to The Family Club for breakfast, with or without red beers. Beer and tomato juice was an American favorite, not a German, but most of the bars had learned to keep tomato juice in stock to satisfy the strange preferences of their foreign neighbors. Bass knew this was Sullivan's morning drink, of course, and The Family Club, again catering to American tastes, also served up an acceptable breakfast of bacon and scrambled eggs.

Bass dressed and went downstairs. Karl was working the front counter. He was wearing a dark cap with the red initial D.P. on it. Buddy-pooh had told him the initials stood for a Nazis club that was popular with the young German men in town.

"You having bier for breakfast?" Karl asked, grinning, as Bass passed the counter.

"Too early for me," said Bass.

"When too early for American to drink beer? First one on the house."

"No thanks."

Walking from the gasthaus to The Family Club, Bass didn't pass a soul. Most of the Animals would have returned to base or taken a room with a girl over a bar. Most would sleep past noon. This suited Bass fine, meaning his search for Sullivan would be more relaxed than if Animals were on the prowl.

To his surprise, several of the girls were on the porch at the club, smoking and looking a fright. Bass wondered if they'd ever managed to get to bed.

"Look vat de cat dragz in," said Amazon.

A short plump bleached blonde who called herself Irma said, "Half price for blow job before eight."

Bass laughed, partly at himself for being shocked by the remark. He would never get used to the sexual frankness of the older and jaded bar girls. The younger ones, new at the hustling game and still shocked to find themselves trapped in it, looked vulnerable and tragic to him. In a few months, they would become as jaded as the older women.

"I'm ready for scrambled eggs," he said.

When he passed Amazon, she grabbed his crotch and said, "How come you never come upstairs vit me? Ve are vriends who don't vuck."

"It's an old American custom," said Bass.

Amazon followed him inside. She took his order and yelled it at the bartender. Then she joined him at a table. No other customers were present.

"I was thinking Sullivan might drop in for breakfast," said Bass.

"You not vind him last night?"

"I tried the soccer field. Football field."

"Dey rent a room."

"Probably."

Amazon stabbed out a cigarette and lit another. Bass noticed she was smoking Camels. When they were

gone, and the Animals back in the field playing war, she would go back to her German brand.

“Vy you so vorried about your vriend?”

“It’s a long story.”

“You going zomevere?”

“It’s hard to explain. So no fights last night? Place looks like it survived pretty intact.”

“The Animals come here looking for Monterey Marys to vight. You stay on de hill and disappoint dem.”

“Let me ask you something,” said Bass. “When did you find out we were Russian linguists on the hill?”

“Vat you mean?”

“We don’t tell anybody what we do. If asked, we say we do clerical work.”

Amazon laughed.

“The virst day I am here, dey tell me you are spies on de hill. Dis is many years ago. Everybody know dis.”

Amazon stood up.

“You vant red beer?”

“Why not?”

She left him alone after delivering a bottle of German beer, a can of American tomato juice, and a glass. Bass mixed his drink and waited for breakfast. When it came, he ate alone, glad to be spared from making small talk.

After breakfast he ordered a bottle of beer without the juice. Before he finished it, Sullivan walked into the club without Heidi.

Seeing Bass, Sullivan grinned and shook his head. He bought a German beer and tomato juice at the bar and joined Bass at the table.

“I hope you haven’t been looking for me all night.”

“More or less,” said Bass. “Where’s Heidi?”

“Sleeping in. I don’t think she’ll be decent till noon.”

“What’s the verdict?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Running off to Spain together or what?”

“You have a mean streak in you, Bear.”

“I’m not trying to be mean. I’m trying to find out how much trouble you’re in.”

"I know. Shit. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Three months isn't that long, Jim."

"You tell me that when you're a short-timer."

"If she's going to run off with you now, she'd run off later, wouldn't she?"

"She wants me to stay so she has more time to think it over."

"I want you to stay because I think you'd make a lousy prisoner. Three months, man. Come on. Get your head on straight."

Sullivan shook his head and stared wistfully away.

He said, "What the hammer? What the anvil? What the fuck?"

He shook his head again. Bass was silent.

Sullivan said, "How did you manage to escape the Animals last night?"

"How did you?"

"I was in and out in no time. Konrad told me Heidi would be here."

"I was in and out myself, looking for you."

"The Animals aren't as dangerous as everyone makes them out to be."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"So you're ruining your leave to worry about me."

"That's about it," said Bass.

"Asshole."

"Takes one to know one."

Sullivan grinned.

"What's so funny?" Bass asked.

"I was just thinking about your first trip to watch the whore parade. You've come a long way since then."

"Look at yourself, Jim. Sometimes I think Konrad pegged you right as Young Werther."

"Fuck you."

"Well, maybe not that extreme. But falling for a spy. Come on."

"Shit happens."

Amazon came over.

"You guys need revills?"

"Not for me," said Sullivan.

Bass shook his head.

Amazon shrugged and moved away.

Bass said, "I was thinking of taking a train out of here with the ladies tomorrow."

"They're ladies now. That, Bear, would be as surreal as watching them come into the train station. You should do it."

"I still have lots of time to enjoy Denmark."

"In other words, you're finally giving up on me?"

"You're going to do what you're going to do."

"I could've told you that and saved you the trouble."

"You'd've done the same thing for me. Ever think of that?"

Sullivan considered this.

"I suppose you're right," he said.

"Friends look out for one another."

"They look so young," said Sullivan. Suddenly he laughed.

"What?"

"What you said at your first whore parade. They look so young. The expression on your face. We're all so damn innocent when we get over here. They don't tell us about this shit in school."

His first whore parade. Bass remembered it like it was yesterday. He'd only been in Baumholder for two weeks when the linguists learned from the girls at The Family Club that the Animals would be in town the following weekend, which meant the influx of thousands of prostitutes to serve them would begin in mid-week. Taking a newk to the train station to witness their arrival was a kind of initiation ceremony for a new linguist, and Sullivan, who had known Bass at the language school and on whose trick Bass had been assigned at Operations, took the newk under his wing and together, with a dozen other linguists along for the fun, they gathered at the bahnhoff to watch the first trains arrive.

Bass had no idea what to expect. The train station was a square stone building with a tower, no larger than the several churches in town. Inside were benches for

travelers waiting for the train and tables for those who wanted to eat or drink as they waited. The linguists pushed several tables together and took chairs around them.

Bass couldn't stop grinning, partly from anticipation and partly from the feeling that he was somehow being suckered, like the country boy taken on his first snipe hunt. Bass knew from overhearing his colleagues that several trains a day would be pulling into the station, each filled with hundreds of women, but Bass had no way of realizing the enormity of this migration and its impact on him. So he just kept grinning, waiting, and listening for the punch line of whatever joke was being pulled on him.

The arrival of the first train changed everything. Bass did not have to watch the parade of girls long to realize this was no snipe hunt, here was an event even more surreal and dreamlike than the descriptions of his colleagues suggested. Several hundred girls spilled off the first train, marching in disorder into the train station, women varying in age from teens to forties, women of all size and description, fat and skinny and in between, pretty and plain, hardened and innocent-looking. What struck Bass first was that so many of them were younger than he was.

"They look so young," he said to Sullivan at the table beside him.

"The youngest are escapees from East Germany," Sullivan explained. "They think they're taking a job as a server in a gasthaus or a waitress in a restaurant, but it's the syndicate bringing them into their fold. Once they're captured, it's hard to get away. They arrive broke, often without family or friends. They risk everything for freedom and end up here. It's a tragedy really."

Only Sullivan's tone didn't suggest tragedy. His voice had the hardened neutrality of a doctor working the midnight shift in an emergency room, who has seen every bodily disaster many times over. Neutrality, lack of concern, was the best defense mechanism.

"Jesus, they're young," Bass said again. "The one in the bluejeans can't be over fourteen or fifteen."

"I think there's a law they have to be sixteen," said Sullivan.

"Young enough."

Some of the girls flirted as they passed by but most looked tired and travel-weary. How far had they traveled to get to Baumholder just ahead of the Animals' weekend pass? Some from as far away as Berlin, the Netherlands, even London, according to Sullivan.

No sooner had the several hundred women passed through the station than the train pulled away to make room for another behind it, and the parade of prostitutes began all over again. As the second group marched through the station, Bass heard someone shouting and turned to find a small group of young German men holding up placards in protest, though he didn't know enough German to read them. But their manner was clear: their shouts at the women clearly meant disapproval.

Sullivan leaned close to Bass.

"See the guy waving his sign? That's Karl, son of the proprietor of the gasthaus at the bottom of the hill."

"Are they a religious group or what?"

"Nazis."

"What?"

Bass stared at Sullivan in disbelief.

"Well, it's illegal, so they have to be underground and pretend they're something else. That D.P. on their caps stands for Patriots of the Homeland. Something like that. I forget the German exactly. Buddy would know. The thing is, this is so hypocritical because Konrad has a stake in the Family Club, yet his son is one of them. The Germans bitch about American immorality and then turn around and put the women in their clubs at starvation wages, which means they're forced to put out on the side just to survive."

"This is hard to handle," said Bass. He stood up.

"Where you going?"

"To the can."

In the men's room he splashed cold water on his face. On the counter was a stack of neatly folded cloth hand towels, and he took one to dry himself.

So this was the infamous whore parade he'd heard so much about. The descriptions of what awaited him were too extreme to be believed – and yet they fell short of capturing the grotesque unreality of what he was witnessing. Bass had expected to be titillated but instead had escaped to the men's room feeling light-headed and almost sick in his stomach. It wasn't that some of the women weren't attractive, many were – but there were too many of them, too extreme and blatant a display of commercial sex parading in front of him, he felt overwhelmed from the sensual overload of it all. This was more like a scene from a Fellini movie than an afternoon in the once-lazy farm village of Baumholder.

When he left the men's room, he found a young woman standing outside the adjacent ladies' room. She was crying. Bass stopped, wanting to comfort her, at least to ask if he might help, but he knew almost no German.

All the same, he asked, "Are you all right?"

She looked up, and Bass saw she was one of the younger ones, sixteen he supposed, a pretty girl, despite the swollen red eyes and grimace through which she sputtered choking words he couldn't understand. Then suddenly she was embracing him and weeping on his shoulder.

Bass stiffened in something close to terror. He could feel the soft sensual bulge of her breasts pushing against his chest. He could feel her warm breath on his neck. He was getting aroused and hating himself for it.

"Marta! Here you are!"

The deep voice belonged to a German wearing a business suit. Hearing it, the girl tightened her grip on Bass, who now tried to slip away.

"I think she is homesick," said the German. His English was almost without accent. "Marta, come on now."

The German pried her grip free of Bass, who quickly stepped back.

"Is she going to be all right?" he asked.

The German smiled.

"Of course, of course."

He had his arm around her and already was leading the girl away. He spoke to her in German now, which Bass could not understand.

When they were out of sight, Bass took a deep breath. He realized he was shaking. He didn't return to the table to watch the rest of the parade. Bass walked through town and up the hill to the kaserne. By the time Sullivan and the others found him in the E. M. Club over an hour later, Bass was pretty wasted.

"They don't tell you many things in school," Bass said.

Amazon came by again.

"You sure you don't want anything?" she asked Sullivan.

"I'll be back later."

Amazon shrugged and went back to the bar. Sullivan stood up.

"I want to get back before Heidi gets up," he said. "You going to be around in an hour?"

"I could be. What's up?"

"We'll be by for breakfast."

"Then I'll be here."

"Good. I thought you might be hanging out. When's your train leave?"

"I was thinking of catching the late morning if I leave today. I may wait till tomorrow to ride with the ladies."

"You mentioned that. Chance of a lifetime. So I'll catch you later."

"Later."

As soon as Sullivan was gone, Amazon was back. She sat down at the table.

"Vat going on?"

"You know as much as I do," said Bass. "Probably more."

"Dey run away togeder?"

"I don't know."

"You don't think she's a spy?"

"Of course she's a spy. That's not the point."

"Two spies have zometing in common," Amazon said. She punched Bass playfully on the arm. "Zorry, I zay zometing vorbidden."

"I think I'll take a walk and come back later."

"You mad at me?"

"Never."

"You vant beer on de house?"

"You bribing me to stay?"

"Look around. Vat else to do?"

"No Animals upstairs?"

"Of course. But dey not vinish vucking till avternoon."

"I thought you'd appreciate the peace and quiet."

"Peace and quiet is boring. Maybe you vant to go upstairs."

Bass grinned.

"You don't give up," he said.

"You nice boy. Vy no like me?"

"I love you. You know that."

Amazon studied him a moment.

"You queer?"

Bass laughed.

"It's taken you a long time to ask that. No, I'm your average red-blooded American guy. I just don't jump in the sack very easily."

"You virgin?"

"I'm out of here."

He was halfway to the door when Amazon said after him, "You come back, yes?"

"Yes. If Sullivan gets here first, tell him to wait."

Time to kill. He considered going back to the kaserne to make sure Sullivan wasn't in trouble. Bass was sure he'd have been covered at reveille. All the same, Malinowski would want to know what was going on before he went too far out on a limb for him. The problem was, Bass wasn't sure what was going on himself, what exactly he could tell the sergeant to help Sullivan's case. Jim talked as if he might still be going AWOL to Spain, even if he had to go alone. Maybe he'd get a better sense of the situation

when he saw them together. Heidi, it seemed, wanted Sullivan to stay. She might make the difference.

The Baumholder streets were still deserted. The stretch of neon signs over the bars, last night bright and inviting, were dark and dismal. Nothing was quite as bleak as the look of a bar on the morning after.

Bass walked west on the main drag, past the Alabama Bar and the Silver Slipper, past the One-Two-Three Club and the Texas Playhouse. 57 bars in three blocks, counting the clubs on the side streets. Two years from now, when he was back in college in the states, would anyone believe him when he described Baumholder? Even if they believed him about the bars, would anyone understand the eerie experience of the whore parade? Maybe Baumholder was like a bad marriage, something you put behind you forever when you left. Or maybe it was an experience that would change Bass forever.

5/

Buckley was typing a memo for Sgt. Malinowski when Buddy-pooch rushed into Silver Section, waving a sheet of paper. Silver Section was the hub of activity in Operations, off of which more specialized sections processed the information obtained in the translation of Soviet military communications in East Germany. Orange Section analyzed personnel and chains of command; Blue Section categorized equipment and weaponry; Black Section analyzed troop movements and maneuvers. Malinowski managed the Silver Section, reporting to Lt. Brown, and Buckley was the section clerk.

"I need to see the sergeant," Buddy told Buckley, looking around the room. The four linguists on trick were at their desks, bent over translations they gleaned for relevant information.

"He went to the canteen for coffee," said Buckley. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Not unless you know how to stop WW III. I got hot shit here."

Before Buckley could say more, Buddy was racing away. He went back to typing the memo, too new to the rhythm of work in Operations to be seriously concerned. He'd already observed that Buddy-pooh, training to be an opera singer in civilian life, liked to dramatize and exaggerate anything that happened.

In fifteen minutes Malinowski stormed into the area, red in the face, Buddy on his tail. The sergeant started barking orders.

"I want an immediate track on every unit! Call relevant substations for signs of troop movement!"

"What's the deal, sarge?" asked Jackson, a short-timer with an adversity to moving in a hurry.

"Jackson, just do as I say."

"Aye, aye, captain."

Jackson liked to say this to the sergeant, knowing it would piss him off first in reference to the Navy and second in reference to an officer. But Malinowski was so riled up he let it ride.

"I'm going to Black Section. I want full reports when I get back."

"When's that?" Jackson asked.

"ASAP."

Malinowski hurried off. Lingered behind, Buddy-pooh said, "I think the Russians are invading Berlin."

The linguists on trick stared at him and waited for more.

"This morning we intercepted traffic consistent with everybody heading for the big city. I mean, like the whole goddamn Russian army moving out at once."

Jackson said, "Maybe they're on maneuvers."

"They never do it all at once, every unit, everybody in sync. Everybody's heading for the big city, and if it ain't to invade Berlin, then tell me something else that makes sense."

Nobody could, and Buddy moved off to catch up with Malinowski. He figured the closer he kept to the sergeant, the quicker he'd find out what the hell was going on.

The linguists left behind exchanged glances. Buckley noticed an unusual concern in their expressions, as if, in fact, the Big War was about to begin, the one everyone knew was possible but no one wanted to believe would ever happen. Buckley wanted to ask questions, to be put to more ease than he felt in the pit of his gut now, but already the linguists were picking up phones or going through documents, trying to get ready for the sergeant's return. Buckley returned to typing the memo but had a hard time concentrating. He still hadn't finished it when Malinowski returned again. This time Buddy-pooch wasn't with him.

"Okay, troops, what do you have for me?"

Specialist McGuire said, "Visual affirmation from Station-4 in Lubeck. A convoy of Russian tanks and artillery is passing as we speak, heading south."

"Berlin is south, right?" asked Malinowski.

"South and east."

Jackson said, "Sir," unable to resist a dig even in this moment of crisis, "I talked to Heilbronn. They've picked up comms directing the 3rd Shock Army to Berlin."

"In so many words?"

"In action and words, sir."

"I'm not an officer, Jackson."

"Yes, sir. Sergeant."

Buckley couldn't believe how relaxed Jackson appeared, grinning at the sergeant. It sounded to the newk like all hell was breaking loose.

Lt. Brown sauntered into the room.

"Something I should know about, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. We've intercepted and confirmed reports that a good many Russian units – maybe even all Russian units – are heading for Berlin."

The lieutenant's lips puckered while he thought.

"To Berlin, sir," Malinowski repeated.

"Do you know why?"

"I think we can guess why, sir."

"You're telling me the Reds are invading Berlin?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Has Central Command put us on alert?"

"Not yet. We just got our reports out to them. I suspect they're still evaluating the situation."

"If this is true, goddamn right we'll be on alert."

"I expect so, sir."

"You heard these reports yourself?"

"I don't speak Russian, sir."

"Right, right. But the reports were intercepted and translated."

"Yes, sir. And confirmed by four other stations in the field. There's no question about this, sir."

"We'll be on alert then."

"Yes, sir."

"Not like the monthly test. The real goddamn thing."

Malinowski nodded.

"Well, sergeant, if you learn anything else, you know where to find me."

"Yes, sir."

After the lieutenant was gone, Malinowski turned to his men.

"Better go get yourself some coffee while you have a chance. Maybe grab a sandwich to go while you're at it. It's going to be a long night once the alert is called."

Everybody but Buckley headed out. Buckley wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, so he stayed right where he was, hoping the sergeant would give him a direct order.

It took a moment for Malinowski to realize his clerk had stayed behind.

"Buckley, you don't want coffee?"

"I would, yes. Thank you, sergeant."

"Just a minute."

Buckley had stood up from the desk and now he waited for more.

"You know what happened to Sullivan last night?"

"I heard he went to town."

"He's still hot for that girl?"

"I think so."

"Dumb shit. He's just asking for trouble. He's a damn good linguist, too. One of the best in the building."

Buckley was silent, watching the sergeant try to make up his mind about something.

"I'm giving you a pass, Buckley. I want you to go to town and see if you can turn up Sullivan. You only have about an hour. Ask in the Family Club. If he stayed in town, he would've gone there. Tell him we're going on alert and his ass belongs up here."

Malinowski went to the desk and took out a form. He started scribbling on it. When he was done, he handed it to Buckley.

"This will get you through the gate and satisfy any MPs you run into. Get moving. I want you back here before things get crazy."

"What about Bass, sergeant?"

"He's probably in Denmark by now. Bass is a good soldier. Soon as he gets word the shit's hit the fan, he'll high-tail it back. Get moving, son."

Malinowski headed off again. The newk stared at the pass. It was an emergency half-day pass. Buckley folded it and put it in his pocket. He grabbed his uniform jacket from the coat rack and slipped it on. He put on his overseas cap. He took a final look around the empty section and stepped out into the hallway as smartly as a soldier on parade.

Bass, of course, had no idea of the growing panic that was happening on the hill. So when Buckley entered The Family Club, Bass was surprised on several counts: first, that he was not at work, which suggested to Bass that the newk had traded tricks with someone; second, that he would come down the hill with the Animals in town, though the journey was reasonably safe at an hour when most Animals would still be sleeping it off; and finally that Buckley looked like someone had died. Clearly the newk was the bearer of bad news (bad news about Sullivan's status, would be Bass' guess) and Bass waited to hear it as

Buckley hurried to the table as soon as he spotted a familiar face.

"The sarge sent me after Sullivan," Buckley said, sitting across from Bass.

Amazon rushed over, looking more worried than Buckley.

"Don't you know de Animals sleep upstairs?" she said, shaking a finger at Buckley. "You cauze trouble dey zee you. You leave now."

Bass stood up.

"She's probably right," he told the newk. To Amazon he said, "If Sullivan shows before I get back, tell him to wait for me."

Bass led the way outside. The day was turning warm, and the town stretched sleepily ahead without an Animal to be found.

Buckley wasted no time in getting to the point.

"The Russians are invading Berlin," he told Bass.

Bass just stared at him.

"It's crazy on the hill," the newk went on. "Everybody says the shit's hit the fan. Everybody says there'll be an alert. The sarge says it's now or never if Sullivan's coming back without getting into trouble."

Bass took a deep breath.

"Slow down, slow down. What makes you say the Russians are invading Berlin?"

"Buddy-pooch came in with a report. Everybody went crazy after that."

Buckley was more than upset now: he looked like he was ready to break into tears.

Bass took another deep breath.

"Here's what I want you to do," he told the newk. "Go back to base and tell the sergeant I haven't left on leave yet. I saw Sullivan, and I'll be seeing him again. If the shit's really hit the fan, I think he'll come to his senses."

"Oh, it's hit the fan all right."

"Did you hear any specific details in the report?"

"The entire Russian army is headed for Berlin. Like, right now."

Jesus, thought Bass, that would do it. With its military charge of keeping tabs on Russian military activity in East Germany, Processing Company would know before anyone if the Rooskies were up to no good. Intercepted communications would give them away if they were invading Berlin.

Buckley stared at Bass, still looking on the brink of tears.

Bass squeezed his arm.

"You do what I said," he told the newk.

Buckley nodded.

"Now."

"You'll be talking to Sullivan?"

"Absolutely. Everything's going to be fine. You tell the sergeant we should be back in an hour or two."

"Okay."

Bass stayed outside The Family Club, watching the newk start up the road to the kaserne. While Buckley was still in sight, Amazon joined him.

"You got zigarette?" she asked.

Bass lit her one, passed it over and lit his own. They blew smoke in unison.

"He said the Russians are invading Berlin," Bass said.

"You kidding, right?"

"That's what he said."

"How you say? Shit in the van."

"Shit in the van," said Bass.

"How come ve have no alert?"

"I expect they'll be calling one pretty damn quick."

A real alert, Bass thought, not the play-war game that periodically was part of their training. Every four to six weeks, an all-Europe alert would be called, scrambling all American military units to designated rendezvous locations. For Processing Company, this meant the linguists piled into trucks and drove down the hill, parking along Main Street in town while they waited for the all-clear signal, a wait that could last several hours. Since the alerts were usually called between three and five in the morning, the linguists who were not on trick were in bed

and not happy to be charged into activity. Most slept in the back of their deuce-and-a-halves until the all-clear signal was given.

Bass remembered an alert that turned into a disaster and resulted in a reprimand for the entire company, which added to the linguists' reputation of being clumsy, cowardly soldiers when compared to the real troops at Smith Barracks. Somehow, in the scramble to get out the fenced kaserne through the main gate, two trucks crashed head-on and their bumpers locked, blocking the gate for all the trucks waiting to exit behind them. Processing Company had no machinery for separating the trucks and human labor, such as it was, could not separate them, which meant the linguists could not drive down the hill to their designated area. A crane had to be fetched from Smith Barracks, which took several hours, and by the time the trucks were separated, freeing the gate to traffic, it was late morning. The alert wasn't called off until noon because every soldier in Europe was waiting for the Russian linguists to reach their designated area. An investigation quickly identified the problem, Processing Company was given an official reprimand, and the Commanding Officer relieved of his duty. Not one of the linguists felt remorse, however, especially since the new C.O. was Capt. Pierce, a short timer who quickly gave the linguists more personal freedom than they'd ever enjoyed. The infamous alert had been a blessing in disguise.

Amazon said, "I hear notting of dis."

Bass blew smoke.

"Do you know who rented Sullivan and Heidi a room last night?"

"Could be anyone. Jakob rents rooms. Isaac, Adolph. Many varmers rent rooms now."

"What time do the Animals usually come back to life?"

"Late. Noon."

Bass looked at his watch.

"I should be long gone by then," he said.

"No Denmark."

"No Denmark. If this is really happening, I expect an alert this morning."

"You no tink real?"

"The newk may have got it wrong. Probably not. Wishful thinking."

"If Russians invade Berlin, vat Americans do?"

Bass shrugged.

"You stop dem, yes?"

"I guess we'll find out soon enough."

Sullivan and Heidi held hands, taking their time along a street to The Family Club. The sun had risen over the village with mid-morning warmth that promised another hot August day. One thing Sullivan didn't like about Germany was that the beer was never cold enough. Sometimes he'd order a glass of ice, the quickest way he knew to chill the beer, and he'd drink it quickly before dilution. He made a note to get a glass of ice from Amazon.

"Freulein!"

Turning a corner, Sullivan found their path blocked by Karl and two friends, young German men not much older than himself. Karl appeared to know Heidi, speaking to her in German. When she replied, Sullivan asked her, "What are they saying?"

"You no speak German?" asked Karl in English. "Then I will practice my English." His English, in fact, was very good.

"Modervucker," said Hans, the tallest of the Germans. "I practice modervucker."

"Kiss my ass," said Karl's other friend, whose name was Rudy.

"Cockzucking modervucker," Hans said, raising the stakes.

Karl laughed.

"This is some English lesson, yes?"

"Very good," said Sullivan.

He took Heidi's arm and tried to move around the Germans but they moved to block his way again.

"Can we get by?" Sullivan said.

Karl said, "I think she come with us."

Sullivan looked at Heidi and saw instant fear in her face.

“We don’t want any trouble,” he said.

“She is trouble,” said Karl.

Hans added, “She is virst class East German whore.”

“A communist,” said Karl.

Sullivan took out his wallet.

“Let me buy you guys a beer.”

Karl laughed, the cue to the others to laugh as well.

“She come with us,” Karl said again.

He reached out and took Heidi’s arm. When she resisted, he tightened his grip and she let out a yelp of pain.

Sullivan stepped forward, red in face, shorter than all the others but no fear registered anywhere in his manner. He grabbed Karl’s shoulder.

“Let her go now!”

Karl did – but quickly shoved Sullivan, who moved backwards but kept his balance.

“Get him!” Karl barked, grabbing Heidi again.

Hans and Rudy attacked Sullivan, knocking him to the ground and kicking the linguist as he tried to protect himself.

Heidi screamed, and Karl punched her in the face, swearing at her in German.

On the ground, Sullivan’s face was bruised, and blood trickled out of his mouth.

Heidi started crying, pulling to get free from Karl’s grip.

“Leave him,” said Karl.

Hans took Heidi’s other arm, and she staggered along between him and Karl as they moved off down the street. On the ground, Sullivan moaned and squirmed in pain.

In a moment the Germans were gone, and Sullivan lay still. The morning was as quiet as before.

Bass waited and waited, and still Sullivan didn’t come. With the unknown situation in Berlin, which certainly would result in the calling of an all-European military alert,

Bass' anxiety increased each moment until finally he could sit still no longer.

Amazon saw him heading for the door.

"Vere you go?" she asked, hurrying to him.

"I have to find Sullivan. Give me your best guess who rented them a room."

"Maybe vrom Isaac."

"How do I get there?"

Outside, Sullivan walked briskly, following Amazon's directions. If indeed Sullivan and Heidi had spent the night in a rented room at Isaac's, Bass would find out soon enough. It was close.

The silence around him was eerie. Who would know that at this moment every Russian military unit in East Germany was racing toward Berlin? And that in the command posts of the American Army, generals were debating their alternatives for a response? If this was the beginning of World War III, as well it might be, it happened in the warming still hush of a Baumholder morning where, behind many a closed door, Animals still nursed their terrible hangovers.

Rounding a corner, Bass was jarred by the sight of a staggering figure down the block. Could it be Sullivan? Bass ran forward.

As he arrived, Sullivan slumped to the ground. Bass hurried to him.

"Jesus, Jim. What happened?"

Sullivan grunted.

One eye was almost swollen shut, and dried blood ran from his mouth over his chin.

"Who did this to you?"

It was clear speech was difficult for his friend, so Bass tried to help him up.

"We're getting you to the Family Club," Bass said.

On his feet, with Bass' support, Sullivan managed to put one foot after the other. Where was Heidi? Bass wouldn't question Sullivan more until he had him upstairs on a bed at the Family Club. He was confident that Amazon would help this happen, in case all the rooms were still filled with recovering Animals.

But by the time they reached the front of the Family Club, all hell had broken loose. Animals were streaming out of the club like residents escaping a burning hotel. Bass assumed the alert had been called, and it didn't take long to prove this correct. A Military Police jeep cruised around the corner, the soldier riding shotgun speaking into an amplified device: "We are having an alert. All military personnel return to base immediately. We are having an alert..."

Bass stopped. Sullivan, whose head had been down during most of the slow journey to the club, managed to look up. He tried to speak.

"I'll explain once we get you settled," Bass said.

The jeep headed off down Main Street. The numbers of Animals racing from the Family Club reduced to a trickle, then none came out at all.

Amazon and some other ladies appeared on the porch. She saw Bass and gasped. Then she hurried to them.

"Vat happen?"

"Can we get him upstairs? He needs to lie down."

"Ov courze."

She tried to help, supporting Sullivan on the other side, but Bass shooed her away. She opened doors for them instead.

Upstairs, she led them into the first room off the hallway. A bed with messed up sheets took up most of the room. Bass led Sullivan there and helped him stretch out.

"Vat happen?" Amazon asked again.

"Jim, you want a glass of water?"

Sullivan did not respond.

"A beer?"

Sullivan managed to nod.

"I'll be right back."

Bass took Amazon's arm and led her out of the room. They headed downstairs.

"Vat happen?"

"Somebody beat the shit out of him. I'd like to know who."

"Heidi do dis?"

Bass ignored the question and said, "Bring us two beers. No, make it four bottles."

He turned and climbed the stairs alone.

When Bass entered the room, he found Sullivan leaning up against the headboard.

"Feeling better?" Bass asked.

"They took her away. Karl and his buddies."

"Heidi?"

"I think they plan to gangbang her or something. I couldn't help her. There were too many of them."

"Well, I know where to start looking."

"I'm coming with you."

Sullivan made a move as if to get out of bed but immediately grimaced and settled back against the headboard.

"You're taking it easy," said Bass.

Sullivan mumbled something Bass couldn't make out.

"Listen," Bass said, "the Russians may be invading Berlin. It's crazy on the hill. That's why we're on alert."

"What are you talking about?"

"The newk came down looking for us. He filled me in. Every unit in East Germany is converging on Berlin. Everybody's thinking the shit's finally hit the fan."

Sullivan started to say something and stopped. Bass gave him time to form his thoughts.

"We can win the war without me, Bear," Sullivan said. "I'm not going back. I'm going to Spain. After I find Heidi and, you know, do what has to be done."

"I'll talk to Konrad and see what he has to say about his son. You stay put. I'm going to tell Amazon to keep an eye on you."

Baumholder was as still as a ghost town. Walking from The Family Club to Gasthaus Konrad, Bass knew the silence was temporary. Soon enough, the linguists on the hill would rumble down in their trucks and jeeps to convene at their designated assembly point near the festplatz park, rattling down Main Street in such numbers as to shake the walls of the buildings. Baumholder would look like a war

zone, and Bass worried that this time the suggestion might be real.

With the gasthaus ahead, Bass gathered his thoughts. Should he confront Konrad right off or try to sneak into the subject from another angle? Konrad, of course, might have no idea what his son was up to. And even if he did, he might deny it, and Bass would have no way of knowing if he were telling the truth or not. For the first time, Bass considered that he might be on a fool's errand.

6/

Konrad was in the back room, smoking a cigar and enjoying the slowness of the morning when Karl came in. Konrad saw in an instant that something was wrong.

"What is it?" he asked. Karl mumbled something. "Speak up, boy? What is the problem?"

It took Karl some time to get it all out. What he was trying to say, that he and his buddies had confronted the lovelorn G.I. and his spy-whore girlfriend and ended up taking the girl with them, to take turns with her and all, but something had come up that had made everything much more complicated. Now everything was a big mess.

Konrad replied, "Stop beating around the bush. What is going on? Did you hurt her? My God, you didn't—"

"Nothing like that. We didn't even get our way with her."

"Then what happened?"

"She's not a spy and she's not a whore. Father, she's a reporter for *Das Skandal*."

Konrad's mouth dropped open.

"That's not possible," he said. "If she told you that, she's lying."

"She has a press card. It looks very legitimate."

"Where is she?"

"In Hans' car out back."

"I want to see her."

The car, an old Adler from before the war, was parked behind the gasthaus next to Konrad's recent Volkswagen. Hans leaned against a door, smoking. In back sat Heidi. She looked like she'd been crying.

"Let me see her press card," said Konrad.

Hans opened the door and took Heidi's purse off the front seat. He found the press card and gave it to Konrad.

From the back seat, Heidi said, "Konrad, you should teach your boy better manners."

Konrad studied the press card. He opened the back door and stooped down toward Heidi.

"Why are you in Baumholder?"

"I'm doing a story," she said.

"What kind of story?"

"That's confidential."

"Maybe this is a fake."

Heidi didn't respond.

"Maybe I should call your editor."

Again Heidi was silent. She glared at him, defiant and obviously getting her courage back from the earlier distress.

"Wait here," Konrad told the others. He went back inside.

There was a phone number on the press card. Konrad thought the prefix belonged to Munich. He dialed.

"Hello," a male voice said.

"Is this Das Skandal?"

A pause.

"Hello?" said Konrad.

"It is. How may I help you?"

"May I speak to Heidi Steinbacher," Konrad said, reading her full name from the press card.

"Just a moment."

After a long silence, another voice came on.

"This is Roth. How can I help you?"

"I'm trying to contact Heidi Steinbacher."

There was a silence. Then:

“What does this concern?”

“Then she does work there?”

“Who is this?” asked Roth.

Now it was Konrad’s turn at silence.

Roth said, “If you know her, tell her to call the office as soon as possible. It’s urgent.”

Konrad remained silent.

“Hello?”

Konrad hung up.

Back outside, as Karl and Hans looked at him expectantly, Konrad said, “She is telling the truth.”

Konrad opened the back door again.

“Come inside,” he told Heidi. “You need to call your office.”

Bass stepped into the gasthaus. Konrad was not in his usual place behind the front counter. His assistant, a woman whose name Bass had never gotten, was in his place, writing something in a ledge book.

“I’m looking for Konrad,” Bass said in English.

The woman looked up from her work and frowned, as if not appreciating the interruption. She was older than Konrad and, like so many older German women Bass saw on the streets, overweight and tired-looking.

When she didn’t speak, just staring at him, Bass repeated, “Is Konrad around?”

Without a word the woman turned and entered the back room.

Bass waited. The gasthaus was empty except for a man in coveralls, a farmer Bass assumed, at a back table, who was smoking a pipe and staring into space. With all the farmland leased to the Animals for their war games, the local farmers had little to do.

Bass waited. He should have ordered a beer. Maybe he should knock on the door to the back room.

Before he decided on the matter, the door opened and the woman entered. Behind her was Konrad.

“Let’s get a table,” the proprietor said in English. He came around the counter.

Bass followed him to a table at a window. They sat down.

Konrad leaned forward.

"Let me guess," he said. "Your friend sent you to find out about Heidi." When Bass looked surprised, he added, "Karl told me everything. Don't worry. She is fine."

"That's more than I can say for Sullivan."

"What do you mean?"

"They beat him up pretty bad."

"Karl didn't tell me this. Is he in hospital?"

"Not that bad. Bad enough."

"At least not in hospital."

"So where's Heidi?"

"First I tell you something. This must be a secret between us. Do I have your promise?"

Bass hesitated. He was never comfortable trusting a German. They were, after all, very recent enemies of America. In their heart of hearts, some were still enemies of America.

"I must have your promise," said Konrad.

"Sure."

Konrad looked around. In the near-empty gasthaus, Bass figured this was for dramatic effect. Germans loved melodrama.

"Heidi is reporter for *Das Skandal*," Konrad said.

"What is that?"

"Very popular magazine. Published in Munich. Prints the stories other magazines don't tell you."

"Like *Confidential*," said Bass. This was the American magazine full of hyperbole and gossip, which in a past issue had called Baumholder "the Sin City of Europe," which actually was close to the mark.

"I not know your American magazine," said Konrad. "But *Das Skandal* is very popular and important German magazine."

"Heidi is an East German spy," said Bass.

"This is what everyone assumes. But she is reporter."

Bass studied him. He seemed to believe it.

"So she's here on a story?" Bass asked.

“On you. On the American spies on the hill.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Bass asked.

Konrad grinned.

“Is better she is not East German spy, no? They have better future.”

Bass wondered how Sullivan would react to the news.

He said, “Can I speak to her?”

“She is not here.”

“I thought she was.”

“She tells me her story, and I believe her. She calls her office, and then I let her go.”

Bass stood up and headed for the door.

After him Konrad said, “I think this is good news for your friend.”

“She iz upztair vit him,” said Amazon as soon as Bass returned to The Family Club.

Bass raced up the stairs. He entered the room without knocking.

Heidi sat on the bed beside Sullivan. They both turned to him.

Sullivan said, “I need some time alone with her.”

“There’s something you need to know,” said Bass.

“Bear, I’m serious.”

“So am I. She’s a reporter for *Das Skandal*. She’s using you for material.”

Sullivan was visibly confused by the news. Heidi turned to him.

“I explain this,” she said.

To Bass Sullivan repeated, “Give me some time alone.”

But Bass didn’t move.

“Trust me,” said Sullivan. “Do I look like I’m going anywhere?”

Bass said, “I’ll be right outside.”

Amazon came upstairs while Bass was still waiting in the hallway.

“Vat iz going on?”

Bass shrugged.

"You okay?"

"Konrad at the gasthaus says she's a reporter for *Das Skandal*."

Amazon looked dubious.

"You don't think so?"

"Heidi iz zpy or I am Marlene Dietrich."

"Why would he say so?"

"She tell him. This iz her cover, no? She can't zay she really a zpy. Dis iz cover."

Bass nodded. He saw a certain logic in this.

"Vat you do now?"

"Wait to see what Sullivan wants to do."

"You vant bier?"

"No thanks."

"I be downstair if need me."

Another half hour passed before Heidi came out. She looked angry, passing Bass for the stairs without a word.

Bass entered the room. He approached the bed.

"I'm a fucking idiot," said Sullivan.

"What happened? Is she a reporter?"

"She's a spy. This was her cover. She's been called back to Berlin, Bass. Urgently. It's part of what's coming down. She wanted me to defect and go with her."

"But you're not."

Sullivan glared at him.

"Of course you're not," said Bass.

"What pisses me off is what she said about America. How I was a puppet of Jew bankers, I'd never be appreciated as a professor or anything else in America, in East Germany they treat teachers and writers and artists like the culture heroes they are, on and on, how no place on earth sucked like the States. Man, she was really beginning to piss me off."

Bass nodded.

"I think she's a Nazis at heart," said Sullivan.

"So what are you going to do now? Still go to Spain?"

"I don't know. Fuck me."

There was a long silence.

"There's an alert," said Bass. "I need to get back. I wish you'd come with me."

Sullivan said, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

"Excuse me?"

"It's Joyce in *Portrait*. I don't think I ever understood it until now. We're all victims of history."

"I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"The shit hits the fan, and we're changed forever."

"Shit happens."

"Right. Shit happens."

Bass said, "Let's climb the hill." When Sullivan didn't immediately respond, he said, "What the hammer? What the anvil? What the fuck?"

"What the fuck indeed."

"If this is the start of World War III, you really want to spend it in Spain? If you wanted that, you might as well have gone to East Germany with her. At least you'd be getting laid."

"I wonder. Maybe she would have dropped me like a hot potato as soon as I defected. One point for her side."

"A possibility."

"I was such an idiot."

"It's more complicated than that. You're right, we're victims of history. Under different circumstances, history being different, maybe you two were meant for each other after all."

"We'll never know."

A silence.

"I do have to get up the hill," said Bass.

"I'm coming with you."

"Good."

Sullivan was able to walk without help, if slowly. They went downstairs. Amazon met them at the bottom of the stairs.

"Look at him valk," she said.

Sullivan smiled.

"We're going back to base," said Bass.

"You tink ve haf var?"

"All I know is we're on alert. Which means back to base."

He led Sullivan toward the door.

Behind them, Amazon said, "You come back, yes?"

"We'll be back," said Bass.

Outside the street was deserted. Bass and Sullivan, walking slowly, turned to climb the hill to the kaserne. They were silent. Behind them the town, Baumholder, with its 57 bars, was silent.

Finally, half way up the hill, Sullivan spoke.

"She was called back to Berlin. She's catching the train. The one you should have been on."

"Shit happens."

"So you think this is war?"

"I have no idea. I hope not."

"If the Russians invade Berlin, we'll respond to defend it."

"Maybe they're not invading."

"Then why the alert? You said their whole goddamn army was heading to Berlin."

"That's what the newk said. That's what the intelligence says."

"So they must be invading Berlin."

"I don't know, Sullivan. I just work here."

Sullivan laughed.

"You'd be surprised how close I came to running off to Spain. If you hadn't been around, I think I would have. So if something happens to me, it's your goddamn fault, Bear."

"I accept the responsibility. Correction. I embrace it."

"Asshole."

"I just remembered something. There's one good thing about returning to base."

"What's that?"

"The chow hall's open," said Bass. "I'm starving."

"Now that you mention it."

"First we eat. Then we find Malinowski and report that we're back."

"You think I'll get company punishment?"

“Fuck no. You’re too valuable. You’re the best linguist in the building.”

Sullivan laughed and said, “Malinowski’s gonna shit. He thinks we’re all commies at heart.”

“He confuses rebellion with disloyalty.”

“Exactly. When Heidi started bad-mouthing America, man, I don’t hit women, but I came close to swinging. I hate hearing shit like that. Especially from a fascist Nazis. I swear to God she is.”

Bass put his arm around Sullivan.

“We walking too fast for you?”

“I’m good.”

They continued to climb the hill to the kaserne, the hill to what suddenly felt like home. They had no idea what fate awaited them, no idea what history was in the making. In a few days, of course, they would learn that the Russians were coming to Berlin in order to build a wall, a barrier to keep their citizens from escaping to the west, but the threat looked more ominous than this as they climbed the hill, more directed at America, at them, and they climbed the rest of the way in silence, each with a knot of apprehension in his gut, the future unknown but their responsibility clear, to return to base, to do what had to be done, their occasional rebellion against the army unrelated to disloyalty, and by the time they walked through the gates of the kaserne, their appetites were gone, dissipated in a still greater apprehension that was electric in the air on base now, an alert that felt like the real thing, the Russians invading Berlin, the cold war ready to turn hot; Bass and Sullivan walked through the gates and headed for headquarters in order to report in, present and accounted for, as ready as they’d ever be to face the uncertain future.

POEMS

*Cherish the way women can touch men,
instead of pining for what might have been.*

From “Five Sonnets”

Five Sonnets

To take my heart, please take my warts as well!
I'm not a perfect man - but still I grow
when most men at my age freeze what they know,
and growth leads where not you or I can tell.
Sometimes I belch! Sometimes I fart and smell!
Sometimes I wake you up before the dawn
and lead you to the kitchen arm-in-arm,
where peanut-buttered pickles ring our bell.
I don't mean all the stuff in marriage vows.
I mean the human truth from A to Z,
and if you find, my dear, that your heart bows
this way - then I'm for you, and you're for me.
What is life without a little fun?
Let me know if you think you're the one.

Imagine, if you will, a body tight
with stress; add a mind pickled with booze;
throw in a heart grown cynical by night,
by day asleep; put in the daily news
to taste; cowardice will keep the blend
alive, no falling soufflé here; somewhere
there must be a past, memories of when
the world was right; yes, the mouth can drool
a bit; a tired dick grotesquely hangs
its chicken's neck southward like a fool
(a dick always points northward when it bangs):
all this – and then let enter Special She.
Witness resurrection of the He.

"A woman needs a man like a fish
needs a bike," she said before she kissed
him on the lips. Wondering what he missed,
he kissed back, which he later wished
he hadn't done because the police just stared
at him as he stammered through the story
that was his version of events, how sorry
he was about the whole thing, more weird
than anything else, there had been no rape
at all, unless his tongue was charged, and she
had started that, this he guaranteed,
he was a gentleman and not an ape.

Q: what in common have King Kong and Tristan?

A: a fish, a bike, an ape . . . Woman and Man.

If our lips should never meet again;
if your arms should not around me wrap
in such a way to tell me of your ken;
if our bodies never draw the sap
each from each, flesh to flesh, the way
we've done before in miracles of night;
if it doesn't happen how it may
have been between us if my health was right;
if, I say, all dreams are lost and barn
doors closed; if this should be, my heart of hearts,
do not grieve for us or weep or mourn.
For a brief time we knew Cupid's darts!
Cherish the way women can touch men,
instead of pining for what might have been.

Of all affection known to man or beast;
of all the ways we relate each to each,
to talk, embrace and cry, and try to teach
the other who we are: the very feast
of love, without which at the very least
would life be insecure and at such risk
that death might well win out; the soft kiss
of love the mother gives her child, her breast
the suckled nourishment of all s/he knows –
this is love that cannot be more pure.
Male lovers in their quest of love bestow
romance as often illness as its cure.

Love is not the sting of Cupid's darts;
Love is the most womanly of arts.

I'm Not Fit Company

I'm not fit company
for women of intelligence
if their necks are long
if their hips are slim
if their eyes darken
with forbidden possibilities

I'm not fit company
for women of intelligence
who reject an old biology
who prefer sensitive men
who talk about feelings
un-biologically

If a thought
is unspoken speech
then isn't a feeling
unthought thought?
And if a feeling is unthought
how possibly can it be talked about?

I'm not fit company
for women of intelligence
who mistake equality
for similarity

Which brings me to you

In these dim lights
I'm not sure what I see
but go on instinct when I say
the odds strike me as good
despite the pleasantries between us
I'm not fit company
I'm not fit company

Advice to an Artist on Choosing a Wife

May the gods bless you
with a wife who understands you

If you are not so fortunate
may she accept you for who you are

and if not this
at least put up with you

If she cannot put up with you
may she not kick you out

or if she does
not also call the police
or the Mental Health Institute

but even if she does
may she not inflict bodily harm
or drive you to cut off an ear

though should this happen
may the blade be clean
and not cause infection

Yet if serious harm comes to you
may she at least spare your work
and not destroy it

and if she must
let her forget the work
hoarded by your friends

If she knocks on their doors

may they not be home
or refuse to answer
or escape out the back door

and if she catches up with them at last

May God have mercy on their souls

West Meets East Talkin' Misery Blues

I've always been one to ramble around
Always had my ups and downs
Thought I'd seen everything before
Til I heard about Maryland's Eastern Shore

*And I'd never been to no Eastern Shore ...
never heard of no Eastern Shore ... I couldn't find it on
the map*

But the Eastern Shore, so I headed east
To see if I could capture that beast
I was in Kentucky in a grocery store
And asked, "Who knows the way to the Eastern Shore?"

*Was this older feller there ... gray-haired, wearing
a goatee, sporting a vest, munching on a chicken leg ...
kinda looked like a colonel ... he said, "East what? This
here is bluegrass country, boy. Maybe you'd better mosey
on." Which I did.*

West Virginia was up ahead
And I pulled over to get a bed
But before I went and closed my motel door
I asked the lady there about the Eastern Shore

*And she didn't say nothing for the longest time ...
Sorta looking at me dead-eye ... when she finally spoke
up, she said, "Don't sleep too soundly, if you from the
Revenue."*

I was going through the land of William Penn
One of them places I'd already been
I'm going along when I get the notion
By the end of the day I'll be in the ocean

And I can't swim ... time to ask directions again ...

was this feller come by in a horse and buggy, wearing a big ol' stove pipe hat, long black beard ... he was clutching a bible ... I said, "Pardon me, Abe! Can you show me the way to the Eastern Shore?" ... He just pointed straight up at the sky ... pointed straight down at the ground ... Said, "There are only two directions."

Seemed to me there was more than that
And I took off as he tipped his hat
Just kept on going, didn't know where
And I ended up in Delaware

Got me a room ... showered, shaved ... put on my New Jersey, and found a bar

This Eastern Shore was like a hickory nut
Pretty tough to crack – but
A little whiskey's a mighty big rock
It can smash the toughest lock

I filled me up with whiskey ...called the bartender over, figuring to ask him directions ... before I spoke up, he spoke up, said, "Boy, you sure do drink a lot. How do you feel?" ... Truth was, I'd had one too many cause when I replied it didn't come out in my usual western accent, it came out sounding like ... "Oh, I feel all roit."

Then a guy at the bar about grabbed me
Slapping my back, wouldn't let me be
You'd think I was his long-lost pal
Or, worse, his up and coming gal

I started worrying about his preferences ... but he didn't make no move ... he just kept saying, "Noice to see ya, noice to see ya!"

It took a while but I broke free
Tried to leave that place, he was following me
He said, "What you going and leaving for?"
I said, "I gotta find the Eastern Shore."

Damned if he didn't look like we was going to look together ... his car was parked out behind mine ... He said, "Listen, we'll stop on the way for some soft crabs."

I've had the crabs but never soft
In Germany they won't come off
G.I. powder just makes 'em gay
And the only way to get 'em is this-a-way

*You get yourself a razor ... shave a path down the
middle of your pubic hair ... soak one side with kerosene
... put a match to it ... when all them critters run to the
other side, you stab each one of 'em dead with an ice pick*

Well, he's in his car, I'm in mine
Traveling fast, he's coming behind
I kept on going rather in a hurry
When I come to a town called Sail-is-bury

*Pulled over to the side of the road, figuring to ask
that feller why he's following me so close ... 'fore I spoke
up, he spoke up, said ... "How about that! I'm from Saul's-
berry myself!"*

There was a bar across the street
Figured it was time to get something to eat
I went along, he made it two
I didn't know just what to do

*But hop on a bar stool, which I did ... stared
straight ahead ... there on the wall was a big ol' sign ...
and damned if that sign didn't say, "Welcome to the
Eastern Shore!"*

He ordered a sandwich, I said the same
And I was about to ask him his name
But before I did, the food come by
And I couldn't hardly believe my eyes

*I mean, this sandwich, it was nothing but two
pieces of bread wrapped about this crab ... I mean, it had
the shells on and everything ... all these claws was
sticking out every which-a-way ... and one of my claws
was moving*

But that feller took a big ol' munch
Them crab shells made an awful crunch

Turned my stomach, face turned blue
This Eastern Shore's a cannibal zoo

*To eat live crabs ... raw oysters ... bet they eat jelly
fish*

"What's your trade?" the feller asked then
With crab shells all over his chin
And the truth was I was writing a book
But before replying took a second look

*Cause people don't like to hear you're writing a
book ... they get jealous of all your free time ... six digit
movie rights ... spot appearances on Johnny Carson ...
besides, everybody knows, all writers are spies*

"What's your trade?" a second time
And I really hadn't made up my mind
But about then the jukebox come on
And it must have been that or sheer inspiration

*Cause right out of nowhere I told him I was a
musician ... (guitar: a little Ode to Joy solo) ...
unemployed*

Well, to make a long story brief
I ordered a sandwich filled with beef
I was beginning to feel a little fatigued
When the feller asked if I liked antiques

*Said he was a dealer ... he'd give me a good deal ...
on something Colonel*

Now what he had in mind was a chair
I said, "Look, man, I've been everywhere.
I don't plan to sit. I plan to leave."
He said, "But this chair's 17th century!"

*I had to laugh ... what kind of a fool did he think I
was?, buy a chair that old ... I didn't need no chair but the
day I did, I wouldn't buy some old chair, I'd buy me a new
chair ... I'd go to Sears and Roebuck*

He said, "Listen, you just don't understand
The older it gets, the more price it commands."

So I told him about this old gal back west,
She commanded fifty cents at best

*That's after she bought the whiskey ... cooked a hot
meal ... introduced you to her granddaughter*

I told him that, he just made a face
Said, "This chair's broke in the original place!"
I said, "I just don't get the joke.

You're trying to sell me an old chair that's broke?"

*He said, "But this chair was broke 200 years ago!"
... I told him we had some slow moving hombres back
west ... but I do believe we'd a had her fixed by now*

Our minds never did get together
I left that place to find different weather
The wind had come up and it knocked me down
Rolled me all across the ground

*Took three guys to pick me up ... one of them stuck
a finger in the air ... Said, "Feels loik we got a little breeze
comin' off the Chesapeake tonoit."*

I got in my car and I turned her west
Back to the land I love the best
Back to where the chairs are new
We got Rocky Mountain oysters, too

*We got ten thousand foot ant hills ... white water
rapids ... snow-capped mountains ... we got them wide
open spaces*

But now I've seen everything there is
That Eastern Shore ended the list
That leaves only the grave to autograph
You can make this here my epitaph

*It takes a cat to go to a garden ... takes a dog to go
to a tree ... takes a seagull, flying o'er the Eastern Shore,
to go to the likes of me*

Autobiography

I have a leak in my soul
And through it my character flows
Drip by drip. The Yellow Pages
Do not list Plumbers
For the Soul. The sages
At church have much to say
On this matter but nothing
They know makes sense to me.

I have a crack in my heart
Through which my spirit wants
To go. The wages of sleep
Do not pay the rent. Dreams
Without spirit do not spend.
A spirit lost is a spirit gone.
I have a leak in my soul
And through it my character flows.

I have a rent in my mind
And everything unwinds.
I don't know where I've been.
I don't know where I go.
I have a leak in my soul
And through it my character flows
Into the vast unknown
Far, so far, from home.

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