EIGHT ORIGINAL SHORT STORIES:
"A ROTTEN WAY OF LIFE"
AND OTHERS

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This thesis is a creative one, comprised of eight short stories which deal with a variety of subjects. All of the material is concerned with personal or vicarious experience. The four stories dealing with homosexuality are an outgrowth of my personal conviction that the practice of homosexuality should be legalized in this country, and to this extent, these stories are intended to elicit compassion from the reader.

Because I believe that creativity is ideally a part of the educational process, I am grateful for the opportunity of pursuing a thesis based on my original work. As a teacher of English, I hope to encourage creative writing among students wherever I see the potential, and insofar as I am able, I hope to teach with creative methods. To this end, writing, revising, and perfecting these eight stories for my thesis has served me considerably. The discerning criticism which has been offered me by my major professor has given me excellent guidelines, not only for evaluating my own work but for preparing critiques as well. I have discovered, as a result, that the writing and organizing of this thesis has become a learning experience—one surpassing my expectations.
The eight stories appear in no particular order, although I have attempted to distribute those dealing with the subject of homosexuality randomly among the others, for the purpose of discouraging a prevailing theme. Following is a description of each story as it appears in the collection:

"The Return of a Smile" deals with a mature woman's revelation concerning her long-dead father and the love for him she has discovered too late.

"Something Is Missing" is a story based on the pursuit of love by a lonely, confused boy. It deals with contemporary issues among young people.

"Job's Laughter" explores inchoate love between mother and daughter, brought about through mutual understanding. The plight of uselessness in old age is touched upon.

"Why No Kissing" is based on the initiation theme and concerns a young boy's first attempts to discover his identity.

"Don't Hang Up" is a story built within the framework of a telephone conversation. It reveals the loneliness and lust of a homosexual.

"They're Deep in California" is a monologue. Loneliness and the search for identity involve a manicurist who envisions a panacea.

"A Rotten Way of Life"—first prize winner in the national STORY College Awards Contest—is a story based on a homosexual's attack by hoods and his self-evaluation as a result of the near-fatal encounter.
"If You Exist You Cast Shadows" reveals the relationship between two homosexuals—one, an older man. Their attendant frustrations, guilts, and fears, which result from the necessity for repression, lead to tragedy.

I would recommend to any creative writer that he attempt a thesis based on his original work. Such an endeavor will afford him a greater perspective of his ability, for, having viewed his work as a total effort, seeing the weaker material juxtaposed with the stronger, he is able to weigh his worth with greater objectivity. If that creative writer specializes in the short story form, the predictable result is an urgency to set his sights upon a novel. It seems to me that any thesis which encourages a writer to pursue writing is a valuable one.
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AND OTHERS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

by

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By the time I was old enough to care, my father was beaten down, insidiously ridiculed and badgered into a kind of fierce weakness. Frustrated by humiliation, mute forces raged within him. Had he been isolated in a soundproof cage, his silent screams could have proved no less effective. Although he ultimately lived long enough to justify his title, he had begun early to be derided by the family as the Old Man.

When the High Holy Days occurred each year, we children, in new garments, imperiously accompanied Mother to the synagogue where we fasted among a congregation of penitents and in the mumbling quiet absolved ourselves of guilt. The hunger knocked against our ribs as the day droned toward sundown and feasting, and we believed, thus atoned, we should begin the morrow cleansed and sanctified; except that the new day invariably found our attitude toward the Old Man depreciating as before.

"Sure ... always he has to run off during Rosh Hashanah-Yom Kippur. Would it hurt him to stay home with his family? Got six lovely children ... so where does he run? To strangers. Off somewhere to daven among strangers."

Mother never failed to remind us.
I was impassively aware that my father chanted for a synagogue in a small West Texas town boasting no precentor of its own. Not officially a cantor, yet gifted in the synagogue's liturgical renderings, he was invited there each year to officiate in the holy ritual. His pompous pride irritated me, and his meticulous preparation succeeded only in rousing my indifference. A month or so before the holidays, he began to anticipate the role he would assume for the solemn occasion. With prayer shawl around his shoulders, his skull-cap upon his head, minor-key, plaintive utterances soared from his soul to produce the ritual supplication. Spine-tingling lamentation tremored through the rooms of the house.

I was born last into the family of grown-up brothers and sisters, and I considered it unfashionable to have a cantor for a father. It embarrassed me if my friends, not Jewish, found him in the dining room, swaying in prayer, worshiping in the manner of his ancestors. We were modern, I rationalized. We should have done with orthodoxy—cast out old methods—think reform. Who wanted to display a relic of antiquity? It seemed anachronous to include this bizarre procedure in the routine of our progressive household.

Mother—dominant, efficient, ever-mindful of progress—subtly molded her children to her own inner visions of life and the Omnipotent. God was her constant companion, and
she taught us to respect His presence within ourselves. Her own preparation for the Holidays was something tangible we could comprehend. Good smells from the kitchen, finery in the closets, a personal awareness of gratitude for our bounty. Her viewpoints became our viewpoints, and we were bonded together.

On the eve of the Jewish New Year, before services began at the synagogue, we rejoiced in closeness over the family meal. On the infrequent occasions when my father spent the High Holy Days in our midst, he would have long since finished his supper—preferring to eat early in the kitchen where he could read from his prayer book undisturbed. A huge white napkin covered his corpulent chest, and though he was short in stature, he filled the room with a bantam-cock authority. This aspect of his personality was apparent only during the holidays, as if the exaltation of the hour demanded from him bustling measures. Having eaten, he would depart for the synagogue. And the rest of us never missed his presence at the table.

"Him ... all he knows is his books. Whenever I needed him, where was he? At the Schul ... Come, children. Let's hurry. We mustn't be late."

But it was too late already.

More and more frequently as those early autumn days announced the return of the Jewish Holidays, piling one year atop another, the Old Man edged nearer the background. For
he became merely a dull nagging at my conscience—a symbol of that which I could not love. It was a relief when he was out of sight. Away for the two weeks comprising the celebration of the New Year, he faded from the eye of guilt, and even as I grew older, it never occurred to me to wonder when he prepared his chants, where he performed, how he was received. Slowly, imperceptibly, he accepted our unspoken decree of banishment. We were unrebukingly spared his preliminary gestures marking the approach of the Days of Awe. I was relieved that I should not have to justify my old-world father—his silk talis draping his shoulders, his yamolke clinging to his balding head as he stood beneath the September skies, sounding the notes of the shofar—the ram's horn, symbol of the New Year. "Awake, ye sleepers, and ponder your deed; remember your Creator and go back to Him in penitence." So say the notes of the ram's horn. I did not then realize what strength of body, what perception of soul is required to bring forth in clear-toned rapture this far-flung message to man. And if he must chant, I was grateful that he had apparently turned exclusively to the synagogue for his outpouring. He gradually removed his very spirit from our midst. And I was jubilant.

For two weeks he would be gone, and for two weeks we assumed the proportions of a close-knit, harmonious unit. The Old Man was out of the house and out of our hearts. We told one another we were a loving family.
What causes the lack of communication between members of one flesh and blood? Indifference? Intolerance? Insensitiveness? It was a subtle, intangible thing. There were no harsh words. No direct protests. No open aggression. But as time wore away, the high wall of disrespect became a barrier no longer able to be scaled. There were seven of us on one side. And wailing on the other, was the Old Man.

He had been a merchant, well-respected as men of little business enterprises were in those scattered days of gentle entrepreneurs. But the prayer books always beckoned. The talis fit better around his shoulders than the gray worsted coat and vest, and the round, grizzled head seemed naked without its black satin yamolke. Mother, clucking with her brood about her, was the better business man between them, but it was an era when mothers made the home, and she bridged the gap by insinuating commentary:

"Nu, Jake. The other merchants are moving closer to the center of town. Maybe you should consider." Or . . . "Jake, your number one salesman is a lazy good-for-nothing. And also a little light-fingered in the bargain!" And for years . . . "Jake, why not invest in some property south of town. That's where people are looking to live . . . ."

These probes and others like them were either ignored or scoffed at by my father, too steeped in his need to commune with God to feel the need to do so with Mother. A keener mismatch was never consummated under Heaven.
As the business sagged, the children grew, and finally one day the eldest son took the burden of livelihood upon his shoulders, followed in quick succession by two younger brothers, eager to compete and succeed. As they flourished, the Old Man declined. He assumed loud bravado as he announced to the world—never to the sons—that his boys were becoming successful business men. But with his loss of position came an even greater loss of pride. The prayer books, always his solace, now became his crutch. No recourse was left to him but his books, but the time for aspiring to a seat of importance in the House of the Lord had passed him by. He was a lost little man, unfound among the garments and furnishings that adorned the shelves of a store no longer his own, unrecognized apart from the other dedicated worshipers who haunted the pews of the tiny synagogue each Friday night and Saturday morning. Tiny though it was, the synagogue proudly employed the services of a regular trained cantor, and so my father watched and waited for the distant summons to his most important two weeks of every year. And the family looked beyond his efforts, beyond his needs. They managed without him. He was an addendum to a total sum.

He appeared to wear his outcast state as lightly as he wore his prayer shawl. If he yearned, he gave no utterance. If he wept, he shed no tear. Sometimes, in that perverse curiosity that leads children to peer in upon that which they most abhor, I watched him through a slit in the nearly-closed
door to his room. He would be sitting absently. Now and then he would lean all the way forward, his head upon his upturned hands and sigh a great sigh. It was then I would turn and escape. I shut him out of my mind in those moments, just as I had shut him out of my heart. And for a long while I would not venture to spy upon him. Then the desire would overwhelm me, and another breath-held occasion would find me peering in as before. I wonder now what I was really searching for in those pilgrimages to my father's door.

In my middle years, I find that I avoid the synagogue. I tell myself that I have God within me; who needs a house of worship? But if we build our temples in our hearts, we also build our guilts and fears. I avoid the synagogue because the chanting depresses me. On the Day of Atonement, the soul-wrenching notes of the shofar hurtle me backward, out of independence and maturity, and I find myself again in childhood.

I am alone in the old house, the weather is autumnal. Buskings of fall herald the shedding of leaves—of guilts—of the old year. It is the time of the High Holy Days. I am solitary in my callous youth. On my bed I luxuriate in unaccustomed privacy—a moment stolen from the normally full and lively household. In my card-house of security, I doze and daydream. I am content. Suddenly faint sounds of mournful chanting reach my ears. But who davens? Who chants? Surely not the Old Man, long relegated to the synagogue! It has been understood!
I am drawn to the sound, and my curiosity conquers my distaste for the ill-associated lamentation. I move out of the house into the backyard, through yellowing grasses, with the stealth of a guilty intruder. The chanting is a magnet, and I am pulled to its soul-flung source. At the garage, I stop. Attached to the frame building is the old storehouse where eventually all our castoffs come to rest. I stand beneath the single window and peer, on tiptoe, into the dark interior. My eyes screen out the September sun, slowly dilating to take in the scene. Amidst the abandoned books, unneeded furniture, outdated lamps, stands the Old Man. He is wrapped in his prayer shawl, his black yamolke covering the back of his head, his holy book before him, propped upon a discarded pedestal over which he has spread a clean white towel. He sways to the prayers he utters, and the small crowded room seems to expand in the power of their expression. I shield my eyes and watch, unaware of the emotions recording themselves deep within me. And though I make no sound, move not a muscle, my father senses my presence, for he turns toward the window, and as he continues to chant, to sway, to pray, to flow out of himself, he nods at me. And smiles! . . . When I stop running, I am alone in my room, my heart pounding, my face ablaze.

I am haunted by a smile now gone to dust. On the edge of that particular yesterday, I hovered uncertainly between
love and loss. Nothing was required for direction but the
return of a smile. Poking about in my soul one day, I
recalled where, in my brash and brittle youth, I lost my
way.
When Davie put Linda on the train to Pittsburgh, he stood on the platform smiling at her through the window till the train moved out of the station. The smile began to strain the corners of his mouth before he realized all at once that the train was gone and he could stop now. He sighed, deep from his gut, and thought that it was too bad tension like his couldn't be harnessed. Christ! He could make a fortune.

On the subway back to Brooklyn, he mulled over the weekend. He had been glad Linda was coming to New York for three days and even more glad when she left. Not that he didn't enjoy Linda. God, she was warm and understanding and demanded very little of him. Like she could sit for hours and not talk if he felt one of his silence-things coming on. But why did she always wear on him, after so short a time? He thought about their love-making. It was good. At least, he supposed it was good. He had little to compare it with. Except for the whore, that one time in Mexico when he was seventeen, and how could that count? He had never planned on making it with Linda. It had been part of that first year at college, finally getting away from home and his parents and the neat life in Dullsville, with everything at
his fingertips except what he wanted. So at school he tried pot. And LSD. And Yoga. And sex. Linda had been the logical choice. He dug her approach to life. She had been around. She was, in fact, very cool. It had happened almost without his realizing it was going to. Linda had gotten to a point where she expected it. And he had not been able to figure out a reason why she shouldn't. But always after, and no matter how much dirty stuff they tried—to add fuel to the fire—he felt . . . what . . . empty. That was as near as he could pin it down. "Etwas fehlt," the guy Jimmy sang in Mahagonny. Yeah, thought Davie. That was it. "Something is missing." But just what was missing, he wasn't sure. Linda was generous and loving and tender and wild. Yet . . .

As the train picked up speed, he smoothed his long hair and suddenly felt himself being stared at. Across the aisle, a big guy in a bulky white turtleneck was holding a newspaper, but instead of reading, he was watching Davie over the top of it. Their eyes met and held for an instant until Davie looked away. He was used to those looks. He had been getting them since he was a kid. He knew he was one of the "pretty" boys, and even though he hated the label, he somehow enjoyed making these characters sit up and take notice. He refused to flirt, however. He had seen that kind of shit going on at school and in trains and hotel lobbies and washrooms as long as he could remember. He stayed aloof. But he was always aware and fascinated. His
subway stop was next, and as the train screeched to a halt, he worked his way through the throng of passengers crowding the exit. He was glad to get away from those hungry eyes.

In his room, he lay on the bed a long time, absently rumpling the warm, silky ears of his dog. He was restless and wondered why he shouldn't be tired enough to sleep. It had been a big weekend.

"Davie, Davie. You are positively the neatest!" Linda had exclaimed, when they had dumped her bag on the bed, fixed coffee and were sitting on the floor of his rented room, shuffling through the French and German records they both collected. He thought it was great that she should dig Lenya and Brel and all the wild, wonderful Brecht and Weill that he loved. "Your mustache looks like the Beatles!" she went on. "I love the way it droops. How long have you had it?" She reached out and gently smoothed its contours with the tips of her fingers. "God, I haven't seen you for six whole months!"

Davie smiled into her eyes and said softly. "I'm glad you're here. I miss school, I think. And you, of course. But I've been busy," he added, almost defensively. "Drawings and a couple of set-models. And more time for my music. New York's great. I really like the freedom, but I dunno. Like it's lonely too. You know?"

Linda knew.
"Mostly it's having no direction, I guess. I was so sure when I walked out on school that I would "find myself," like they say, on the streets of the biggest city in the U S of good ol A." Bitterness tinged his words. "But after you've done the museums and the shows and the underground flicks and the dirty books and the snow in Central Park, shit, I don't know, like you're all alone in the middle of nowhere."


Later, after they had gone to bed together and Davie was lying there, wide awake listening to Linda's even breathing, he thought of that magazine cover again and smiled grimly in the dark.

They saw Fellini's Satyricon both nights of Linda's visit and loved the wild, frenetic spectacle. They watched the crowd come out and talked about how much freakier the audience looked than the people on the screen, and Linda told him about winning a prize for an etching she had done based on a Fellini idea, in one of her art classes. It made Davie feel good that he and Linda had all this fantasy stuff in common. She admired and understood his art as much as he did hers. They had opened up a whole new world of understanding between them since they had met at school. Davie knew that. But already, now, after two days of her
constant company, he was getting restless and looked forward to tomorrow when, after the Modern Art Museum, he'd see her off to school. Why was it, he asked himself over and over, that as long as he wanted something he couldn't have, it was the best thing ever. But after he got it, he could never remember why he had wanted it. His mother used to say that to him when he was a little kid. Suddenly he recalled the swimming lessons.

"That big ship model, Davie. The one you've been wanting. Well, you can have it. We'll go buy it as soon as we get to the car. IF you dive first. All the other boys have dived already. Mr. Balsh is WAITING, David. Come on. DIVE. Then we'll go buy the model."

He wouldn't dive. He got the model anyhow. And he hated it.

It got dark outside as Davie lay on his bed, sighing frequently. His body was tired but his mind was furiously working—arranging and rearranging myriad thoughts that were disconnected and incomplete and aimless. He saw himself descending the ramp of a jet at the Rome airport. He had been there with his parents when he was fifteen, and he knew just where he would go. He found his way to a small sidewalk ristorante and ordered an aperitif. He loved the warm Italian sun on his back, and he felt completely at home among the people. Fellini would probably stop at this very cafe. He knew exactly what kind of spaghetti Fellini liked
to eat because he had read everything in print about him. He could see himself at the great man's villa outside Rome...he, always first in the entourage that accompanied Fellini wherever he went. He was attracted to Fellini in some strange way. He reminded Davie of Hap, a gentle man he had followed about like a puppy when he was a little kid. Hap had been a friend of his parents, but though he was married, the father of a baby daughter, he was like a child himself. He and Davie had understood each other, without saying much. Davie used to write him cards from camp and sign funny names, and he would answer them and sign funnier names. When Davie returned, miserable from a month at camp and bored because of the creepy guys and sick of regimentation and camp food, he and his special friend would go to the ice cream place and order huge gooey sundaes and laugh and talk nonsense. Hap had died when Davie was thirteen, but he still thought about him and missed him. When he watched Fellini on TV interviews, he thought that he was like his grown-up child-friend, and he wished he could follow Fellini around like that. Sometimes he dreamed about it.

He got up from the bed now and began to pace. The room was bearing down on him. He spied his dog's tail poking out from under the bed and squatted down on his heels to rouse her. He stroked her back, and she sighed contentedly and started to snore again.
In a sudden burst of energy, Davie straightened the cluttered room. He scooped up dog piles scattered about and spread fresh newspapers. He gathered up breakfast leavings that he and Linda had ignored in their hurry to go out that morning. All at once he wanted some fresh air. Although it was nearly eleven, he felt like walking, grabbed up the thick army jacket he had bought at a surplus store, and ran down the steps of the Brownstone into the clear March night. The change of temperature made him feel lightheaded for a minute. He wished he was stoned. But he had been off pot since he had joined the Meditation Center a month before. They required it. He was glad he had done it. He and Linda had talked about his initiation late into the night.

"I'm happy for you, Davie. You seem happier too. Like maybe you've found what they say you CAN find. Peace, maybe. Have you, do you think?"

"Oh, well, it's too soon to tell, I guess," Davie replied evasively, hating to admit that he didn't know. He described how the meetings made him feel.

"So fresh and clean and friendly. You know? All kinds of people. Old couples, some with heavy accents. An Indian lady--very beautiful in one of those saris. And Blacks. Lot of em. Kids with long hair. AND short hair. Girls with little babies. Boys with dogs. And the best part," he added with conviction, "they are all there because they LOVE."
He told her about the film he had seen of one of the great leaders, Meher Baba, who washed the feet of lepers. Beautiful people, Baba had said, trapped in ugly cages. "You wouldn't believe how he hugged them and how human he was and how he played with the little kids and was so full of fun." Then he added. "You have the feeling when you walk away from one of those meetings that LOVE is the most important thing in the world and that maybe you've found it at last. You know?"

Linda nodded, knowing.

What Davie didn't add was that by the time he reached his room, he always felt low again. Like maybe he had almost caught the tail of a beautiful bird that had flown away, leaving him with one little molting feather. He remembered the opera then and the song they sang to Jimmy "You can eat and you can drink and you can smoke," they told him. "Yes," Jimmy answered, "but always, etwas fehlt." Something is missing.

He had reached the avenue and was strolling past a string of bars separated by dismal shops locked behind steel gates for the night. For a long time he had thought about going into the gay bar on the corner but could never quite get up his courage. He had watched the men, the boys—lonely, frightened, some looking depraved, most uneasy—all disappearing through the doors of that bar. One night he had seen a well-known conductor walk out, a young boy at his side. Ironically,
the next day, the Times devoted a full page to the ideal life of this world-renowned personality: his lovely wife; their children; their estate; their town house. It was all too funny, Davie thought. And too sad.

He lingered on the corner, trying to decide which direction to take when a man, fortyish, well-dressed, gentelman-looking, walked out of the bar. Their eyes met for an instant, and Davie saw immediately the whole story there. The look was guarded. But behind the screen, an interest lurked, ready to quicken at the merest hint of encouragement. Davie dropped his eyes, and the man crossed the avenue to hail a taxi.

Davie remembered reading what Baba had said. Something about lust grinding you down to a general feeling of hopeless dependence, accentuating separateness and suffering; but love bringing unity and a feeling of joy. He remembered the words: "Lust is dissipation, love is recreation. Lust is a craving of the senses, love is the expression of the spirit. Lust seeks fulfillment, but love experiences fulfillment. In lust there is excitement, but in love there is tranquility."

Tranquility? Davie wondered if he had ever been tranquil in his twenty-one years.

He tried to empty his mind and assume tranquility, soundlessly pronouncing the word they had taught him at the Center. It was supposed to calm him and give him something to cling to. But the neon sign over the bar intruded upon
his thoughts. CAMARADO'S CAMARADO'S CAMARADO'S. He put his hand on the door knob, let go as if it had bit him, and started to walk in the direction he had come from. He turned around, however, and came back. This time he grabbed the knob and pushed through the door.

The place hit Davie like a bomb. His mind exploded with the thought that every pair of eyes in there was on him. The room was blurred by orangish, smokey light—guys everywhere. Some at the bar along one wall. Others at booths or tables. A few hung around near the entrance. Davie looked down at his feet, then up at the ceiling, his eyes darting—anything to keep from focusing on anyone in particular. All at once he saw RESTROOM and made straight for it. Black painted walls. Tiny. Piss and pineoil. The words "fuck" and "prick" and "shit" and phone numbers scrawled on the grimy door. A moment's isolation for him to get his bearings. There was no mirror, so Davie couldn't be sure how he looked. He smoothed his long hair with his hands and wondered if he had any pimples. Christ, he couldn't remember what he looked like! And he was almost shocked to realize that he wanted real bad to look nice. He stood over the john, pretending to pee, for fear someone would come in and catch him hiding. He didn't know how he'd measure up out there. He didn't believe he was attractive, despite the looks he'd been getting for years. But maybe he was only fooling himself. He couldn't be sure. He felt calmer after a few minutes and braced himself for the long walk to the bar.
It didn’t seem so bad now. The eyes were no longer raking him. At the bar, Davie ordered a beer and hated the voice that came out of him. It seemed weak and high, but he figured that it was because he hadn’t spoken to anyone in several hours and because of the cold air and the long walk. Yet, he cursed himself for being embarrassed, because deep down he knew he was nervous as hell. He sipped at the beer and made himself study the room. The juke box was blasting out shit into every corner of the dark room. At the far end, a pool table was surrounded by some tough-looking guys with tattoos and short, greasy hair. A "NO GAMBLING" sign was plastered on the wall near the table, and over the bar, big letters warned "NO DANCING." All of the light fixtures had orange bulbs that looked like one-watters. The place was so dark that Davie could barely make out the faces around him. The room was divided into talkers and lookers—the silent ones watching the others intensely. Despite the hubbub, when the door opened and a newcomer stood in the entrance, everybody seemed to freeze while a brief sizing-up took place; then the babble surged again, blending with the beat of the music.

Davie thought of Fellini’s Satyricon, and the faces around him—glowing eery in the orange light—made him realize that Fellini knew EXACTLY what he was doing. He had heard him defend his freaky characters once on TV, saying he saw no FREAKS anywhere, only PEOPLE, just like in busses and on streets and in bars and in shaving mirrors! Davie felt like
he was in the middle of a Fellini picture right now. Only he wished the Italian director was here to tell him how to play this scene. He drank his beer, trying hard to relax.

He watched the mirror behind the bar as a young man walked up and stood beside him. Davie looked away but not before he noticed the guy's reddish hair and darker beard and mustache. Davie drained his beer, thinking maybe he would leave now, when suddenly he was startled to hear the fellow speaking to him. He was asking him a question that had something to do with initials which Davie didn't recognize. At first he thought maybe he meant the Meditation Center because he mentioned "meetings," but he went on about the Gay Activists Association. Davie nodded as if he had heard of it. They began to talk then, and Davie could see that he was intelligent and well-educated. They talked about movies, travel in Europe, living in New York--the guy was from Cleveland, studying at Columbia--and of their childhoods. Several times they found something to laugh at--something in common that Davie was surprised to be able to share with a stranger in a bar. After another couple beers, they realized they were practically yelling at each other over the increasing din. The guy suggested they walk for a while. Despite the full beard, the eyes of his new friend seemed very young. Davie noted, as they left the bar, that they both had on army jackets and big clompy boots. What the well-dressed faggot might look like if he was a soldier, he thought insanely.
They walked for several blocks, breathing in the cold air, glad to be out of the frenzied atmosphere of the bar. When they reached a busy intersection, the student from Columbia said to Davie,

"Would you like to come home with me?" or "I'd like for you to come home with me" or something like that. Davie moved to a bank-window on the corner where he began to study a travel poster. He remained completely absorbed for a long silent moment. Then, almost inaudibly, he murmured, "OK."

All at once he felt happy, nervous, scared, excited. Wicked, maybe. Guilty, perhaps. But the dark had cloaked him with a kind of magic assurance, and he felt adventuresome and eager. It was a new state for Davie—a courtesy offered him by the night, and he accepted it willingly.

The redhead lived in a two-room dump with a cat. Davie was amused by the place. It was so student-like. Paperbacks everywhere, textbooks, spiral notebooks, desk, typewriter, the inevitable coffee-pot. On a table sat a giant statue of Buddha from Chinatown. The small room beyond the living room had a bed, couch, and bookshelves. The bathroom was roach haven. As the cat rubbed Davie's legs, the student asked him if he would like a couple of Vitamin C pills, in case he was allergic to cats. Davie was, and said yes, appreciating the boy's thoughtfulness. He felt at home, as if he'd been here before. He stood in the center of the room, quietly, his hands at his sides. He was thinking of absolutely nothing. He wanted to smile but didn't. The
student crossed the floor, facing him. He reached out and took Davie's hands in his own. Davie stood looking at their hands touching, lightly, warmly, then glanced up at the student who was smiling at him. He said to Davie, very gently, as their eyes held, "Don't be nervous." Davie wasn't. Not too much. After a while of just standing there like that, they went into the bedroom, undressed, and lay beside each other on the three-quarter bed. The room was lighted by streetlamps. Davie could feel his heart bumping, and he kept saying to himself that he was lying naked next to a perfect stranger. Yet, except for being terribly shy, he felt happy. Their hands touched, and the student rolled closer so that he was leaning over Davie. Their eyes locked.

"We're going to be good together. You'll see," he said softly and kissed Davie gently on the mouth. He kissed him again, and this time began to explore. Davie heard himself sigh, very deeply, and the escaping sound surprised him. It was more like a moan. His shyness began to abate. He felt uninhibited and careless. He was reaching into a part of himself he had never known, trying to come up with an identity that he had been seeking and missing along the way. Only one thing jarred his moment of abandon. A thought kept pounding. Over and over it sounded in his head, like a goddam TV commercial, louder and louder as their passion mounted: "I wish I loved him." The words screamed inside his brain.
Afterward, they talked some more. The student, a Spinoza buff, was working on his Ph.D. in philosophy. Davie acted like he knew who in the hell Spinoza was. He was surprised to discover that the student was twenty-nine. He didn't look it. The talk between them flagged, faded, until the only sound in the room was the hissing of the steam pipes. The student slept.

Davie was wide awake. He searched the room in the half-light. Cats in the alley were screwing, crying like people. A light from an apartment across the airshaft flashed on, throwing a crazy pattern on the ceiling. Davie took the design apart and put it back together. He listened to the young man breathing beside him and thought again how he was a complete stranger. He felt nothing for him. Nothing—nobody—nowhere. He remembered Baba's words about lust and love, and he thought of Linda. He knew she loved him. He wondered if he would ever tell her about tonight. And where would tonight lead? The night seemed like many nights rolled into one. He remembered Hap, the man who was a child, and he felt very lonely. Jimmy was singing his song: "Etwas fehlt." Tears started. And when he turned over, sunlight was streaming into the room. It had betrayed him—the sun—taking away the night with its safeguards, its gesture of courtesy. Davie didn't feel happy now.

The student had dressed and was fixing breakfast. Davie wasn't hungry, but the fellow insisted. They ate with Buddha--
eggs, cold sliced tomatoes, rye bread and butter. After breakfast, they exchanged phone numbers, and the student walked him to the subway station. There was a friendly ease between them. They liked each other. They shook hands and said good-by.

In the subway tunnel, Davie paced. The rush hour was past, the platform deserted. He peered into the distance along the tracks, and as far as he could see, there was nothing.
Under the house, Alma shifted her position so that the pebbles beneath her right knee no longer bit through the cloth of her slacks and went on wrapping. The old plumbing fittings were shaky, and inside her head she talked to them: "Pipes . . . you better appreciate my nice warm quilting . . . ." Her elbow ached with her weight, as inch by inch she scooted along on her backside. The foundation smelled ancient, the pipes, frail and corroded with time, felt cold and unyielding to her grasp, and the low-ceilinged space over her head made her feel like the only survivor in a two-foot high world of aged and clammy darkness.

And then Mama Big's voice echoed through the house above her, penetrating the rugs, the hardwood floors, the foundation—finding its way to pierce her very flesh and bones.

"AL---MA . . . AAAL---MA!" The old lady's voice was toneless, its pitch long unheard by her own ears. It was a voice projected through fear . . . fear of dark and silent desolation. It was a hoarse, helpless, hopeless instrument of fear. "AAAL---MAAH!"

Alma twisted her head toward the opening of light behind her to see how far she'd come and shrunk as a twinge of arthritis caught her shoulder. She hoped within herself that
she could finish this chore and be back inside the house before Connie stopped by for her noon visit . . . "Mother . . . honestly," she could hear her daughter scold. "If Daddy isn't up to this sort of repair work anymore, why won't you let me ask Ed . . . . He's told you time and again . . . all you have to do is ask." Alma pictured Edward, her six-foot, two hundred pound son-in-law cursing his way through the labyrinths beneath the old house and smiled to herself as she thankfully appraised her own neat size ten and went on wrapping. No, she could still manage, thank the Lord, and if He would just let her finish these pipes before Connie arrived, no one need be the wiser.

"AL---MAAH!"

"Oh, Mama," she prayed aloud, "just hold off a little longer. I told you I'd be back in a while." If only she doesn't try to get up and grope around trying to find me. I know she remembers where I am. Why can't she wait till I'm finished!

She thought of her mother, big-boned, handsome in spite of the mountain of infirmities heaped upon her--locked in her cage of deafness and blindness, and Alma could not help feeling guilty for adding to her fright. Still, if a norther blew in and these pipes froze, there would be no fixing them . . . Mister Gates had warned her last winter when he was by: "Hard freeze, Miz Hargrove, and that's it! You'll havta wrap 'em. One break, and the whole dum system'll go." His price
had been too dear, so she had kept the knowledge to herself. No use to burden Clement.

For the past three mornings, after she had driven Clement to work, reminding him to take it easy, rest if his breathing came hard or those chest pains got worse, she had come quickly home, settled Mama for the morning and tried to tune out her incessant groaning. As Alma sat in the middle of the dining room floor, cutting old quilts into strips, she noticed the house had developed a decided list . . . . The floors seemed to pitch slightly, like a craft on the crest of a wave, and Alma thought of a song one of the children used to sing:

This ole house is agettin shaky;  
This ole house is agettin old . . . .

Falling apart, she mused. Like Mama, like Clem . . . like me. Well, all a body could do was pat a little here, smooth a little there, wrap up the sore spots, and pray for the best.

She cut through the quilts, stacking up the strips, and hid them in the closet before Constance came by at noon, or so Clem would not see them in the evening.

Now, through the musty darkness, Mama's voice bellowed, "OH LORDY HELP ME." Alma remembered she must call the druggist for some more of those tranquilizers, though she didn't think they helped much any more. Poor Mama. Nothing seemed to give her relief. If only she didn't groan so everlasting loud. Alma's mind turned to Clem. She'd better reorder his asthma prescription. At times she was convinced Clem would
get better if he needn't hear Mama carrying on like that.
Oh, he never admitted it bothered him, but dear Lord, Mama's
voice filled every room in the house, and she never let up
... only when she slept, and that was precious little.

"OHHH LORDYHELPME."

Poor thing ... Alma wondered if Mama knew how awful
she sounded.

"WHATSTOBECOMEOFME. OLORD ... OHHH, THEY ALL FORGOT
ME ... ."

Doctor Hicks believed Mama's attacks caused a certain
amount of brain damage—still Mama seemed to know what was
going on around her. Even that time when she and Clem had
turned on the TV volume all the way up so Mama would think
they were watching—they only stayed next door at the Sniders'
for a few minutes, but hadn't Mama sensed something, struggled
out of her bed and felt her way throughout the house looking
for them? When they found her, she was in the center of the
living room, like a lost child, whimpering, "They've left
me, they've left me." Yes, Mama knew what was going on,
poor thing.

Alma gave the last foot of wrapped pipe another winding
of twine and began her journey backward toward the opening
of light. But not before she heard Connie's car wheels
crunch on the driveway gravel. "Now I'll get it," Alma
thought. "Well, too bad ... . Somebody's got to attend to
things. If Clem hadn't got so bad in his chest last winter,
he'd have fixed these pipes in a jiffy." She had been careful not to mention the need.

She built up a strong defense for herself as she sidled her way to the rear of the house where daylight welcomed her. Just as she reached the opening, Mama fiercely thundered her name, and she heard the back screen door slam, announcing Connie's entrance. She hoped it would not be a difficult visit.

She stood up in the sunlight of the back yard and stretched toward heaven. It was a wonderful feeling, and she indulged herself in a backwarming moment of dawdling. Then, loud voices from within the house hurried her along, and she brushed at herself as she climbed the back steps, fortifying her stand, dreading the well-meaning assault from Constance.

Connie was at Mama Big's ear, shouting, neck veins distended, yet managing to thread the sound of her voice with patience and compassion. "Mama Big . . . hush now, hush now."

Alma felt foolishly child-like as she stood anticipating the probable tongue-lashing from her grown daughter—"Honestly, Mother . . . ."

Preoccupied with trying to soothe Mama Big, Connie merely nodded in Alma's direction. "Now Mama Big, you musn't take on so . . . . I heard you carrying on clear out in the street. Don't you know you make it twice as hard on Mother?"

She was hollering right into the old lady's ear, but the tone was placating, gently admonishing.
"But Connie . . . Alma's under the house . . . ."
Connie shot Alma a look, as the frightened voice of her grandmother rambled on.
"She could get hurt under there . . . and then what would happen to me?" she complained.
Her voice went on, loud and toneless, and Alma stood silently in the doorway, listening, half fearing Connie's reaction.
"Mama Big, nothing's going to happen to mother," Connie mildly chided, not looking at Alma. "Mother's a big girl now. She can take care of herself. We all have things we've got to do. I do. And so do you, Mama Big. If Mother had to go under the house, why didn't you take a nice nap? Didn't you have a good lunch? Didn't Mother clean you up and give you your medicine before she left you? Now, why didn't you behave and let Mother tend to things she must do!"
Alma felt gratitude and love wash through her incredulity. As she made a move toward them, Mama Big, sensing her presence, wailed . . . .
ALMA, OHALMA, IS THAT YOU? I KNOW IT'S YOU!"
She began to whimper. "I've been calling you and calling you." She clutched the air in front of her, and Alma quickly reached for her hand, taking her mother's wrinkled one in her own.
"Hush now, Mama, you're all right," she said into her mother's ear. "You're all right, Mama, and I am too."
Connie sat alongside patting her grandmother's knee. The old lady huffed and fumed, scolding the air, pretending to reject the flurry of solicitude, responding in spite of herself. Connie looked up at Alma, shrugged helplessly, and smiled at her with inchoate acceptance.

Gradually Mama Big began to quiet down. Her breathing came more evenly, and she made a few uncoordinated attempts to smooth her ruffled feathers.

"I declare, Alma," she fretted in a final flash of peevishness. "I believe you're just trying to make me sick!"

Connie and her mother exchanged a quick incredulous look, then burst into spontaneous laughter. They laughed until the room rocked with laughter.

The old lady must have heard them or felt the vibration.

Or perhaps because she was the center of so much attention, she began to chuckle too.
WHY NO KISSING

He was sick of Bert's swaggering and badgering and bragging. Bert was a prick! He wished to Christ he was rid of Bert and the stupid school and the greasy Mexicans and their goddam language and back home. His mother and her big ideas! "Just think, David. You'll learn to speak like a native. Spanish is so mellifluous." Mellifluous, shit! He was lonesome as hell for Milly and bored with living in a rat race that led nowhere except to class and to bed and back to class. Bed meant for him sleep—or his special thing—awake-dreaming—and not what Bert meant. And who cared about going to bed with a Mexican whore named Rosa? Except Bert! David's mind was reviewing the personal report of his roommate's first big escapade when Bert slammed into the room, tossed his books on one of the two cots, and greeted him in mellifluous Spanish.

"Hace mucho calor, amigo. It's hot as hell today. Wanna go with me to Rosa's? She's got a cool courtyard and all the free beer you can hold."

David made a face. He hated beer. And he dreaded the thought of going to bed with anybody, let alone some cruddy Mexican.
"Why don't you knock it off about Rosa? Like I'm not that interested in getting laid by a Mexican whore who every guy in Mexico has probably laid already."

He watched Bert through his lashes and Bert shrugged, examined a pimple in the mirror propped in the window, and answered him.

"Rosa es algo especial, amigo. She's something ELSE. One look at you, she'll figure you're eighteen—twenty, maybe. And baby, she'll treat you right. You know what I mean?"

David knew vaguely.

"Man, you gotta make it sometime with somebody," Bert goaded. "Hell, like you're graduatin high school next year. It's time you got educated!" He spiced up the word with a leer. "Tell you what--I'll even treat!"

Bert's father was well-off and, like David, the boy had a generous supply of cash, though he was usually slow about digging into his pockets. David shot him an incredulous look.

"Man, I'll even more than treat," Bert added with mounting enthusiasm. I will personally keep you company. Ol Carter wants to go too. Oh, wow, can't you see square ol Carter in bed with fat Rosa!" And Bert snorted raucously.

Then. "No kiddin, Benton. Rosa's not half-bad. She's not even that old. Maybe not more than twenty-two or three. And not really so fat. Only well-rounded enough to . . ."

But David had walked out into the hallway, leaving Bert with his choice description hovering in the heavy afternoon air.
After dinner in the school dining room, David, Bert and Cleve Carter strolled to the plaza. Shoppers crowded the turista stalls this Friday night, but the boys ignored the bustle. During the weeks they had been in Monterey attending the special session for Spanish students, they had become indifferent to their surroundings. In the school they spoke only Spanish, and in the street, they learned words that were not taught by Professor Mendoza.

Two Mexican girls giggled past, speaking softly in Spanish, and David caught a remark about his long hair. Bert and Cleve had retained a cropped look, but David had let his hair grow, primarily to antagonize his mother. She was always carping about the shaggy-headed hippies, and her smugness irritated David. Actually, he didn’t care one way or the other about the length of his hair, but he got a kick out of imagining his parents at the airport, seeing him with almost shoulder-length hair. He thought of the marked contrast between himself and his upright, uptight married brother, and he smiled sardonically.

"Let's catch the flicks," Carter suggested, as they approached the movie houses. "I dig these Mexican broads. Nos vamos?"

"A-aa-aa, who wants to see another movie? We've seen three already this month," Bert replied. He had his eye on an American girl with long blond hair. The girl lingered at the corner, waiting for traffic to slow so that she could
cross, and Bert stared brazenly at the curve of her breasts beneath her summer jersey.

"Dig those," he whispered hoarsely to David, who glanced in the direction of the girl as she crossed the street. He nodded, affecting disinterest. Bert continued, undiscouraged. "Now, if you want to REALLY see a pair of em--Rosa is festooned." He spoke the word consciously, and David remembered Bert's saying he had picked it up in a dirty book he had found in his father's sock drawer. "Festooned," he repeated with savor.

Carter grunted in mock disdain. "Wow, he's off on goddamned Rosa again. Shit, man, for three weeks you've been mouthin off about Rosa. She must be the best lay in Monterey." Academic instruction notwithstanding, he pronounced the word Texas-style: Monna-RAY. "How about it, Benton? You about ready to go see for yourself? Hey--how about it--let's go pay a visit to Rosa raposa Grandiosa furiosa cosa de la cosa," he flaunted, exhausting the greater part of his hard-won summer vocabulary.

David smoothed his long, thick, somewhat wiry hair with both hands, cupping it close to his neck and shrugged. Rosa seemed to be closing in on him. Now even Carter was on the Rosa thing. Truth grabbed David. He was scared as hell at the thought of going to a whorehouse. He didn't think he could pass for eighteen, let alone twenty, and he couldn't bear the thought of being embarrassed if they should turn
him away. He knew where the house was located. It was part of a cluster of buildings enclosed within a high wall. Bert had described the courtyard with its tables scattered about like a night club. David couldn't imagine himself sitting around, drinking beer in the courtyard of a Mexican whore. In bed was beyond his conception. He wished he was in his own bed, with Milly somewhere nearby. Milly was his dog and the only female he cared about. He thought of her at home, missing him, and he winced, realizing it had been six weeks since he had hugged her and ruffled her ears and felt her cold nose nuzzling him when he sneaked her inside, after his parents were asleep.

"Wuddya say, Benton. Wanna go to Rosa's tomorrow?" It was Bert at his ear, and without thinking about what he was saying—the words rolling out like scattered marbles—David answered, "Yeah, okay. Why not?"

Bert let out a whoop, and a couple of passers-by looked around. The boys were conspicuous on the street tonight. Most of the people in this neighborhood were natives, the boys having left the tourist sections behind.

The moment the words were out of his mouth, David died inside. Now he couldn't back down! Carter had stared at him in such a way as to dare him to renege. He knew he had his neck out. He was aware that both Carter and Bert thought he was weird. They were never comfortable during his long spells of silence, and he failed to show proper enthusiasm for their
midnight analyses of the female sexual animal. It was not that David was indifferent to sex. He fantasized in the long nights when he was the only one awake in the dorm, and his imagination produced a far-out world sparked with enough realism to bring precaution in the form of a hand towel to bed with him. But the phantom-lover in his awake-dreams was half-woman, half-goddess, and the sex act was a mysterious, ancient rite, cloaked in Fellini phantasmagoria, with shimmering, bewitching figures surrounding him. During the day, anything as tangible as a Mexican whore caused him to shudder. Now he thought, God, I've done it! And he died a little more.

The three boys moved along the streets back to the dorm, not speaking. It was as if they had signed a secret pact in blood, swearing silence.

Later that night, after the light was out in their room and Cleve Carter had disappeared into his own wing, Bert hissed into the tense quiet, "You sure clammed up, Benton. Wattsa matter? Sorry about Rosa?" The dark sat silently on his words. "Shit, Benton, I don't give a damn. Like I don't care if you never go to bed with anybody. It's your problem. I just thought you ought to get a load of Rosa. If we gotta wind up this summer with credits, why not REALLY get something to your credit. Ya know what I mean?"

David agreed that he knew what Bert meant and added, "Knock it off tonight. I'm tired, that's all. Wake me for breakfast." And he turned over. But he didn't sleep much.
Somewhere toward morning, David dozed and dreamed. He was at the seashore. The night was wet and foggy. Hazy rings circled every street light that bordered the beach, and he could see fuzzy, steamy, misty clouds whiz past. The people in the dream were cardboard flat. Suddenly, he was at his brother's wedding party. He hated the guests who closed in around him. Most of all, he hated his brother. But he dared not let anyone know. He smiled and smiled, but only he knew that the smile was painted on. His mother towered in a Givenchy suit, her hair teased to perfection. When he got very close, he saw that it was not hair at all, but cotton candy, spun fine, mounting higher, ever higher into the sky. He cried to see that it was not hair, and when his tears fell, the cotton candy melted, and his mother became a very old, bald man. Milly appeared, scrambling under the feet of the people in the church, and he was afraid they would step on her tail. She wagged through the crowd, and he followed her closely. He was in whiteface now, dressed like Harlequin, strumming a lute with no strings. The floor shifted, and he sank, rose and sank again. The sky was behind him now. A cinematic sky--dark blue, coral, gray, special pink. It was late evening, and the sea rolled in from nowhere--out of the sky--and he felt his whiteface run like tears down his cheeks.

"Benton! For chrissakes, you're moaning in your goddam sleep again," Bert complained. And when David thought of the dream again, they were on their way to Rosa's.
The day was still and hot. David wore a white shirt and levis. Sandals. He was suddenly worried that he had on no socks. Maybe she would hate his bare feet. He looked at his toes, as the three boys made their way to the neighborhood where the house was located. He couldn't see anything but his naked toes and wished to God he had worn socks. Socks seemed all at once the most important thing in his life. Faking ease, he spoke nonchalantly.

"Carter, how come you wore socks?"

Cleve Carter looked at him with pained indulgence.

"What the shit do I know? I just got dressed like usual and put on my socks. What's so big about socks?"

Bert contributed, "Whattsa matter, Benton, forgot to wash your smelly feet? Rosa ain't so particular, amiguito. Forget your feet. You got more impressive parts of the anatomy to worry about." And he let out a saliva-spewed snort that caught David full-face.

"For godssakes, Bert, watch it!" David swiped at his face with the back of his hand and hated Bert for ever being born. He began to study him as they walked. He suddenly realized that Bert was a bigger prick than he had figured. His pimply face was nauseating enough, but what was even sicker, Bert's breath constantly smelled of garlic, or whatever the Mexicans seasoned everything with. David was choosy about his food and ate as few spicy dishes as possible. He always ordered American food when they went to a restaurant. The smell of garlic offended him, and Bert was a walking garlic ad.
Bert ignored David's jumpiness and turned to Carter.
"Carter, old buddy, mi amiguito de poco tiempo, I ask you, is this a day or is this a day?"
"For what," queried Carter dully.
"For WHAT? Jesus Kee-rist, Carter. You are a cube which is worse than nine kinds of a square. You are a pain in the ass," he elaborated. "For WHAT, he wants to know. Where in hell are we HEADING, Carter?"
Carter answered him defensively. "I don't see that it takes any special kind of a day to go visit a whore. What's so special about what the weather's doing? What I want to know is, what'll Rosa be doing?" And he laughed at his big joke.

David smiled cryptically. Good old Carter. Man that's exactly what he wanted to know. How does a whore act, anyway? He attempted to summon up one of his awake-dreams, but nothing came to mind except Giulietta Masina, and that lady was no whore. That lady was maybe the most special lady in the whole world. He visualized her now in the treehouse and wished he was watching Juliet of the Spirits for the seventh time right this minute instead of walking down a street in Mexico in the hot Saturday sun with a prick and a bore on the way to a whorehouse. God, he wished the whore would be Giulietta Masina. He suddenly recalled his dream and ached to be in whiteface, disguised from the world, and at the edge of the sea.
When they arrived at the house, David cursed his bare toes and followed Carter who followed Bert into the semi-shaded courtyard. A section of the patio was covered in bright tiles, and on these, small tables were randomly situated. The boys selected one in the shade and sat down, listening to the sounds of the deserted yard. Somewhere a small child whined for a CocaCola. No adult voice answered the whimper, and after a while David no longer heard it. He began to draw panda-like puppies invisibly on the table top. His notebooks and texts were covered with these little creatures. They were always in his mind, leaping about on short legs with half-closed eyes, very mournful and very appealing. The puppies he drew now seemed to be waiting for something. He conjured up one on a tombstone, his short legs out straight before him. The tombstone was placed on a catafalque. Another puppy stood atop a grand piano mounted on a wooden platform in whose corners gas lamps reared unlighted. Another perched on a chair beside a table standing in the middle of a tiny proscenium stage whose footlights were dark. A single candle glowed on the table. All of the puppies were waiting resignedly. Bert interrupted David's intense execution of the pencilless drawings.

"For chrissakes, Benton. You wanna wear out the top of the table or something?" Leave the goddam table alone, willya? Jesus if sometimes you don't give me the creeps!—Say—how do ya yell for beer in Spanish?"
Carter brightened. "That's easy. Tres Carta Blancas."

But he refused to display his virtuosity.


Almost before his words died away on the still air, a shuffle of huaraches was heard approaching from the shadows of the surrounding buildings, and a middle-aged Mexican woman appeared. Smiling at the boys, exposing bad teeth, she asked in poor English if they wanted something to drink. In his mind, David sketched a bottle of Carta Blanca into a waiting puppy’s reluctant paw.

Bert spoke Spanish better than the other two and conversed for a few minutes with the woman. He assumed an officious air, glancing several times in David’s direction. David had no real knack with the language and caught only a word here and there but gathered that Bert was making arrangements for him with Rosa. He couldn’t interpret much about procedure or what Bert was planning for himself and Carter. His head ached a little now, and his mouth was so dry he even looked forward to the beer. The woman shuffled away, and Bert leaned in close over the small, round table and whispered loud enough for anyone to hear.

"You gotta do all your dealin’s with her. She’s the big senora around here. I hear she likes em young! She was eyeing you, Benton. Ya notice? I think maybe you’ll get
her instead of ol Rosa." And he exploded in sadistic humor at the thought.

No matter how intimidated he was by Rosa, David preferred her a thousand times to this old woman who seemed infinitely sad to him. He had noticed that her hair was dyed very black—blacker than the blackest hair in Mexico, and on it the sun cast an orangish glow, like a tarnished halo. Her sagging body seemed out of place in the violet satin dress whose ample folds accentuated her shapelessness.

David recalled a character in *Juliet of the Spirits*—a woman-man—a kind of guru. Somehow the old Mexican whore assumed this identity in his mind, and he began to produce Fellini-like scenes through which he wandered in her company. The patio fell away, and while Carter and Bert spoke a low staccato beside him, David lapsed into one of his silences which the two boys had learned by now to ignore.

He was bystander, looking in at his dream. Giulietta Masina was crying because she wanted to run away with her young lover but cared deeply for her aging husband. She explained to the guru that her boy-lover had spent an unhappy childhood, and she wanted to compensate him by loving him with great tenderness and great passion. The lover was himself, and he stood watching Giulietta weep over him and wanted to console her, but he was only a spirit—one of the spirits that hovered near her at all times. Suddenly Giulietta turned to him. The guru had pronounced some special words,
and David found himself visible before her—naked and shivering. He wanted to hide his nakedness but was helpless to move. Then, slowly, with exquisite grace, Giulietta held out her arms to him, saying in her sad, gentle, deep-throated way, "Come with me, little boy." And he trembled as she drew him close to kiss him.

"Benton, for chrissakes," rasped Bert's voice into his fantasy. "Here comes the old bag with our beer. You look like a dead cat. Get on the stick."

The old woman slapped across the tiles and set three cold bottles on the table. Bert had become chief negotiator and apparently was arranging for all the expenses, for he and the madam began to haggle. David watched them, conjecturing that sooner or later he'd have to come up with his share. At this moment, however, he was glad not to be bothered with money. He felt, in fact, incapable of concentrating on anything! He had become a pawn, allowing himself to be moved about at will. The old madam turned her back on them and disappeared into the shadows. David reached for a bottle and poured some of the delicately-colored liquid into a tall glass, and as he bolted it, shrinking at the bitterness, he watched over the rim of the glass for his companions' reaction. They accommodated him by exchanging glances that summed up the general feeling that "wow, old Benton has blown his mind!"

This suspicion was confirmed a few minutes later when David heard himself call for another Carta Blanca. The bottles were small and he was thirsty as hell!
After the second beer, David felt taller. Certainly, he was less worried about his naked toes. He wiggled them to prove they were free agents, though attached to an almost-seventeen-year-old entity, and he smiled at his paradox. But the smile didn't show. Most of David's emotional responses were invisible. He smiled frequently and swore and laughed and died—he died often! All inside. He knew he disconcerted people because he was silent much of the time. But within, a riot was going on. Right now he was giggling like a fool.

The creak of huaraches stopped beside him, and his thoughts went into fireworks as he heard the old woman speak to him, echoing his fantasy. "Come with me, chiquito."

He shot a look at Bert who leered at him and winked wisely. Carter had gone to pee. David knew there was nothing for it but to follow the old woman. He stood up, swaying slightly, not looking again at Bert whom he hated at this moment. He silently directed a few favorite four-letter words at him and trailed after the old prostitute who headed for the buildings which squared the patio.

David knew he was not drunk, but he enjoyed the feeling of not giving a damn. He so seldom NOT gave a damn. It seemed pleasant not to worry, and yet, he knew that actually he was worrying about not worrying. He could feel himself trying to worry but somehow unable to succeed. It was strange not to be able to worry. Once, in the small hours of a long, fretful night, he had whispered into the darkness: "I worry
when I worry and I worry when I don't." Recalling that now, he giggled to himself. But his face betrayed nothing.

As he trudged along behind the woman, he heard a girl's voice singing a song popular with the mariachis on the plaza. They passed a kitchen where a skinny woman was busy pounding dough on a wooden table, and the musty, vital smell of tortillas reached out to him. An orange cat darted out of an open doorway and skirted into the sun of the patio, becoming a bright blur before David's eyes. He wished inanely that he could call "Here, kitty, kitty." But it occurred to him the cat probably understood only Spanish. "Here, gato, gato, he thought to himself, feeling silly. Several times the woman whom he followed turned around and smiled at him, shielding her rotten teeth with her hand, then beckoned him onward. He felt like Theseus, as he suddenly recalled him from a class in Greek mythology. Except that David's Ariadne was no maiden. He shivered then, and Giulietta flashed into his mind, becoming the thread that guided him through the labyrinth of his thoughts. It was to this thread that he clung with a kind of desperate compulsion.

The path led them halfway round the square when, abruptly, the old woman stopped before a partially open doorway. The interior was dark and he could perceive nothing beyond the opening. He felt stupid all at once, standing next to the woman who had led him there. He prayed she would leave him and prayed she wouldn't. He murmured "Gracias," for he
sensed she wished to be on her way and wondered if she were lingering for money. He reached into his pocket, but before he could bring out his wallet, she protested that "no, no, no quiero tus pesos." For once, he blessed Bert and then his thoughts jammed. The old woman had turned and was heading into the sunlight of the patio again, leaving him feeling foolish and completely exposed. He was beginning to remember how to worry!

"Pasa. Entra, muchacho." summoned a voice from within, and David moved as if mesmerized in its direction. The room was small and clean but very cluttered. He was vaguely aware of whiteness and darkness--walls and floor perhaps--and many objects scattered around. Crosses? Yes. Crosses. Hanging and propped and lying about. The one window was flounced in bright yellow, and the bed was neatly made up with a colorful chenille spread. When his eyes adjusted to the setting, he saw Rosa leaning over a ceramic bowl washing her face. She was wearing a red taffeta party dress, and about her neck glittered a rhinestone necklace which matched the pendants at her ears. He saw that she wore high heeled patent leather shoes and no hose. Her black shiny hair, which hung to her shoulders, sparkled with rhinestone stars. She didn't smile and said in English, "Get comfortable. It is very hot today."

David suddenly remembered his mission and reached nervously for the buttons of his fly. He had no earthly idea what to do after he unbuttoned his pants, but the occasion demanded
it, and he had made up his mind to go through with it—no matter what! Rosa watched him, and he froze, looking embarrassed, so she turned away and resumed sponging her face. She patted herself dry and splashed her neck and arms with cologne. David was immediately overcome with the stifling scent of gardenia. Besides garlic, the one odor most offensive to his senses was gardenia. He smiled ironically to himself, his eyes even more serious than usual. He got out of his sandals and was down to his yellow shorts, wondering why in god's name he had chosen yellow. He could not now remember whether he had thought of the color, the morning seemed so far removed. Now, suddenly, yellow seemed terribly symbolic. He looked at the yellow curtains and recalled a song from an old movie on TV—"Little Yellow Bird"—and wished that he could fly out of the window. The rustle of falling taffeta interrupted his wishful thinking, and he saw Rosa moving toward him in her panties and no bra. She was NOT fat. Her breasts were full and heavy but very firm. He had often sketched women's breasts like these, and he found himself admiring the dignity with which she moved. The room was small so that in a few steps, Rosa had crossed the floor. Yet she held herself proudly. David's eyes never left Rosa's breasts and when she lowered herself onto the bed beside him where he sat on the edge, his eyes followed her breasts downward so that he would not have to look directly at her face. She still wore the necklace and asked him to loosen the catch,
while she, with head tilted forward, removed the earrings. He hated his cold, numb fingers, but he managed to release the spring, and the heavy jewelry fell between her legs. She laughed, and a strong whiff of garlic, mixed with the heavy essence of gardenia, caused David to gag. But his face remained impassive.

Rosa's hands reached out and smoothed the already smooth contours of David's hair. There was gentleness in her touch, and she murmured something about the length of his hair, suddenly grabbing a handful, bringing his face close to her own. She forced him to look at her, and when he did, he saw that she was not very old and, in fact, rather pretty. No. Not pretty. Sad, maybe. Like Giulietta. He felt himself being drawn backwards, and he no longer fretted about what to do. He was weighted with the beer, and his worrying had slipped into another gear, now becoming a kind of consistent thrumming in his head, with no real meaning, like toneless music or a fountain splashing endlessly, with no pattern, no design. Rosa was very close, but his senses were anesthetized. He felt suspended, looking on, as he so often did in his awake-dreams.

He was in the treehouse with Giulietta beside him. He felt her hands, but he was not sure what they intended, and he let her have her way. She was gentle but persistent and extremely persuasive. He smiled inwardly, his eyes shut, and as he visualized her sad, brave, candid, little face, he
murmured her name. A name. Some name. He murmured the name, but his sounds were indistinct, and he could almost imagine, in one peculiarly alert corner of his brain, that in a minute old Bert would be jabbing him awake. The treehouse floated away, and he and Giulietta lay beside the sea. The sand was very hot. It covered his body and taunted him and frightened him and soothed him and inflated him. No. It was not the sand. It was Giulietta. No. Not Giulietta . . . .

Under the scalding shower in the dorm, David scrubbed his body relentlessly with soap and a cloth. He sorted crude stories about the aftermath of promiscuous sex and promised himself to pay an anonymous call to one of those health centers when he got home. He knew he would worry from now on about strange, unimaginable symptoms. He shuddered and gave himself another murderous scouring, as if somehow the suds would carry with them all evil threats. He was alone in the bathroom, having refused to join the others at dinner. He wrapped a towel about his middle and peered into the shaving mirror. Did he look different, he wondered? Serious eyes returned his gaze, and he smiled sheepishly, wiped it off, then smiled again, in spite of himself. "Sonofabitch! Son-of-A-bitch!" Yep. He seemed older, he decided. Not so much like the shivering boy waiting for Giulietta. GIULIETTA! The thought of her hit him like a fist. Almost at the same instant, he reasoned: Shit! Giulietta Masina is married to
Federico Fellini and she is a movie actress forgodsake in Italy and very probably eats piles of Italian spaghetti loaded with garlic. His eyes watched his face, the smile fading, as he let go of a favorite dream. And suddenly, his image in the glass blurred.

As he stood before the mirror, he pictured Rosa and grinned. But the grin faded as puzzlement clouded his eyes. Why had there been no kissing? He had so badly wanted to ask Bert about the kissing but he knew what Bert's reaction would be! Still, he was so sure there would have been kissing. With Giulietta, the kissing had always been the best part. He realized he remembered very little about the afternoon. It seemed more shadowy than his fantasies, but one thing he knew with growing certainty. NO MORE WHOREHOUSES! Okay. What, then? After Rosa.

He flipped off his towel and paraded around with flagrant delight for a couple of minutes. All at once he looked down at his nakedness and wondered if he would become a statistic of VD. He pondered over what he would be expected to tell in the dorm tonight, and of what he told, how much would be real and how much made up. But what really worried him, was when you went to bed with a pro like Rosa, why wasn't there any kissing?
DON'T HANG UP

To the voice answering his call, he repeated the word. "Hul-LO." There was no rise of inflection. The word was merely a flat statement of fact: I-am-here-again . . . Face-it . . . Don't hang up!

He eased himself into a huddle beside the phone on the floor and balanced his drink between his knees as he lit a cigarette in the dark. Then, with his drink in one hand, he strained across the width of the night stand and reached to the bed for an ashtray already spilling over. All the while he held the receiver to his ear, listening—attempting to interrupt—listening again. With a tremor in his voice, like an unsure schoolboy, he began to interject excuses to offset the stream of rejection pouring into his ear.

"I know it's late . . . yes I am . . . very drunk. But it's not that late, and I'm not that drunk. Where've you been? It's been over a week . . . thought you said you'd call . . . All I want to know is where've you been . . ."

He had control now. His voice was calm—almost steely-sure with a desperate lucidity as though the liquor had sharpened rather than fuzzed his ability to express himself.
"I must see you. Tonight. Oh, come off it. It's not that late. What's late! Well, sleep tomorrow. No... listen. Please listen. I am terribly lonely tonight. I am alone. And I am lonely. Do you know what that means?—Well... we could talk. I wouldn't try to stay. No, I'll leave when you say... Look, it's been three months since I tried to stay. Oh, I remember exactly how long." He laughed bitterly. "It's not so difficult to remember. LOOK, I'm coming over—Wait wait wait. Don't hang up. Wait. Please. All right. We'll talk on the phone. ON THE PHONE. All right... Only, don't hang up. Please."

Throughout this abortive attempt to win his point, he had taken convulsive swallows of his drink, and suddenly he was down to ice.

"Look, wait... let me pour a drink. No wait, it won't take a minute. Stay there... wait... I can take the phone with me..." He trailed the base of the phone after him the few steps to the small kitchen and with his free hand carefully aimed the bottle of Scotch at the glass. He missed, and the liquor spilled over into the icetray, hopelessly mixing with melting cubes. He cursed into the phone, tried again, this time filled half a glass with Scotch and forgot to replenish with ice.

"Now listen... Are you there?... Don't hang up." he said into the mouthpiece as he made his way back to the dark alcove where the bed was. "I could be over there in
fifteen minutes . . . I'll drive . . . All right--ALL RIGHT! I'll take a cab. What the hell difference does it make to you how I get there . . . PLEASE. Let me come. A week ago you promised--" Then, suddenly wary . . . "Are you alone? . . . You're not alone, are you? Who the ---- is with you? I told you I'd throw the next one down the stairs . . . Try me. Since when did that stop me--I'll break it down . . . You're goddam right I'm drunk. Just what did you expect? I need to see you. Can't you understand . . . listen, why can't you understand that I need to see you. I am so goddam lonely." His voice broke. "LONELY, goddam it, not lonesome . . . Well, there is a difference. I am never lonesome. I am always lonely." To himself he repeated, "always lonely," and repressed a sob.

Suddenly there was a subtle change in his voice . . . an attempt at control and geniality.

"Oh . . . yes . . . the part. Well I'm definitely cast . . . Agent has it set. Well of course it's a great part--and as you well know, I am particularly suited to it." He began to ramble . . . "He's quite young--a goddam mess . . . gets involved with this boy and they commit a thrill-murder . . . I know you know the plot, for christ sakes. Everybody knows the plot. They changed the names . . . Artie and Judd . . . Well of course I'm doing Judd." A bitter laugh. "I am Judd," he said, more to himself than to the phone . . . Then, intensely:
"Look, we're wasting so much goddam good time. I'm coming over . . . I will not stay. I only want to talk awhile . . . Look, I've finished my drink. If I leave now—"

Suddenly . . . "Are you alone?" Then viciously . . . "What flabby-assed broad have you lured up there now, if I may ask? What fetching little flabby-assed--Hello? Hello . . . Hello? --Goddamsonofabitch!" he said to the hum in his ear.

He dragged himself to a standing position and lurched to the kitchen where he slopped another Scotch into his glass. This finished off the bottle, and he shrugged indifferently as he dropped it with a flourish of mock-elegance into a garbage-filled sack under the sink. He nursed his drink to his bosom as he made his way back to the phone where he sat on the floor, Yoga fashion, carefully dialing the seven numbers, and waited. For an indeterminate time he seemed unaware of the clicking in his ear as the ringing continued unanswered. Then, coming to . . . his mind exploding, he screamed:

"How dare he . . . How dare he refuse to answer! What gives him the right . . . what in hell gives him the right--"

And then he was sobbing into the phone. The clicking persisted.

For a long time he held the phone to his ear, his fury spent, the sobs subsiding, his head on his drawn-up knees. Finally, with a stirring of energy, he focused on the luminous hands of his wristwatch and saw the time was 3:30. "Not so
goddam late," he muttered to himself. "If I can't sleep, why the hell should he . . ." He carefully laid the receiver on the night stand where he could hear the clicking and took long drinks as the heaving in his breast abated. He got to his feet and fumbled in the dark for his cigarettes somewhere on the bed. "If he thinks he's going to get any sleep--" he mumbled again and again.

With great care and a deliberation peculiar to the very drunk, he removed his wallet, and before placing it on the night stand beside the clicking receiver, extracted enough money for cab fare. He pushed his fingers through his tumbled hair, got into his jacket, drained the last of his Scotch, checked the room for burning cigarettes, and felt in his pockets for his key. He opened the door, and in the stale air of the outer hallway, shut it and secured both upper and lower locks before he maneuvered, with consummate dignity, the four flights down to the futility of another empty night.
"You can soak em now, please. It's like I was sayin. I'd get out of this town in a minute, but I don't want to leave my apartment and my phone. A phone's not the easiest thing in the world to come by when you're short on cash. And listen, where would I get the cash, once I made the move? You know what I mean? Like if I was to leave next week or next month, I wouldn't have nothing saved up. Because it takes a lot to live. Even with the extra manicurin I do up at the old folks' home and the hospitals, I never have an extra dime. And my car. Now that's a real expense. But gosh, I'd like to get back to California. I was real happy in California. I mean, I know I was younger then, and all, but the people out there was MY kind of people. You know what I mean? They understood me. People here! There's nothin deep about em. I'm deep. See. I mean I think a lot. I guess I don't look like no deep thinker, but when I'm manicurin, I'm thinkin all the time. Like reincarnation. You know about reincarnation? There's a swell article in one of this month's movie magazines all about it. This Zimbalist actor. He's a believer in reincarnation, and what he says in there describes exactly the way I feel about the whole subject. He's my kind of person. I mean, I know if I knew
that Zimbalist, we'd hit it off together right away. Like if you do good in this world, you'll be happier in the next, and all. I believe in that. That's a profound thing. That's deep. That's the way they all are out there in California.

When I was manicurin out there—that was fifteen years ago—I met people you could talk to about real important subjects.

--Other hand, please. Dryer too hot? You just holler if the dryer gets too hot.--I was workin for a hotel barbershop then, and the boss, he was a real good guy. A prince, like they say. He'd let me off early if I had a date that looked promising. If it wasn't for him, I'd've never met my husband. Maybe it was just as well I never did meet him, the way it turned out. But you don't know those things at the time.

Anyway, my boss, he was always good for an advance or to get off early. He told me when I left, Vergie, he said, anytime you need anything, you just come to old Nick, I'll stake you. I bet I could walk in there right now and Nick would give me my old job back. I was good. You know? I mean, I wasn't just any ordinary manicurist. I was taught by a pro. Nowadays, these schools run you through like you was so many cattle, but in those days, you got real supervision. I'd go tomorrow if I thought I could find Nick. They tore down his hotel right out from under him when the expressway went through that part of town. I know because I got a post card from Lucille who was still working for Nick at that time, and she told me kinda sadlike that the old shop was breaking up and
everybody going different ways. Lu and me was good friends. We'd double date a lot. She was always good for a lot of laughs. Nothing serious about Lucille. We all knew she had a bad set of lungs, but nobody thought she'd pass on as soon as she did. I never was so shocked when I got that little package from her sister I never had even met, and she sent me a pair of Lu's earrings because she said at the last Lucille said give those earrings to Verzle, she always liked em so much. I guess she knew she didn't have long and that's why she had such a don't-give-a-damn outlook on life. She'd go to bed with a guy soon as look at him. I still got those earrings. I never could bring myself to wear em. Not that I didn't appreciate them and all. But I just put em in my little cedar chest and I take em out now and then and remember the way Lu used to laugh at everything. They make me sad. You know what I mean? Men always used to love Lucille. Ed used to eye her, but it was me married him. I got him by holdin' out and not bein' fast like Lucille. Mama taught me that. She said I had to learn the difference between what men wanted and what they WANTED. She said to give em what they WANTED after the ring was on that certain finger. I wish I never did move back East with Ed. That was my big mistake. Cause people there just don't understand a person. Anymore there than they do here in Texas. Texas is so huge. You know what I mean? And people don't care about you. Not like they do on the Coast. If I could find Nick, I think
maybe I'd move tomorrow. Course, I'd hate to leave Mama. She's afraid to go out by herself at night now. And she loves the little apartment. And all her pot plants. It'd be mean to uproot Mama when she's so settled. I'm glad I moved away from Philly after the divorce. It was good to come home to Mama, and we've done pretty good livin together after so long. Nearly ten years now together. But Mama don't ever have nothin to talk about. You know what I mean? —Let's soak this hand now, huh? I'm goin slow on these cuticles because that's where the real artist comes out in a manicurist. I know I've never done your nails before, but I bet you come back to me, because I've been told I'm a real artist in my work. Mama always says if you do anything, do it right. And that's the law I set up for myself in manicurin. Men appreciate that. I'd really like to go back manicurin men. I guess you think a woman my age wouldn't attract no men-customers no more. But, I've still got a lotta life in me. I think Lucille was right. You gotta laugh a lot. Course, I can't find a whole lot to laugh about here in Texas. Oh, I like our little apartment, and it's good to have a phone and all. I don't get that many calls, but you never know. And Mama enjoys callin her church friends. She wants me to join her church, but I can't see no point to join up with a bunch of sheep that run to church and never think about a thing. Who's there to talk to? I've gone with Mama a time or two, but that bunch of old ladies she pals around with are
so silly. Alls they ever talk about is television and church. I want to talk about deep things. I bet you're a deep thinker. I can tell just by the way you look at me and nod. It's like you really understand me. Like the people in California. Somebody told me once there was a church out there called Vendanta and it's like reincarnation. I mean it's a kind of a religion which the Hindus or somebody started and they are always happy to take in new members. I got me a book out of the library and read up on it, but most of it was too much for me. But I know I could understand it if it was explained right to me. And where it's most popular at is out there in California. I'd leave tomorrow if I thought I could pass the state boards. I haven't had any beauty exams in twenty years, and I went and let my California license run out when I moved back East with Ed, cause I thought sure my manicurin days was over. It's funny how you can never tell. I'm scared to death I couldn't pass those boards. I hear they're real rough now. All kinds of college questions. Not that I wouldn't understand the questions. But a person gets rusty. And some of the techniques have changed and things. If I could find Nick I wouldn't need no license, I bet. Not at first anyway. Course Nick may be clear out of the barberin business by now. He could even be dead, I guess. Fifteen years is a long time between seein people.—You want polish? I tell you I'd kinda like to buff em a little, even if you want polish, because I think buffin's so good for em. It strengthens em.
Course, you've got well-cared for hands. Anybody could see you don't do a lot of heavy work, but still, it never hurts to strengthen em. You care if I buff em? Good! There's a special know-how in buffin your nails just right. I mean, you go too fast in two directions, you burn the nails. Burn em! That's a lot of friction. See, you got to swing down steady and in a rhythm. A regular pro taught me. That was when I was just a kid, but I don't forget a thing, once I learn it. I was good-lookin when I was a kid. Real slim then and good-lookin legs. Men always used to look at my legs. I think it was my legs what first attracted Ed. He was a man to appreciate a good pair of legs. Trouble with Ed was he kept on appreciating legs after he should've quit! I never could keep up with him. He could lie same as look at you, and he claimed I talked baby-talk and he couldn't stand it. We got so alls we ever did was fight. I stood it as long as I could, and I came on to Mama. I mean, when a man don't appreciate anything you do for him! I gave up a perfectly fine job with Nick to go live in that cold, godfor-saken Philadelphia, and Ed never appreciated nothin. I sure was smart when I left him. Cause he never appreciated a thing I ever did for him. Boy, Nick sure used to appreciate me. You know what I mean? He was an older man than me, but he knew how to make a woman feel like she was appreciated. Like he'd always notice if I was wearing something new. And he used to tell me I smelled good. Nick wasn't no marryin
kind, though. He was good and kind, but he didn't care that much about a wife and kids. He just lived for that shop. Gosh, I wonder where Nick is right now. I'd leave this town tomorrow if I thought I could find Nick and get me a phone when I got out there. A person's got to have a phone. It takes a lot for a deposit. You gotta stop and think about things like that. But you need a phone. You never can tell when somethins goin to come up and someone's goin to need to call you. And then I'd have to pass my boards. But I bet I could do it. Somethin tells me once I got to California things would start to go good for me again. Because I could slim down. And I've still got good legs. Mama tells me so all the time. Maybe Mama wouldn't miss me so much. After all, she's got her church and her pals. I could sell my car to get some money to tide me over. Course, I don't know what I'd do out there without any car, but I might could get a job in a department store selling handbags or something till I passed my license and save up for another one. I bet it wouldn't be no time till I was on my feet. I might even join one of them Hindu churches. I bet they're lookin for deep people.--This shade of polish suit you? No polish? Well, honey, it won't take but a minute more, and they can be any shade you want em to be. Here's a nice coral or maybe you'd like something darker. Well, it's up to you, but it's the same price with or without. I thought I just ought to tell you that. I hope you'll come back. Because I've really
enjoyed talkin to you. You're deep like me, and you don't find many deep ones in this town. Call and just ask for Vergie. I'm sure I'll be here. But if I'm not, you'll know I've went to California."
A ROT TEN WAY OF LIFE

Three AM in Manhattan in front of the Baths was a fairly risky time to pick up a trick. He would have done better to go inside. At least, inside there was authority and protection. But the persistent figure in the shadows of the building aroused his curiosity, and he lingered, lighting a cigarette. The Scotch he had consumed since around eight had fuzzed his vision so that the figure merged with the darkness. He hesitated a few minutes more, dragging on his cigarette, decided to hell with it and started to push open the heavy door above which a light glowed dimly, when he heard a voice immediately recognizable as Puerto Rican.

"What's your hurry? Where's the fire at this hour?"

A short snort of a laugh blended with the voice, and he realized the shape in the dark was really two people. He moved a little closer, ignoring the signal of caution in his gut. A match flaired below two faces and his interest quickened. They were young. And they had that look of the very wise about them. The match went out then, and he tried a casual ploy.

"You going inside?"

"Nah. The air is better out here."
The other voice contributed. "Live around here . . . ?"

Insinuation coated the edges of the words.

He stayed cool. "Not far." And then. "Move out in the light--I like to see who I'm talking to . . . ."

"Sure. Like it's more interesting that way." The word was pronounced in four syllables, and there was a flirtatious suggestion about it. The two shifted into the quasi-light, and he appraised them quickly. One was older--maybe a year or two. The younger was about seventeen, with his naturally black hair bleached to a kind of reddish gold in this light. He looked small-assed and knowing. The older guy was heavy-set, tough-looking. A small wrinkled scar slightly pulled up the right side of his mouth, which may have accounted for the meanness in his face. His eyes were expressionless, as if they had seen everything already.

They looked him over with a false air of detachment.

His stage-name was Glenn Selden, a slight variation from the Simmons he had been born with. He was about thirty, not tall, but he carried himself with a kind of dignity--even when drunk--that gave him a distinct identity. He was smallboned, though not delicate, with a profile that theater reviews described as classic. He drank a lot--especially between shows, and he had been between shows for so many months now that it was just him and his unemployment check. When he drank he lusted. And he had been drinking all night.
The tough kid spoke up. "That's a slick jacket, man."

It was insinuative, almost ominous. The other boy snorted his laugh, and the ping of warning went off again inside Glenn. But this time in his head.

"Yeah ... well, it's just a jacket." He turned aside. Something told him to let these two alone. He was not given to violence. It sickened him, and although he knew he walked with it whenever he made this scene, he still kept some kind of inner alarm that sounded when things looked rough. The alarm was buzzing now, and even through the Scotch, he knew to heed it.

He searched out the younger boy for a long minute, taking in his body and his face, then met the other's eyes. Somewhere behind the emptiness was a threat. He casually moved to the entrance of the building. "See ya around," he tossed over his shoulder, taking the three steps and throwing his weight against the big door. He crossed the deserted lobby to the bath area. He knew he could satiate his screaming body somehow in that steam-filled abyss, and what did it matter how and with whom, so long as he could drown the loneliness for an hour. The Scotch only doused it. And right now he was out for oblivion.

Near dawn he dragged himself up the three flights of grimy marble stairs. The Baths had produced no action tonight, and every nerve in his body cried out for release. His head ached and he was still a little drunk. He longed for sleep and dreaded it. For he knew he would only have to wake again.
His apartment was 4B at the end of the landing, and the hall outside his door was bleak, grayed by years of tenement dwellers and their grim futility. He glanced at 4C as he passed and wondered if Carol was on the early shift. Christ, he hoped she wouldn't start in on him today. Fat old bag! If she wasn't banging on his door to bitch about his radio or Gina whining, it was to bellyache about his late callers. Goddam paper-thin walls. She was nosey and, he figured, so straight she was probably revolted by him. He could sense it. He hoped to Christ she was working the day shift today, then maybe he'd be out by the time she came home. He couldn't figure how she could drag those two hundred pounds around the diner and not be too tired to start up with him!

He fumbled for his key and patiently worked the two locks—upper and lower—all the while speaking softly and lovingly to the dog who was madly sniffing the space under the door in the room beyond. When the door swung open, he took her full weight on his chest. She was a long slender fawn-colored whippet, and her extraordinary grace was momentarily blurred by the furious scrambling and snuffling that welcomed his return. He commanded her to stay and then meticulously secured the locks again. The room was a stale jumble of newspapers, playscripts, coffee cups, cigarette butts in a half-dozen ashtrays, and clothes and towels scattered around. He hadn't lifted a hand in three weeks except twice to take out the garbage. In the cubicle of a
kitchen, roaches disappeared frantically as the light came on. Four paper sacks overflowed with litter and beer cans, and dishes spilled over from the drain into the sink. On the small four-burner stove, a skillet with the remains of an indifferent supper kept cold company with a greasy tea kettle. Beyond the living room, a tumbled bed loomed in an alcove, and behind it, forlorn drapes thinly disguised a paint-spattered window that looked out onto a void.

Glenn got out of his jacket and dropped it on the couch. He pulled dingy white drapes across the two windows in the living room, carefully checking to see that the one reached by the fire escape was locked. He murmured to the whippet, Gina, as she settled down, her brown intelligent eyes following his every move. He disposed of several of her piles, distributed about on newspapers, and wearily stooped to extract a can of dog food from the cabinet under the sink. Gina watched him and began to quiver in anticipation.

"Yes. That's my elegant lady." He might have been talking to his co-star in a play. "Yes. That's Daddy's beautiful girl," he went on. The dog trembled from head to foot, but she sat on her long legs and didn't move. When he had mixed the canned meat with a handful of dry pellets, he added a splash of water, and stirring the contents of the bowl, set it before her. She ate daintily, stopping abruptly now and again to watch his movements.

He spread fresh papers, checked the window once more to be sure the correct one was locked and then entered the alcove
where he got out of his pants and shoes and fell on the bed. He fumbled for a cigarette from the clutter on top of the night stand and assumed his habitual position of head thrown back against a bunched-up pillow, eyes focusing carefully on nothing, straight up. The cigarette burned to ash as he lay there listening to Gina moving about restlessly, now that she had finished eating. He called to her finally, and she sighed and settled beside him on the bed, stretching her long neck so that the tip of her nose nuzzled the warmth of his body. Glenn snubbed out the cigarette, pulled a spread over them both, and slept.

He had no idea how much time had elapsed when he became aware of the cougher from the floor above who had started his death rattle. Glenn fitfully threw back the cover, as the pipes, now clattering throughout the building, sent up heat that pervaded the fusty closeness of the room. He sank back in a kind of drugged sleep, the periphery of which was rimmed with awareness, and somewhere in that state heard Gina whining. Rousing somewhat, he groped for her, missed her and found that she was gone. He was irritated, for he wanted her beside him. He dragged his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, discovering Gina in a stubborn watch before the apartment door beyond the alcove. She was quivering all over, and her whine was a prisoner in her throat. He staggered over to her in time to see the doorknob turn silently, first one way, then the other. Gina would have attacked the door, but
he commanded her to stay. Apprehension grew in his chest as he stood there frozen, not sure how to handle what might be on the other side of the door. Gina, despite the imposed restraint, hurtled against the door, piercing the air with a flurry of barking. Glenn hooked his hand through her collar and ordered her to be still. He made no move toward the door. For a moment there was no sound and then a tapping began. Glenn's mind tumbled. Probably somebody needing a drink—bad. Maybe Artie. Artie had been out of work as long as he had—since the off-Broadway thing folded, and he knew Artie had no conception of time.

"Artie, is that you?" He spoke low through the door, and in the same low register, a muffled voice answered him.

"No. It's Rico. We met earlier tonight. Let me in." The accent was unmistakable and Glenn's pulse quickened. It was the younger of the two tricks he had left outside the Baths.

"For chrissakes, this is no time for a visit. How the hell'd you find my apartment?"

He stood motionless before the door. He realized now, his head clearing a little, that they had followed him and somehow managed to get inside the building after he had let himself in. Christ, he must have been out on his feet.

Gina was wild to growl, but the restraining hand on her neck dictated the policy. She continued to whine in the upper reaches of her throat, and her tense body reflected her nervousness.
The voice behind the door came on cajolingly. "Look, Glenn Selden ... That's you ... Right? Well, I'm Rico. The blond. Remember? Lemme in, huh? We could get acquainted ... Right?"

Glenn figured out that they had watched him climb the stairs and compared his apartment number with the mail box below to get his name. He recalled with a lurch of excitement the body of the young Puerto Rican. But caution sounded. This rotten neighborhood had produced three muggings already last month. How long could his luck hold out? He glanced at his watch. It was 5:40.

"Forget it," he called lightly through the door. "See ya around. Both of you beat it."


Glenn reappraised the situation. He was just a punk kid. If he had taken the trouble to follow him ... why not? His lust was doing the reasoning now and he forgot to ask himself why the boy had not called to him on the street.

He commanded Gina to stay on the couch. She obeyed, but she was shaking all over. He lurched into the kitchen and poured himself what was left of the Scotch, not bothering with ice. He tossed down a couple of gulps and splashed water
on his face at the sink. With his glass in his hand, he returned to the door and spoke through the crack.

"You there?"

"Sure, I'm here. You gonna open up? You will not be sorry, I think."

The voice had that provocative quality about it that Glenn had recognized outside the Baths. What the shit, he thought, and released the two locks. Before he could turn the knob, the door burst inward and the young hoods rushed him, knocking his glass out of his hand, spilling liquor down the front of his shorts. Gina had leapt from the couch and was growling viciously, her large teeth bared, her face distorted with hate and fear. Carlos, the older boy, grabbed her savagely from behind, twisting her head up at a grotesque angle. Rico quickly shut the door, bolted it again and was behind Glenn in an instant, his arm hooked around his neck, wrestler-fashion.

"For Godsakes, let the dog alone. I'll quiet her. Please for Godsakes, let go of the dog. You'll break her neck." Carlos held Gina in such a way that she could not open her mouth, and the whine came up frightened and mournful through her constricted teeth.

"You must be some kind of a goddam nut. Me let go of this dog! I'll kill the skinny sonofabitch." And with his other hand, Carlos reached inside his jacket and pulled a short ugly knife out of a leather holster. The blade flashed menacingly.
Glenn was pleading now. "For Christ's sake, take what you want and get the hell out of here. But leave that dog alone. She will obey me. I'll tie her up if you say. But please, in the name of Christ, don't touch that dog." He was talking in gasps, as if he had been running, arms extended, vainly reaching out to the dog.

Rico tightened his hold around Glenn's neck and cut off his breath at the throat. He choked and thought wildly they're going to kill us. They're going to kill us both. The dirty bastards. The rotten lousy bastards.

He begged to talk, and Rico loosed the crook of his arm sufficiently that Glenn could get his breath.

"What do you want? Money? Do I look like I have a goddam dime? What would I be living in a dump like this for if I had any money? Clothes? Take what I've got. Take the whole rotten place with you. But for chrissake, leave us alone."

He pitched forward suddenly in an effort to free himself, and Carlos, still hanging on to Gina's collar from behind, crashed his free fist into Glenn's face. He sickened as something crushed in his nose and blood gushed out. He sagged against Rico and would have slumped to the floor had not the restraining arm about his neck prevented it.

Rico got busy then and began to tie Glenn's arms behind him with a piece of cord he took from his pocket. He finished the job and pushed Glenn so that he lost his balance and fell to the floor. He moaned and wanted to mop at the blood but
had no hands. The blow had been powerful and the front of his face was alive with pain.

Glenn thrashed about in his mind, wildly, desperately. He came up with Carol. Surely to Christ she'll hear this commotion. Please don't let her think it's horseplay. God, let her hear. It seemed inane that he should be praying for Carol to butt in. He had done a complete about-face in what -- twenty minutes? A lifetime. He cried out suddenly--a wordless groan, projecting his voice with all the strength in him. Carlos instantly lunged at him, releasing the dog to Rico who grabbed her from behind with a bath towel around her neck, pinning her against him. Carlos bent over Glenn, holding the knife to his throat, sneering, "Shut your mouth, you stinking faggot. Did you think you had landed a couple of live ones? You creep. A lousy queer ever lay his hand on me I'll cut out his liver." And he meant it. Glenn knew that. He was sick. Sick in his stomach and sick in his heart. Any trace of the Scotch had been cleared away now, and he knitted his reason together.

"Look," he started in, almost pleasantly. His brain registered you goddam idiot, you sound downright pleasant, as if you're entertaining guests. He wanted to howl with laughter. But what came out was a sob. "Look," he repeated, "There's a closet in there. Take whatever you want. I have a few bucks in my wallet. Here's my watch." He waggled his hands behind him ineffectually. "Take it, for God's sake and
get out. We'll forget it. Leave me and the dog alone and we'll forget the whole thing. I never saw you." He was warmed up now, and his voice began to hold them. He pleaded for the dog and then switched to clear reasoning. "It's only a mugging, this way. Why ask for worse? They're out to get guys like you. Come on. Take the stuff and clear out. Pile it all in my suitcase. Anything you want, only get that filthy knife away from my neck and let that dog go before you choke her to death."

The low forcefulness of his voice continued, pleading, reasoning, pleading, reasoning. He prayed behind his stream of words that somewhere on the other side of the wall Carol was getting ready to leave for work. Please let this be her early shift. He tried to calculate. It must be close to six. She had to be right there in the bathroom. Why hadn't he heard the toilet flush? God, maybe she had worked all night and hadn't come in yet. He tried to listen above the blood pounding in his ears, but Gina's whines were silver-thin and they penetrated every corner of the apartment. She must be there. Surely to Christ she had to hear the commotion. She sure as hell always heard everything else!

His mind worked while his words pounded away at Carlos and Rico, who only commented in grunts or short profanities. Their eyes raked the shabby apartment, and once Rico dragged Gina across the room into the alcove where he overturned a large pasteboard box on a shelf above the clothes rod, scattering
glossy theatrical pictures and letters. He swore as he failed to uncover anything of value. "Wotta crappy hole!" Gina tried to escape his grasp, and in securing her, he stumbled over the box, knocking against the wall. Glenn moaned for Gina, whose attempt to howl was stifled by a tightening of the towel around her neck. Glenn's mind churned. Carol, you've got to be one foot away on the other side of that wall! He willed her to be there. All at once he was aware of people's voices coming up from the street below and trucks rattling past. He cut his eyes to the windows and saw gray daylight oozing between the drapes. The tenement had begun to throb with life. Glenn's mind teemed. He reached inside it for a gambit.

"You're wasting your time, you guys. It's daylight. You're asking for it in this building, people leaving for work--coming home . . . They know me around here . . . Drop in on me at all hours. You're asking for it, I promise you. They know my dog. They'll notice I haven't taken her out. Wise up and beat it. What you'll get out of me's not worth getting caught for. Surely you can see that." He was pleading again. Carlos picked up his words and flung them back at him.

"It's not what we get outta you. It's what we give ya. Maybe me and Rico here we fix you so you don't make out so good no more. Huh, Rico? We fix him. Huh?" He leaned in further with the knife and pressed the tip to the hollow of
Glenn's throat. "Choke that goddam mutt," he commanded Rico. "I don't want no goddam howling mutt to louse us up. Let's do this thing right." He grinned into Glenn's face—a brutal, drawn-up mockery of a grin. He pushed the knife into the flesh as far as it would go without piercing, and a cry of protest started in Glenn's throat. Rico had jammed the table-radio under his free arm and stuffed Glenn's jacket inside his buttoned-up coat. He motioned Carlos to grab the watch. They moved in spasms, never taking their eyes off their captives. With his free hand, Rico jerked Gina so that he up-ended her, and her long, twig-like legs flailed the air as she hit the floor with her spine. She yelped frantically, and Glenn shuddered and groaned for her, not daring to move into the knife-tip at his neck. At that precise moment, a furious battery of blows struck the adjoining wall, accompanied by a shrill female voice.

"Glenn! What in hell's going on over there! I'm calling the cops! You hear me Glenn! I'm coming over there and I'm bringing the cops. You can't carry on like that around here! I'm calling the cops right now. I'm calling em! You hear me?"

It seemed to Glenn that she must be beating the wall with a bottle or a hammer, and her screeching mounted in frenzy as the buffeting intensified. He heard a short snarling cry in Gina's throat, ending abruptly in a whimper as if something had knocked the breath out of her. Suddenly a savage side-swipe to his face blinded Glenn momentarily. He felt he had
become the eye of a hurricane, as action exploded about him. Then through a blur he saw a whirl of movement—undefined, inexplicable. His ears resounded with the hollering, the hammering. He shut his eyes. Dared not see. Dared not think. His face stung from the blow and his nose throbbed intensely. Something began to press in on him from all sides. He tried to clear his brain in order to determine the source of the boding intrusion. Then—almost hysterically—he realized that it was the deafening quiet of the room that bore down on him. The hoods were gone. The pounding had ceased. Carol's voice was still.

He sat slumped over Gina, half-laughing, half-sobbing. The front of his shirt was bloody, and his nose was swelling and ugly. Gina's eyes were wild, the whites shot with red, her body trembling convulsively.

"Oh my God, he's hurt," Carol wailed as she came through the open door. Then . . . "Oh Glenn, your nose. Oh, how terrible . . . your nose."

She was into the kitchen now, hunting for ice and a knife to cut Glenn's bonds, at the same time trying to comfort him and the dog with a profusion of chatter. Tears ran down her face as she rattled on about calling the police and never dreaming and God how awful and who would have believed. She sliced through the cord and gathered him to the refuge of her ample body, pulling Gina close against them as she began to apply ice to Glenn's battered nose. His fingers carefully
explored Gina's heaving ribs. He could not stop shaking, nor
could he yet answer Carol's rapid fire questions. His mind
was reeling off a thousand disjointed thoughts. Primary among
these was OK it's happened. You knew it had to one day. They
got off with a jacket, a radio, and a lousy watch. You and
Gina came out with one broken nose and your lives. He uttered
a short bitter laugh. Not a bad exchange for such a rotten
way of life.
"Christ, I'm glad you're here, Kay. C'mon in. Let me fix you a drink. I'm having one. Just knowing you were coming by, I've . . . let down a little."

He was spare, wiry, not quite as tall as the fortyish-looking woman who stood in the entry--her arms about him briefly--not quite her age. She nodded against his cheek but said nothing.

"I've been so goddam . . . so . . . no, no--I'm all right . . . give me a minute. Fix yourself a drink. Let me . . . get hold of myself. I . . . guess I've been waiting for you all week to . . . to talk about it."

At the bar she tended her glass briskly, familiarly, not looking at him. She glanced about her, weighing, as usual, the superior taste of the room. She crossed to the velvet couch opposite the hassock where he sat studying his drink and waited for him to speak.

"You didn't mind, did you, my calling you like that? I was sorry afterward, when I realized you weren't due back in town for almost a week. But I had to tell you. I knew you'd want to know."

He gulped down the last of his drink before answering the question she put to him.
"No, no . . . I haven't been alone. I've been with people all week. Thank God for that. The play's running, you know.

She nodded.

"Jeezus! Going back to the theater. Trying to concentrate. Everybody kind of tiptoeing around like I was going to break. I've tried to let them see I'd rather talk about it, but nobody will. It's like a conspiracy. All day they keep coming into my office with 'Uh--Ed' this and 'Excuse me, Eddie, but--uh' that. As if suddenly I was so goddam breakable."

She tried to explain it away, excusing generally people's awkwardness on these occasions, and he agreed.

"Oh, I understand, I guess. They don't know what to say. But it seems to me that they could see I'd rather talk about it than try to pretend it away . . . I've scarcely cried. That night I broke down a little. And the next day when I called you long distance . . . God, I'm grateful you came by tonight. -- Here, you need some more ice."

He moved to the bar. She picked up an alabaster egg from its stand on the low table in front of her and began to roll it between her palms. He watched her from the bar and, in a flash of amusement, recalled having once told her she'd wear it down to the yolk one of these days. He came and sat on the floor in front of her.

"Why won't they talk about it, do you think? That's what's got me so upset. You can see that, can't you?"
He set his freshened drink on the table and, reaching for the egg, took it from her and began to rub it between his own palms, its smoothness warm from her handling.

"You know, Kay, you're the only woman I can talk to and be myself." He examined the egg as if he'd never seen it before, then all at once looked up into her eyes. "You know how important he was to me."

Tossing the egg back to her, Ed got up and began to pace, covering a track in the long shag of the carpet, as if he were resuming a familiar journey.

"They've all clammed up. Like he never existed. Like he had no identity. And he was so real! I told him, so many times. You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Lennie. You smell good and you feel good and you taste good. He loved me. I know that. I just wasn't enough, that's all."

He stopped before her, looked at her a moment, hard, then looked away. "He wasn't in love with me. You know?"

She nodded, waiting for him to go on.

"I think he was in love with his own childhood, for god's sake. Is that possible? He used to lie in my arms and cry. He couldn't ever get over the fact that his grandmother gave him away. She was all he ever cared about, his grandmother. When his parents got divorced, it was his father's mother who took him in--I don't know--when he was four or so. And he loved her because she was good to him. She has this farm, and Lennie used to be her little man and help her
around the place. He'd cut pictures out of the monkeyward
catalogue while she sewed, and help her bake cookies and
bread and things. I guess that's why he always liked to
come over and fix meals at my place. I used to tell him,
'you might as well move in. You're in love with my goddam
gas range!' He'd just smile and tell me to shut up and mind
the salad while he did something marvelous to a wine sauce
or an omelette. When he was a kid on that farm, I think he
was happy. And maybe that was the only time. It was just
him and Gammy, he called her. I don't understand that old
lady. She must've loved him. She taught him everything she
knew. He could even sew better'n she could. He told me he
used to make her little party aprons and surprise her--out of
scraps from her sewing basket when he was just little like
that."

Kay conjectured that Lennie's gift for costuming was a
result of all that, and Ed agreed, adding, "He was good at
a lot of things. You know? . . . She pounded God into him.
When he was living with his Gammy, they never missed a church
meeting. He said he used to lie in bed after church some
Sundays and wonder what it was like to be dead and if he'd
really go to heaven. He told me once he was glad he had
given up all that shit . . . . She used to take him visiting.
All her old lady friends would fuss over him and call him
their purty little yellow top. He laughed out loud when he
remembered to tell me that. One night, though, when we were
in bed together, I grabbed hold of his hair and pulled him down to me and said c'mere little yellow top, and he got furious with me. I thought he was going to get dressed and walk out. 'Forget that shit,' he said and kinda sobbed. 'I never told you that stuff. Okay?' And of course, I didn't mention it again." He picked up her glass, which she had drained, and glanced at the bar, but she shook her head and he went on talking.

"Well, his mother remarried. I don't know exactly how old he was then. Little though, still. His mother had made a new life and wanted him back. It was a mess. He was only in grade school, but he liked it out there in the sticks, and he was used to it with his wonderful Gammy. When he first found out what was going on, he'd hide when he heard footsteps on the porch because he figured they were coming to get him. His grandmother wouldn't say much to him about it. She tried to ignore it, he said, like maybe it would go away. One day . . . ."

He interrupted himself to hold up her glass again and this time she assented. She followed him the few steps to the bar, indicated a very light Bourbon, then sat on one of two chairs flanking an inlaid table. He sat in the other . . . .

". . . sure enough, there was his mother--though she didn't look like he remembered her--and some fellow with her; they were smiling and had a new suitcase and a kitten for him, and they said c'mon they were taking him "home." He looked
at his Gammy and she looked away. No tears. No protests. Just looked away, wringing up her dress in a wad. He said Gammy, once, then once more, and the next thing he knew, he was in the car with those smiling people, and he said he never saw his grandmother again."

Kay's face told him she could scarcely believe it.

"Never! She didn't even have him out for a visit. Once a year, on his birthday, he'd get a card saying Lennie, your Gammy loves you. And that was it. I guess he got so he buried the memory. But he told me that after he started to live with his mom and Grady, he felt like he was different. All gone. As if he wouldn't even leave a shadow in the sun. I don't think he ever told that to anyone else but me. One night when he was having one of his crying fits, he said, 'I need you, Ed. You make me feel like I exist!' Imagine . . . me!"

He shrugged deprecatingly, reached for a pack of cigarettes on the table, lit one.

"Me, mind you, pushing forty. And queer as a three-dollar bill—with my little book of tricks—life secure—busy—the theater my thing—and here he comes. He was something to see, though, wasn't he? Big. And blond. And young. You know, Kay, when he stood in a doorway, with the light in his hair, I could feel my pulse speed up. You understand, not sex exactly. Not just sex . . ."

It didn't surprise Ed when Kay interrupted to praise Lennie's remarkable beauty. He knew she shared his appreciation
for slim, elegant young men, and Lennie was no exception. She had often commented on his striking blondness, his athletic build. But Lennie bored Kay. Ed knew that—knew how hard it was for her to talk to him.

"All right, he was dull. I'll grant you that. He was dull. I knew you suffered him, every time you had us by for dinner. But with me, he was different. Not that he didn't like you. He felt more at ease with you than most women, and he knew you knew he was queer, and understood, and didn't judge. We'd laugh sometime and call you queen of the queens or fag-hag, but he really liked you. It's just that I was the only person he could be himself around. If he knew I was expecting somebody to drop by, he'd wait half the night till he figured they'd be gone, and then he'd walk over from his rooming house--four in the morning sometimes, and fix eggs. We'd just sit there, if I was hung over. But he was there. And he cared. You know? ... Now ... ."

She sighed, got up, crossed to the window and looked out on the night checkered with squares of light from windows in the neighborhood. Bare branches moved in the wind. She hugged herself and walked over to the floor furnace, where she stood letting the warm air swirl up about her. She watched him watching her.

"Why do you think it's so hard for people to talk about him? I never directed him in a show that people didn't notice him. He was damned good on stage, too, wasn't he? Had a nice solid look up there."
She nodded, but he caught a glimmer of something in her face.

"Okay, he was better back stage with sets and costumes, but hell, if he'd get an itch to do a role, I couldn't say no."

She had to admit he always pulled it off. Ed laughed when she said Lennie reminded her of those beautiful guys they cast in the lousy foreign movies you see on TV. Hercules or what's-his-name with the heel. She went on about how dependable he seemed around the theater--always with a hammer or a paint brush. But Ed had quit listening . . .

"You know, I've decided that he wasn't so much dull as scared."

She said yes, she agreed, but didn't have a notion of what.

"I don't either, exactly, but for instance, I know he felt comfortable around you and liked to come by your house with me. But on New Year's I couldn't get him to budge to go to your party. We almost had a fist fight about it. I knew he needed to go out. But he just sat there in that rented room of his, getting drunker and drunker. Christ, he could drink for a kid. 'I can't take all those people tonight, Ed,' he kept saying. 'They don't know me, any of em. I'm nobody to those people. I don't even count as far as they're concerned.' Who could argue with him, the way he said it?"

She had wondered why they hadn't come, she said, and wanted to know what shape Lennie had been in New Year's Day.
"I was leaving town. I hated like hell going, but I promised my folks I'd come home around the first of the year before the play opened. He drove me to the airport around five, and I said, 'Come on to Michigan with me, Lennie. I'll loan you the money. The folks will be glad to have you. Mom loves to fuss over my friends.' But he wouldn't. Said he had a lot of studying before the semester started again after the holidays. And things to do. He dropped me off and kept my car while I was gone. He hung around the theater all that week, even though the set was finished. Jack was trying to get the lights ready for the show and said Lennie was there every day, helping him—up in the booth, or throwing switches for him in the trap room under the stage. Lighting wasn't Lennie's job, but Jack was glad to have him help. He liked the kid, but he thought he was dull. Like everybody did."

Kay nodded and sighed for Lennie.

"Jack said they went out for lunch a couple of times and Lennie insisted on paying. He didn't have much money, Jack knew, but nothing else would do; Lennie just smiled when Jack protested. 'I don't need it. I have it to spend.' Jack figured maybe he got some Christmas money, and it seemed to make Lennie feel good, treating like that, so he let him. Once, they went to the Chinese place for a really posh meal. But the time I got back, he was in school again . . . ."

He asked Kay to excuse him for a minute while he went to the John. She strayed about the room, touching an object here
or there, peering close to a new painting to see whose work it was; finally she crossed to the adjoining kitchen where she found a box of rye thins. She took several and returned to the couch. He came back into the room, smoothing the flats of his hands together, smelling faintly of Woodhue. He sat on the floor near her.

"After he met me at the airport on Sunday, and I dropped him at his rooming house, I didn't see him much all week. He was quiet on the way back that day. Said the show was set, ready to go for opening night, all he needed was a red footstool to complete the third-act furniture. At school, he was rehearsing a play, and his instructor agreed to let him off for our opening, if he wouldn't miss any other rehearsals."

Kay remembered, she said, that Lennie was doing the Ionesco thing, and didn't he have the lead?

"And working very hard to interpret it—didn't want my help. 'It's my baby,' he told me. He said the character had to exist for him. Because if the character didn't exist, he wouldn't. I know the woman who taught his acting class; we've judged debates together. She told me Lennie was struggling to produce a "real" character. I met some kids in his class. Afterward. They were all so shocked, they said. But they wouldn't discuss him. They kept lowering their eyes and hemming and hawing around, but not really talking about Lennie at all. I felt like I had to talk about him. You can see that, can't you?" He was almost pleading.
Her eyes filled, and by way of answer, she reached out her hand to him. He squeezed it, not looking at her, then got up and moved to the window where he stood for a moment without saying anything. When he sat down again his hands trembled as he lit a cigarette.

"I thought maybe . . . he'd stay with me always. I guess that sounds corny. When you're straight, and married, you pretty much take for granted that the two of you will be together somehow, no matter what. You're kind of a family—right? You don't sit around thinking about getting older and older and one day, there you are. Alone. Nobody. And was there ever anybody? Well, that's the gay life, baby. I'm scared as hell of those prospects! I'd really like to settle down. Fuck society! I want to get married to a beautiful boy and take care of him. Lennie would have been so right for me. You know that, Kay. You've always known Lennie was special with me, haven't you?"

She nodded, her eyes bright with tears and pain.

"He needed taking care of. And I could have. Look at those nights he'd lie in my arms and cry. I know I helped him. Hell, he'd tell me lots of times I helped. Sometimes, when he would forget those lousy years after he left the farm, he'd laugh out loud—not that way he laughed in front of everybody else, like he was apologizing for living! This would be after we'd gone to bed, and he felt like such a stud because he knew we were so good together. He'd say then that he thought
maybe he had an identity after all.—Jeezus, Kay. Forgive me for pouring out like this. You know it all, anyway. I loved him! I really loved that kid. You're the only friend I can admit that to. I appreciate like hell your letting me unwind this way.—The Scotch helps.—I needed this tonight. It matters to me a whole hell of a lot that you'd sit here and cry with me for Lennie. I wouldn't dare cry in front of all those people that awful dignified phony day. I knew I owed it to Lennie to cry, but I was so afraid they'd know I was queer for him, and I couldn't afford to louse up everything it's taken me so goddam many years in this town to build up. My little card house! You can see that. But listen! I would have stayed with Lennie. If he had let me. He always said, though, that he didn't love me enough. He wouldn't even move out of that rented room, for chrissakes. And this old house needed him. He appreciated every beautiful thing in it. He loved my antiques. He had the kind of good taste that no childhood out in the country can explain. And his Gammy sure as hell never taught it to him! It was instinctive with Lennie. I loved to share all of it with him. Most of the local queens flounce in and out and oh and ah, but it's superficial; they're so jealous they could shit. Not Lennie. He really dug all those objets d'art of mine. Like the bronze Caesar he gave me. It's a good one."

He got up and walked over to a low commode where the sculpture rested on a small pedestal. He ran his fingers along its contours and smiled, more to himself than at her.
Though Kay had seen the bronze, she came over and examined it closely, as if it might tell her something about Lennie. She remarked that he had told her how long he had saved for it after he found it in one of the junk shops. He had asked her opinion about it as a birthday gift for Ed, and she had encouraged him, offering to loan him the cash, but he had declined. "I've almost got enough to buy it. They're holding it for me. But thanks." And the next time she had come by, it was in the living room. Ed had told her the kid was almost reverential, the way he had presented it, knowing how much it would mean to him.

"He loved me. I know that. But in love? Well, that was something else."

He sat down again on the floor beside the coffee table, and she joined him, reaching for a woolen afghan from the couch. The room had grown chilly. She asked him a pointed question about Lennie.

"I think maybe when he was in the Navy in San Diego, he might have been in love. He told me about this Greek boy he chummed around with those two years. They were both around seventeen at the time. Lennie cut out right after he graduated highschool. This sailor was a dropout who joined up. They were both running, I guess. Lennie went into Reserves to get away from his folks. He said his stepdad was OK, but he'd hated the atmosphere in that house since the day he moved in with them. They treated him like a guest. Everything always
so polite. Having to thank them for this or that, like they were doing him a favor, like he didn't belong. Maybe it would have been different for Lennie if that Greek kid had made it with him. But they just kind of mooned around and touched now and then, and it never came off. Neither one would even dare talk about it."

Were they that naive, she wanted to know, or simply frightened?

"Christ, who can say? At fourteen, I was sure I was queer. Not him ... He asked me once how I first knew. I couldn't believe such a question from a kid as old as Lennie. You would have thought somebody would have brought him out, but I don't think he was ever really sure till he met me. For one thing, he was so goddam shy ... Maybe it was shy, not dull, that Lennie was."

He got up suddenly. "It's colder'n hell in here. This furnace is supposed to come on automatically." He looked at the thermostat. "Wrap that wool thing around you. I'm going to check the pilot light." He poked around beneath the grid of the floor opening for a couple of minutes, then, all at once, seemed to sag, as if he realized that the chill he felt had nothing to do with the furnace. He let his breath out explosively. "Ah, Christ." It was more supplication than profanity. He found a sweater in the coat closet, dragged the hassock over to the floor vent, and got back to Lennie.

"It's hard to think of a big, blond kid who's built like Lennie not being any more sex-oriented than he was when I met
him. When he came into the theater the first time, looking for a job, I thought, Hel-LO! But he never tumbled. Just perfectly straight asked for a job. Said he was majoring in theater at school. Suddenly I wanted very much to hire an assistant back stage. He did volunteer work while I spent a couple of months trying to convince the Board, and he hung around with me a lot because he was broke most of the time. He earned every dime they finally agreed to pay him. And in all that time, I never laid a hand on him—I figured he was straight. One night, after some beers at my house, he got tight and started to cry. He ended up in my arms and kept saying 'Hold me, oh Christ, hold me' And I did. For a long time. He finally quieted down, but things were different for us after that. He began to be himself around me. Not very long after, it just happened. He practically suggested it himself. Told me it was good to be with me and he liked for me to hold him when he felt scared and gone. One afternoon, when he had dropped by my house to discuss some fabric for the set, we wound up in bed in the middle of the goddam day with every door in the place unlocked and me loving every golden hair of him. Lennie! Sweet Jesus, I can't believe I'm not going to see him around every next corner. God, he was a precious baby . . . ."

Kay had quit drinking, but she picked up Ed's glass, empty and forgotten on the floor beside him, and fixed him a Scotch. When she handed it to him, his eyes caught hers and
"Kay--that phone call I had to make to his parents was the nightmare of my life."

She waited. He fumbled for a cigarette, cursed, went into the bedroom, came back with a fresh pack, and lit one before he continued.

"It was the end of the week when I returned from Ann Arbor--the night of first dress rehearsal. Lennie had been working back stage all evening and everybody had kidded him about how pisselegant he looked. I hassled him for wearing the new clothes he bought at Christmas to work in. 'Get off my back, Eddie,' he said. 'I just felt like dressing up for the party tonight.' I saw him go over and put his arms around the sweet little girl who's playing the lead, and she told me later he held her real close as if he didn't want to let go hugging her and told her she was doing such a great job in the play. He liked her; she was nice to him--always talking to him about school and complimenting his clothes--you know he made a lot of his own shirts on his landlady's sewing machine.--That night he had on his new suede boots he was so proud of. Took him forever to get em paid for. He was wearing one of those wide belts that looks so good on big tall guys, and a gaucho scarf I had given him. His shirt was a kind of lemon-yellow and his pants were light-blue and tight. He really looked great, and he loved hearing it from the leading lady. I let him alone about his clothes. Why bug him! If he wanted to wear his new stuff to work in, it was his business. Everybody had agreed to go over to Jack's for
beer after the rehearsal to unwind. I begged off. I usually don't do that, but I was beat after my trip. The folks ran me all over creation visiting my nieces and nephews. You know. Here's uncle eddie who directs plays in texas, and all of em wanting me to spend time with just them. I enjoyed it, sure, but I was worn out when I got back. So I was asleep about two when my phone rang. It was Jack and he was at the theater. He had gone back after the party to lock up the costume room and get a rundown on the light board before dress rehearsal the next night . . . Oh God, Kay--Codalmighty . . . I'm shaking like hell, just thinking about it. I don't know if I'll be able to . . . get . . . through this. I--I . . . ."

She was beside him on the hassock in one move--stroking him awkwardly--and their tears fell without restraint, each crying in that private capitulation to a stricken moment. As she murmured against his ear, reminding him that she knew, she cared, he flailed himself. "Christ, I'm a fuckin mess."

He loosed himself from her and started to pace, wiping at his smeared glasses with his shirt tail. "Okay . . . I'm okay now . . . ." He peered at her myopically and added "Drink with me, will you?" While she was pouring herself a Bourbon, he sat down with his drink and took a deep breath as if he were beginning a long journey.

"I answered the phone, half-asleep, and a voice was saying, 'Ed, wake up and listen to me.' At first I wasn't even sure who it was. Then it hit me that it was Jack and
he sounded grim and tense, and I thought my god, the theater's burned down! I was trying to listen when I heard: 'Ed, something's happened to Lennie. You got to come down here.' 'Where? Here where?' 'To the theater, Eddie. I'll tell you when you get down here.' NO! I was awake then and I knew I wasn't budging from the spot till he told me what I'd be coming down to. I knew for sure I didn't want to go! 'Eddie. Get a grip on ... Lennie's dead.' No, I told myself. That goddam Jack is drunk and I am going to kill him for scaring the shit out of me like this. But I was saying into the phone, 'I'm coming, Jack. Meet me outside, will you?' 'Yeah, sure, Eddie,' he said. But he sounded sick. He was out in front, and so were about a million other people it seemed to me. Cops. Night watchman—though how they ever woke that old geezer up, I'll never know. And Jack's wife was there, the silly bitch—you know her—all organized with hot coffee and saying wasn't it just AWFUL and who would've thought that was why Lennie didn't show up at the party and how it never occurred to ANYONE. Jack told me they all figured he had gone home with me. I supposed he had gone to the party with Jack. So no one really missed him at all. CHRIST! . . . "Kay shuddered.

"Some cop started asking me questions. I heard myself answering him, but I kept thinking all the time, where is Lennie? And I didn't want to know. Not really. Then Jack walked me inside. You know, Kay, my feet were moving one in
front of the other, but so help me God, I was back in bed, having the rottenest nightmare of my life. 'Where is he, Jack?' 'Trap room.' Christ almighty, what was he doing in the trap room? We went down, under the stage, and apparently a cop had been waiting for me there because he needed to know who had access to the trap room. 'Jack here, and—and Lennie,' I told him. 'They both had keys besides me. No one else.' He was blocking the door, and I didn't try to see past him. I wanted to run. He said, 'Some men are bringing a stretcher.' I nodded. I didn't want to hear. I was afraid to look. I don't know what I expected to see. But not Lennie! And then the cop moved aside. Jack was saying that I didn't have to go in. 'Don't go in there, Eddie. You don't have to look!'--It was Jack who found him, you know.--But I had to go in and I did. I hadn't been down there for a hell of a long time. Jack usually took care of the trap room. There was a light on, but the room was dim . . . Jack is really weird, I guess, because you can't imagine what he said to me. Even now I don't believe it . . . Then I saw Lennie. I felt ridiculous all at once. Like a trespasser who got caught. I guess I just stood there. I can't remember. Next thing I knew, Jack was leading me up to my office. I felt like a big bandaged wound—all muffled up and throbbing inside."

Kay's untouched drink was on the table, and abruptly, she reached for it as if to steady herself.

"It was awful. You'll never know. I dialed long distance direct. I had their number on Lennie's employment sheet."
Somehow the call got fucked up and when his mother answered—
it must have been around three—I could hear her, but she
could barely hear me. Only a hundred miles away, and it might
as well have been China, I had to yell so loud. How in the
name of sweet Jesus do you yell into a goddam phone that I've
got news for you, your son is dead. And was I supposed to
tell her how he died? I just couldn't. And then she was
yelling at me. 'Please, for God's sake, call me back so I
can hear what you're saying.' And in the same breath, 'Oh,
God, I don't want to hear.' And then. 'Please, please, call
me back so I can hear you.' Jack dialed it for me this time,
and this time it was OK and Grady, his stepdad, answered. I
could hear his mother crying into the phone, so he must've
been on an extension. I don't remember what I told them. But
Grady was saying they would leave right away. Thank God he
didn't press me for details. I gave Jack the phone and walked
out of the office into the hall and nearly bumped into the
policemen carrying out a stretcher with a sheet over it. I
knew Lennie was under that sheet. But can you believe I also
knew I would be waking up in a minute, and I wanted to laugh
because I was so glad I'd be waking up! Then I was leaning
against the wall cry--crying . . . Wait a minute, willya, Kay.
I'll . . . be all . . . right . . . in a minute--I--I've got
. . . to get it out of me . . . I've saved--saved it up for
too--too long now. I haven't really . . . cried it . . .
all . . . cut . . . yet . . . .
He went into the bathroom and his sobs were dry and hard and brief. When he came back into the room, his look said: That was that. He had cried for Lennie. It would probably be the last time.

"You see, that was Lennie under that sheet. Those were ... his boots sticking out from under the end of it, and it seems kind of crazy now, but I was so glad he had those suede boots on. He loved 'em so.—It wasn't till the last couple of days that it hit me—he knew what he was going to do that night. And all the week before. Maybe all his life before that. He knew exactly what he had to do. There wasn't one goddam person who could even sense what deep trouble he was in. Imagine! ... You can see I have to talk about him. I'm always going to have to talk about Lennie. Because he was real. He signified. He was alive and he was beautiful and he was full of love. I guess it was his grandmother who destroyed him. Or his mother. Or all the mothers who came before them, I don't know. But one thing I'm sure of. I've got to talk about him. It's important to me. And to him!—

He lit another cigarette.

"Oh, christ, I forgot to tell you what Jack said. I didn't tell you, did I? Well, maybe it's because of Jack's weird way of always looking at things as if they're on a stage, but when we went into the trap room, and there was Lennie, hanging from a support beam, Jack whispered, "God, Eddie. Look at the shadow he's making on the wall."