SODEK'S GOLD

THESIS

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By

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*Sodek's Gold* is a novel based on individuals the writer has known in the Caribbean who have been placed in fictitious circumstances. Included are social issues, conditions, and dialects found there.

The main character, David Sodek, is an Englishman working in the Caribbean who discovers an ancient coin and becomes obsessed with finding more.

Sodek's search is impeded by the strongarm Mostyn, but with the help of his friend Elbert he recovers an underwater cache of golden treasure. Elbert is killed.

Sodek avenges Elbert's death but ultimately relinquishes the gold and himself to the sea.

The theme of the work involves Sodek's obsessive personality as seen in his increasingly pedantic and destructive search, and in his unrealistic belief that money buys freedom.

Included between chapters are vignettes comparing the characters and nature, and foreshadowing following events.
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The sunlight scattered on the water and drifted down through it; and the water held it and reshaped it, now molding it into a glowing green cloud, now letting it sink in as a pale golden shaft, losing definition away from the surface but with enough brightness in its bottom reach to crown a rounded coral head, rich tan in color and alive with convolutions.

The swimmer on the surface paused, hung there looking down through twenty feet of clear water to where the patches of light washed over the sea floor. He watched the sharp little angelfish, black with vertical yellow stripes, flicking in and out of the staghorn coral. Squirrel fish hesitated in jagged holes, their black eyes, too large for their spiked, silvery-pink bodies, looking out suspiciously on the bright world and the swimmer's shadow before them on the sand.

A peacock flounder moved across the window of his vision, framed by the black rubber of the face mask, changing color quickly and losing its green and purple rosette markings as it passed from dark rock to sandy gully, where it settled itself with a flurry and became barely visible once the sand had drifted back down to obscure its outline.

This was an invitation to dive, to follow the flounder over the contours of the seabed. He had enjoyed the game before: these fish wafted smoothly a bare inch off the
bottom, their flat bodies recording briefly the shape of every small rock they passed over, every hollow they went into. A pursuing swimmer was led to do the same, to glide along the sea floor, dipping and rising with the sandy bottom in the wake of his ghostly quarry. This flounder was alarmed by the splash of his surface dive and began to move steadily out to sea. By the time he had reached the seabed, however, it had settled again, and he was able to come up close behind it before it took off, this time rippling frantically. He could barely keep up with it, his fins working hard through the thick water, his face and chest skimming the sand, the closeness of the objects over which he swept giving him an unreal sense of speed. Exhausted after fifteen yards or so, the flounder sank onto the bottom again, relying on its camouflage to protect it. The swimmer felt his air beginning to go, with the urge to breathe swelling up inside his chest in its place, and he just had time to reach out and touch the still shape of the flounder, which again lifted off and rippled away, before bending his body upwards and spiralling towards the glassy underside of the surface, breaking through with his head and shoulders, spitting his snorkel free of water and drawing in breath deeply.

He did not stay long on the surface. He had seen something down there, close to where the flounder had last settled. He had extended his hand towards it as his buoyancy began to lift him away, but had grasped short.
He looked down through the water. That was the spot, to the left of a box-shaped rock. He could see nothing from this height; the flounder's passing had no doubt disturbed enough sand to cover the object again. He took a deep breath and dived, feeling the water pushing its fingers painfully into his ears as he went down, holding his nose and blowing to clear them.

It did not take him long to find it, sifting through the sand. It was the flat disc-shape it had appeared to be, and had a dull sheen on one edge through the encrustation. It was a coin; he had known that when he first saw it; and he grasped it tightly in his palm as he drove hard for the surface—not through shortage of air this time but through excitement.

Even as he rose, the part of his mind which had remained detached from the event talked to him: this was what so much underwater swimming was all about, so much exploration of other kinds—the half-shaped hope of finding. Part of man's reaching out to his world, to take, to hold, to use—new things, old things. And he was taking back an old thing, which men had already taken once, and used, and lost. He had reclaimed it. A coin. A heavy coin, he realized, as he lifted it clear of the water to examine it, pushing his face mask back onto his forehead. Salt water dribbled down into his eyes, stinging, and he rubbed them clear. Then he rubbed
the coin with thumb and forefinger: but the hard covering of
centuries merely rasped his fingertips.

He left his face mask up, pulled the end of his snorkel
out of his mouth, glad to be rid of the bitterness of the
rubber and the clench of his teeth, and rolled over onto his
back, finning relaxedly for shore. And the warmth of his
find soaked through his body along with the warmth of the
shallower water into which he passed.

David Sodek was not on vacation on the island, much as he
liked to pretend that he was. He was there to service one of
his firm's retail outlets—or, to put it more plainly, to
fire a shop manager and find a new one. The firing had not
been difficult—the man was a criminal and pleased enough not
to be prosecuted. Choosing a replacement had been hardly
more difficult since of the two candidates who even began to
meet the requirements of the position, one had shown such
obvious and arrogant distaste for the fact that he was being
hired by a foreigner to work on his own island that Sodek
wondered why he had applied for the job in the first place.
He was perhaps looking to the time when all such businesses
would be island-owned; and Sodek would not have been
surprised had he used his position if appointed to bring that
day closer, by whatever means. There were ways. The second
candidate he had liked—younger, somewhat self-effacing, with
no advanced education but warm and quick. Elbert. Whole.
Having found his man, Sodek had given himself a few days off before bending himself to the task of training yet another local manager. This was the sixth on the island in his five years as Caribbean Controller.

Still, it was one of the better islands to spend time on—not much nightlife, but he had more than enough of that in Miami. The family liked to come here, too, and were no trouble to him when they did. They were pretty self-sufficient by now, the boys having reached the age where they thought (and were probably right, he had taken the step forward of admitting) he had nothing more to offer them of the expertise of self-enjoyment. They could swim as well as he could, were better yachtsmen, and only his persistent good luck as a fisherman had saved him from having to bow to their superior skill in that sport, too. He accepted their growth, had stood back some time ago to watch the steady approach of the day he had foreseen as inevitable when his wife had produced the second of two dark-haired sons—the day when he would no longer be needed. For his wife had already become independent of him by the fourth year of their marriage, when Roger had been born, two years after his brother Vincent. She had her own friends, her own job, her own bedroom even then. And from the beginning he knew deep down that she would encourage the same independence in her sons, would never let them come close to him. She thought him weak, but
had never openly accused him of it, lacking in ambition, and, the third prong in her assault, sexually impoverished. Perhaps this was the only prong, and the other complaints no more than barbs. But the shaft, the thrust, from where? The poison had never gotten very far into his system—his antidote had been to prove himself with other women to his own satisfaction and often enough to theirs. If his wife had taken what she could not take from him elsewhere—and he little doubted it—then she had been civil enough to hide the fact from him; but he suspected she would have taken rather less care with the boys.

They showed no signs of despising him, however: they accepted him at a distance as the man who provided the money, the holidays in the Caribbean sunshine and the occasional trips to Europe, which he had left as a young man, and who taught them the basics of the skills they now surpassed him in.

But he knew. He knew that this distance between them merely stretched more tightly the cords that not even Sandra could break, that inside the most casual of encounters between him and his sons the cords were twanging away, pulling, pulling without tearing; that there were times when his sons had wanted him to reach out for them, when they would have come to him, and he had not reached. He had taken into his thinking too many of Sandra's judgments and lost
confidence in his ability to offer more than bicycles and packed suitcases, and his acceptance of her accusation of weakness was perhaps main proof that the accusation was not baseless.

In such overworked terms did he consider the dissatisfactions of his family life. Corporate life it was not—they shared the same address, merely. Yet he noticed, how he noticed, in the lift of Roger's eyebrows, the tightening of Vincent's mouth at times when Sandra appeared at her most invincible and presided daintily formidable over the dinner table, that the rifts were not only between him and her, him and the boys. Such gestures, he was sure, had belonged to his childhood also, and they rang through him as if his memory were a fine green goblet singing to the vibrations of the boys' mute despair.

His position in the family was not, he felt, all that unusual—others of his friends and colleagues showed surface marks of the same experience; but the fact that he spent so much time away from home made his real isolation both more obvious and easier to bear. He found it a little ironic, however, that a job he did not like should by its very nature help sustain a marriage he no longer derived any pleasure from. If he stopped travelling then the testing time would come.
In the meantime he lived, moved and had his being on a level well above the turmoil of his inner space, and rarely looked down into the depths. He had no future he could foresee and had encouraged in himself a strong sense of the present. And much of his time was spent in islands given over to present living. He loved the islands, and in moments of fanciful pathos had seen in them parallels with his own experience—taken, used, spurned, with a confused history often misrepresented in the telling, left to their own devices with no future anyone dared predict but with a solid and satisfying present.

And this coin, now. A substantive from a sentence in the tale of the islands, perhaps to become part of a statement from his own life. As he had carried it back to shore it had been a sense of its past which had moved through him: he was being told a small part of some story no one had ever heard before. Back in his hotel room it was different. The coin's presence, its existence here and now, began to shine dully through as he scraped at the surface covering with a nail file and, later that evening, chipped at it with a knife he had borrowed from the dining room. He worked rapidly until he had uncovered enough of the coin to make out the pattern of the relief, then he became more cautious, fearful of scratching the surface. He sat on the edge of the bed, bending over into the circle of light from the bedside lamp
as if he were looking down into a bright rock pool, the scrapings and chippings falling into and around the black plastic ashtray. The crickets outside his window mimicked the high-pitched skreeking of his knife, taking the noise and amplifying it into a rhythmic protest of sharp metal and glass, a sound hovering between the soothing and the aggravating, not knowing which way to go, a noise of the nerves.

He worked for a long time without pause, his mind given over to half-thinking; but his eyes recorded eagerly every detail of the removal of the encrustation and noted every new feature of the coin as it emerged.

It was past midnight when he straightened up painfully for the last time, brushed the debris from his lap, and hefted the coin in his hand before peering at it closely, seeing it now as a whole thing, freed from its undersea years and reaffirming its fine permanence in a world which had changed. The crowned and quartered shield held in a tight circle of words he could not understand was packed with symbols he could not identify—lions? fleurs-de-lis? birds? swords? All beautiful, a song sung in a foreign language, the melody sufficient.

When he closed his eyes in bed that night and moved immediately towards sleep, the afterimage of his evening's work hung, enlarged, behind his eyelids and turned slow and
golden in dark space. The coin had become a whole world and spun on its axis as he drifted with it and it offered him its full face until he eventually sank onto its hot surface and through into the lit depths beyond.
A golden butterfly fish pecked among the coral polyps. Its long, slender snout worked like a pair of tweezers, probing, nibbling, gripping, extracting. The butterfly fish could reach where other fish could not, could feed off minute organisms safe from most other predators. It jerked from crevice to crevice with the nervous intentness of a hummingbird.

It seemed made to attract attention, this fish. The rules of camouflage were flouted. The vertical stripes on its flat and spade-shaped silver body were broad, rich yellow, the first two even accentuated by sharp black lines down their edges. The back third of the fish, where the body was flattened out to its broadest, was the same sun-gold, with a green tuft of a tail tagged onto the end and again marked off by a black band. No subtle blending here.

Most noticeable, however, was the eye, or rather the false eye. In the top section of this yellow expanse, on what was really the dorsal fin, was set a large black spot like a bullet hole ringed with white powder marks—the fish could have been tossed in the air by some sharpshooter, like a playing card, and drilled neatly but off-center.

The true eye was much smaller, hidden between the black edges of the foremost stripe.

The barracuda was quite a young one—two feet long—but already adult in death. Its stomach rode high inside the
polished torpedo shell of its body, urging it constantly on to a savagery so swift and fierce that each killing used up enough energy to make a further killing presently necessary. The cycle never stopped, only paused, an eccentric vertical wheel climbing to the point of hiatus and then as it fell stabbing forward with its greased silver piston.

The wheel was at the top of its revolution now, as the barracuda lay in the water, tail slightly lower than head, long, straight, sour mouth not tightly enough closed to hide the pointed dog's teeth within. Its head-up posture was as deceitfully nonchalant as the slow drift which took it toward its target, the butterfly fish engrossed in its picking. The barracuda flicked not a fin, could not be said to swim at all, but nevertheless moved steadily to where it wanted to be, within darting range. There was the victim's head, the big black eye watching him boldly. The fish would move as soon as he did: he would have to aim just in front of its flat snout, could then catch it in the middle as it jerked past him. Closer, closer, drift don't swim, closer, the wheel hung, then fell.

The barracuda fired itself forward and clashed its teeth shut where the butterfly fish should have been.
CHAPTER II

After breakfast he begged some bleach from the woman who cleaned his room. She was a squat, silent black woman—was she frightened or surly?—whose "Yes, sah!" in reply to his request was as much as he had ever gotten out of her. In shape she reminded him of a sun-softened chocolate figurine compressed and flattened from above by a child's whimsical palm; but the depth and sheen of her skin fascinated him, always on the point, it seemed, of breaking into sweat but never quite doing so. He wondered if it would be dry to the touch. His mind veered away from the image of his fingers on her skin. Because she was ugly? Or black? Or a working woman? Or all three? Or was it that it would have been a symbolic reliving of a history of which he sometimes found himself ashamed to have reached out his white hand to this black woman, even in curiosity? No, he decided willingly, it was because she was ugly, and quite old, nothing more.

He poured the bleach into the plastic soap dish, and dropped the coin in to remove the last traces of deposit. It did not occur to him that the cleaning woman would see it when she reached his room, and might have her own way of looking at it, different from his.

How did he see it? As an object of beauty and interest in itself, yes, which held further possibilities and raised
several questions he planned to spend the day finding answers to. What might its origins have been? How much was it worth? Would he be able to keep it?

Already he felt the coin to be more than a piece of shaped gold of some probable monetary and certain historical value. For years he had travelled the Caribbean, marvelling at its variety but puzzled and frustrated by the lack of centrality of this hand-scattering of islands drifting in an arc across the oceans. Where was its heart? Did it have no essence, no genius of its own? Were these islands not what they appeared to be on the map, jewels on a necklace chain stretching from North to South America, but only an accidental dribble of hardened volcanic saliva across the face of the sea?

It seemed to him now that the one thing which could be seen to hold together the islands of the Caribbean was gold. And while his boyhood fantasies of pirates and treasure lent some emotive power to the concept, his rational mind drew easily enough on what he knew of Caribbean history to sharpen the picture offered to him out of focus by his visual imagination. The Arawaks...

His room maid came to the open door: she stood there quietly, only her shadow warning him of her presence, waiting for him to signify whether or not she should enter.
"Just a moment--I'm going out now." As he spoke he held up his hand to show that she should not come in, and when she turned away he walked to the door and pushed it shut, quickly replacing the shorts he was wearing with slacks and a loose cotton shirt. The day was already hot.

He had several calls to make, and chose to drive across town first of all to see Elbert Davis. He had promised to deliver a pile of manufacturers' pamphlets so that Elbert could begin some preliminary work before they went into the shop together the following Monday.

He knocked at the front door of the green block-built bungalow, and got no reply, although the door was slightly ajar and swung slowly inwards under his knuckles. He could see little of the interior; and, not waiting any longer, he walked down the side of the house, called out the local, "Anybody home?", even finding himself lengthening and lifting the last vowel sound into a higher pitch halfway through.

"Here sah!"

On the verandah at the back of the house he found an old man lying in a hammock strung from the roof, swinging slowly, watching him as he rounded the corner. His eyes, which held Sodek's as he climbed the three steps onto the verandah, looked very white in the shade but were, Sodek noticed as he stepped closer, yellowed and tired. They were wide, and very still, and the hammock and the face in which they were set
rocked around them. The man's age could not have been easily
guessed--his apparent listlessness and fragility probably
made him seem older than he was--but he was no great age. He
had all the marks of a man who had had to work long years on
an unyielding mound of earth under an unsympathetic sun in
order to support a family whose size kept increasing, it
seemed, while his back was bent over his labor, so that
looking back over his life it appeared that there had been an
extra mouth to feed every night when he came home from work.

"Yes, sah!"--his cleaning woman's phrase, this time used
interrogatively but without a questioning intonation: the man
was simply putting himself at Sodek's disposal, but
cautiously.

"I've come to see Elbert Davis. He's expecting me. He's
going to work for me. I've brought these"--he flapped the
brochures towards the man. He had learned in the West Indies
to make introductory statements as simple as possible and to
reinforce them with gesture. Too often in the early days his
words had beaten round the uncomprehending head of their
intended recipient and then fallen to the ground to lie
fluttering in the dust, and on one occasion at least to be
spat upon.

"He not here. He gone to see him friend. He be back
soon. You sit down, sah!"
A scrawny black arm, its shape made interesting by the pink of the palm and a line of shiny scar tissue running down the inner forearm, waved to a wooden stool; and Sodek sat down fairly happily: he had not swum for a while before the previous day, and had stayed in the water longer than he had intended and his legs ached.

"You be Mister Sundek?"

The voice too rich and too strong for the body.

"Yes, that's right. How much has Elbert told you about the job?"

"It be good job. Elbert he work hard. He clever boy."

"Is Elbert your son?"

"Yes, thass right, sah. He my larst son. The one after him, he die, my wife too, at de birt'."

"And how old was Elbert then?"

"He be two year. Mebbe tree. But he be good boy even den. He neffer cry; he allus laffin, laffin. One day he get fishhook in him foot--he mebbe four year old--and, 'Look dadder!' he say, 'I gar-fish, I hooked!' an' he pick up two wood pieces an' make like a long fish mout' gaspin', an he jump aroun' de yard like he ain't got no hook in him 'tall, 'tall. An' he let me cut it out wid my fish knife, an he don'make no hollerin'. An after, he tell me take care o' dat hook for it good an' sharp, an' now it got he blood on it, it catch plenty barra'."
The old man enjoyed telling the story. No doubt he had a similar tale for each of his children, an anecdote which for him epitomized a son's or a daughter's character and also took him back to what he now remembered as a happier time in his life.

"How long have you lived here, Mr. Davis?"

It was an unthinking question.

"Here? On de islan'? I allus live here. Dis be my islan'--dis be hoom. Where else'd I live?"

There was no animosity, just surprise that such a question should have been asked.

"And how many of your children are still on the island?"

Sodek found himself cast willy-nilly into the role of television interviewer, asking questions to which he did not particularly, himself, want answers. He had nothing to say to the old man: what else was there to do but ask questions?

"Dey be four, Elbert an Joseph--dis be him house--an Steve an Philleep. Dere be two boys in Florida."

"No daughters?"

"My girls all gone marry."

The old man's tone dismissed them: they were no longer a part of his life.

"And were you a fisherman?"

"Fisherman, yes. All de mon here fishermen. An I work de lan'. But she be terrible hard, dis here lan'. She be
ready to grow only what she want to grow, an she grow dat all de time. You clears de bush, she put de bush back in no time 'tall; you plants crop, it run away into de bush an hide itself; you plants banana, de banana invite de bush back straight way, an' you done have to cut her out ebry day."

"Did you have your own land?"

"I have my lan' still, back dere."

He waved his arm over the side of the hammock towards the bright bush rising gently on the slope behind the house.

"My son don' want to work no lan'. My son don' want to fish. My boat, she rot. My motor, she rust. My lan', she sleep, an' nobody disturb her."

A pause. Sodek did not feel inclined to encourage the old man in his beginning self pity, if that was what it was. Another line.

"Do you know anybody who has found treasure on the island?"

The question was out before he realized it. It must have been hovering just within the darkness of his mind, waiting its chance.

Another pause, this time not of David's making. A longer pause.

"Tresor?"

"Yes--gold, jewels, ornaments--coins--you know."
"I be hearin' 'bout a man, long time ago, he find two coins. Dat be all. "What kind of coins? What part of the island?"

Too many questions, too quickly.
"I not be knowin' dat."
"If someone found treasure here, would they be able to keep it?"

'Iffen a man foun' tresor on dis islan', sah, he be say' nuttin' to no man. Dis be small islan'. Words dey blows roun' de islan' on de wind, an' de people reaches up an picks dem out o' de air like dey was breadfruit. Sometimes dey takes dem an' makes a tasty stew; sometimes dey cooks up a real pison dish an den you better watch out.

"De tings on dis islan' an' in dis watter dey belong to de islan' an' to de islan' people. Aint's no man got no right to keep a part of our islan', no sir."

If the old man had begun to suspect what might lie behind David's questions, it was halfway through what he said, hence the transition from general comment to precise warning. Certainly there was an intention in the old man's voice which would perhaps not have been there if the matter of gold lost or found were as remote a topic as his earlier words had suggested. Sodek wanted to ask more, but felt he would be wasting his time, and he was in any case discovering in himself the germs of suspiciousness, breeding as they can so
easily do in a man who did not have, and suddenly had. He had no wish to provoke retaliatory queries from the old man.

Elbert's arrival poured warm apology into the awkwardly growing gap in the conversation. His effusiveness did not surprise Sodek—he was an effusive young man, and the stream of regrets and explanations began almost before he had rounded the corner even though he was in no way at fault.

He had a story to tell, however, which soon surfaced among the apologies. A man had been drowned. This was not an unusual occurrence on an island where a good portion of the people spent a good portion of their time in and on and under the water; but this death was not straightforward. The man had smoked ganja heavily and had been due to appear in court on charges of illegal possession; and it was expected that he would have something to say about the network from which he drew his supplies. He seemed moreover to have gone fishing alone, and had passed through the reef at a point where it was notoriously difficult to make the return passage. That was all Elbert knew, but he had heard much speculation.

Sodek had heard stories of strange deaths before—not only on this island—many of them associated with the ganja underworld which was not so very far under. It seemed that island people had their own codes of conduct as well as their own methods of dispensing justice.

"Come in, Mr. Sodek."
He had stepped back out of the shade on Elbert's arrival, and now became conscious of the sun pressing its hot hand on his shoulder blades, pushing him forward into the cool darkness of the house.

He had been in West Indian homes before, and found little of note in this one: there was the usual paradoxical impression of bareness and clutter: the center of the floor empty, covered with a sisal mat; the rest of the floor dry gray concrete, with the furniture set out round the outside of the room—a square table covered in a red-and-white checked tablecloth; bentwood chairs, not around the table but in a line on another side of the room; one faded green moquette armchair; a mahogany chest of drawers dull for want of polish, and shelves with crockery, glass, magazines, a few books piled haphazardly. On the walls were a garish Renaissance head of Jesus, gilt-framed, and a color photograph of a Caribbean scene Sodek did not recognize. On the floor, mounds of various things: fishing tackle in one corner, two baskets of fruit—limes and oranges—one tipped on its side, clothes in another corner, more magazines, shoes, and an outboard motor propped up against the wall. It was not clear from the state of things whether there was a woman in control of this household: a glance into the curtained-off kitchen area suggested that there was not—it was not dirty, but disorganized, with too many things left
out which could have had a home in the plain wooden cupboards. Again the paradox of sparse confusion.

"Will you have a drink, Mr. Sodek? Beer?"

Elbert seemed at ease. Sodek liked the confidence of his movements as he opened the small fridge near the door, took out three beers and opened them smoothly, back-heeling the door shut as he turned away so that the fridge, startled awake, began to purr and rattle its way back to a temperature at which it could again rest.

"Your father and I were talking about treasure."

The statement leaped out of his mouth unbidden as his related question to the old man had done, and stopped Elbert dead in the doorway as he returned from taking out the old man's beer. He loomed there, momentarily still, dark shape against the light.

"What did he have to say?"

He moved forward again, picked up his own bottle.

"Not much."

"Did he show you his coin?"

"Coin?"

"He didn't. He wouldn't. He has a coin, a doubloon."

A glance over his shoulder towards the verandah. No words. He moved towards the chest of drawers, lifted the lid of a small, plain wooden box on top, took out a tray, reached inside and held out to Sodek a leather pouch with a
drawstring. His eyes offered humorous conspiracy, which Sodek accepted along with the pouch.

The coin which slid out into his palm was different from his own—the same size and satisfying weight but with coarser markings—perhaps an older coin. Sodek weighed it in his palm, rubbed it between finger and thumb, tested the edge, looked at it again, then dropped it back into the pouch and gave it back to Elbert.

"Where did he get it?"

"He's never told me. I don't think he's told anybody. He's had it a long time. Don't tell him I showed you."

David was tempted. An "I" began to form in his mouth, he hesitated, the moment passed, the coin was back in its bag, and he was glad.

Elbert himself knew no more about treasure. He had heard stories, of course—of a coin found in an octopus' den; of an old woman living way back in the bush who had never let anyone see what was in the greasy bag tied to her waist and who had eventually just disappeared; of a family who had suddenly left the island and bought a farm in Colorado. Elbert threw his quick grin in with the stories, warning Sodek not to be too impressed, and Sodek in his turn showed less interest than he felt. He had no need of an accomplice yet. But he had a plan, or at least an intention. He intended to keep the coin he had found—that was predictable
enough; and he intended to look for more. He had known, too, that that would be so as soon as the realization of what he had found had sharpened in him. He had been drawn to dive straight back down to the same spot, clutching his first find, but had persuaded himself of the futility of such an attempt. The sea floor was covered with rock debris and coral fragments; it had been one chance in an infinite number which had led him to the first coin, itself hardly recognizable. So he had settled for a triumphant swim to shore.

But he had thought since. He had thought as he worked at the coin in the late hours. He had thought about tides, and currents, and sea floor contours; and he had hidden his eagerness behind the rationalization that since he intended anyway to spend a lot of time in the water during his three-day break, he might as well spend it in the area of his find. He was beginning to be gripped by the conviction shared by so many to whom small good fortune falls: that they have stumbled on a star dropped from the heavens; that another such star if found will allow them to plot a course towards the perfect life; so that the second discovery becomes far more important than the first, adding direction to mere existence, talking of future rather than present, giving hope beyond satisfaction.
He had two more calls to make before returning to the hotel for lunch. The first was to the library, a stuffy and gloomy building just off the market square. Peeling paint outside, peeling backs of many of the books inside. It was a well-worn library, and the volume on coins he borrowed was about to lose a few of its pages. For more than one reason he decided to tackle the reference section unaided. He might as well not have tackled it at all: there was nothing of any use to him there. Even the book he had borrowed was too vague and poorly illustrated. Having looked through it, he put it back on the return trolley under the offended gaze of the librarian and left with her eyes hot on his back.

From the library he headed out across town, past the four-storey concrete and glass boxes of the financial center and the low, pastel-painted stucco shops with their misspelled notices, past the white ship-like police station with its antennae and flags and a rooftop office like a bridge looking out over the harbor to the open sea. The small wooden shops on the outskirts were more interesting than anything in the center, brighter colors than the other shops and in better repair than the library, each with its owner casually propping up a doorpost, encouraged in his idleness by a group of customers who had bought or who were in no hurry to buy and of passersby with no great desire to get where they were going. It was usually impossible to tell from the outside
what was on sale inside, and some of them might have been private homes, not shops at all.

The museum was well out on the road to the north of the island, a converted stone-built fortification, perhaps built against pirates by pirates.

Their collection of coins was small, and again he gained little information. He could only guess his find to be about three hundred years old. The examples under glass were more elaborate in design but comparatively uneven in their finish, and seemed to come from an earlier time; they were dated around 1600. There was no current value ascribed to them.

He decided not to go back to the hotel for lunch. He slipped three modern coins into the drink machine at the entrance to the museum (it would make a fitting exhibit itself in a few hundred years' time), avoided the more exotically named cans—Tahitian Treat and Mountain Dew he knew to be sickly sweet—and settled for a plain Coke, ignoring the red 'caffeine' signs which flashed faintly away back in his head. He was healthy, and wanted to stay that way; he was still able to view his body positively—he was friends with it, could pat it on the back when it turned in a good performance on the tennis court or in bed. He ate carefully, exercised to exhaustion at least once a week, did not smoke. But while he liked to warm his hands at the hearth of body-respect, knowing that he was leading a
sensible physical life, he had in his hip pocket a small flask of self-indulgence from which he took a quick, secret swig every now and again. Truth was he distrusted the puritan ethic which had stifled his early adult life, pitied the health fanatics who were less than their own masters, honored some of the stipulations of the medical world in the breach rather than the observance. And such small comforts as a night out on the tiles, fast driving and caffeine when it pleased him reassured him that he was a free man after all, gave him a childish satisfaction in beating (or at least snubbing) the cold system which his reason sought to impose on him: they were far from compulsions. If he died early, he decided, his epitaph would be not, 'He whored because he had to' but, 'He Coked to show he could.'

He drove straight for the north shore, then turned east along the coast. The bay was not very far, but was not a popular swimming place, being without much of a beach and having a wide rocky shelf covered in shallow water and sea urchins between the shore and the sea. The shoreline became a bluff of some eighty feet at the far end of the bay, and the water there was deeper, darker blue, with the swirl and smooth surface of a current. The road at this point went a quarter of a mile inland, skirting the bluff, and he pulled his car off it into the beginning of a track which led up over sparsely-vegetated ironshore rock to the top of the
bluff. It was a difficult climb: his slip-on sandals were the worst things he could have worn, and his ankles suffered twisting and scraping from the jagged surface as he turned this way and that, stepping from pinnacle to pinnacle. The danger was not of slipping, but of tripping: the rock gripped his rubber soles and stopped dead his moving foot, throwing him forward, so that he dared not build up any momentum. His climb was without rhythm, therefore, and tortuous in the extreme. This vicious gray lunar terrain bordered all the coast roads. He had seen children who had fallen on ironshore with inch-deep open gashes which needed stitching but would not get it; and he had seen cars which had run off the road and rolled over at high speed. They were ripped open. A driver or passenger flung from a vehicle ... he had never completed the picture, had never brought together the images of a child's gashed leg and a shredded car.

At the top of the bluff he paused through exhaustion, but his pause was prolonged by the impact of the view. It was not in broad terms startling—there was, after all, only the sea and the sky. But it was a long time since he had looked down on the sea from any height, and he was struck now by the range of colors—peacock blues, purple blues, deep greens, light greens—and of visual qualities—opaque, translucent, iridescent, transparent—over different parts of the sea floor: a moving, heaving patchwork quilt of changing hues,
the coverlet of some sleeping giant who breathed deeply and regularly. If he turned over in his sleep half the island would be swamped.

What had he to do with this gargantuan overlay of water? It daunted him. It was beyond reach, resistant to intrusion, impervious to search. Yet he had come to search it, first with his eyes, later by working his way through it, wriggling along underneath as if it were a ground-stretched net in a commando course. It had offered him one small secret: could he pick more out of it?

He looked for and found his point of entry on the previous day, and followed the line of his swim out to sea. It was difficult to judge distance by skimming his eye over a surface his whole body had had to pull itself through, but he thought he could see the place where he had made his find—there, where an electric blueness in the water suggested a sandy patch, a streak, a gully, a path of underwater light leading back to the cliff on which he stood, leading back, it seemed, to his very feet. Such a gully would surely mark the course of a current, a river in the midst of the sea, endlessly toying with the debris of the war between water and land, picking up, putting down, sucking out from the cliff face the shattered fragments of rock and coral, the excreted grindings of the untiring parrot fish which every year laid down two and a half tons of sand on each acre of sea floor—
carrying it out to sea until it was tired of it and letting it sink to the bottom. Had his coin been one of the current's playthings? Were there more scattered out along that drift of sand? And where had the sea found them? Had it broken into some sunken strong room as if it were a toy box, looking for baubles to finger for a while?

Doubloons . . . doubloons . . . the word had rung round at the back of his head as if the coin itself were spinning slowly on a mahogany table, singing as it went, and from behind it came another word . . . treasure . . . treasure . . . a wave, washing further and further up the shores of his mind ready to swamp the picture of a single coin with images of splendor and light and heaped-up wealth.

He knew his foolishness but chose to indulge it. He dreamed to show he dared.

He did not even want to be rich, not really rich—that was not part of his dream. He wanted enough money to free him of the need to think about money. He wanted to be able to cut the wires to Miami from which he hung. Most of all he wanted to be able to withhold something from his family, to have something which they wanted and which he was not prepared to give. He had never refused before: they had needed most of what he earned to lead what they had learned to see as a normal life, and the pathos of deprivation had been a specter hovering over him whenever he had hesitated in
the giving. But he wanted to give them more than they needed and less than they wanted, to step through the clouds of their indifference so that they should see him as a living and willful being and not as an empty business suit on a hanger, with pockets full of credit cards. He knew that a handful of coins would add no new dimension to his life, would weigh all too lightly against the shackles of family commitment; but where there were a few coins....

The climb down from the bluff was even more hazardous than the climb up. He was forced to pause between each step. He had no wish to have his face hurled down onto those jagged points of rock.

When he got back to the car the sweat was running down his body and his calf and thigh muscles ached. In spite of his care there was a loose flap of flesh on the outside of his ankle from which a line of blood crept down over his foot. It stung.

It stung even more when he waded into the water. He had started to drive back to town, but had found himself turning on impulse onto the track which led down to the bay. It was right that he should begin, though, and he did not know why he had hesitated. He carried on, stopping the car just where he had done the day before.
The water seemed colder around his thighs as he stooped to spit into his face mask and then rinse it. He wanted to see clearly, so clearly. He fitted the mask and snorkel, then pushed himself back in the water, lifting his feet one by one to slip his fins on: if he got sand in them he would only have to take them off again, or they'd put holes in his skin in no time. The cut on his ankle was painful, chafed as it was by the edge of his fin. He would not be able to swim comfortably for long.

The moment of change came when he rolled over and looked down. It was at this point that terrestrial sensations passed away from him, and he never failed to thrill at the transformation. He could no longer feel the sun, although it was still there on his back—it simply passed through him and was dissipated in the water; the earth had stopped pressing up through the soles of his feet; his arms no longer hung heavily downwards but floated alongside him with a freedom of their own. His breathing became an internalized thing—it was as though the water contained the sounds of his body and they had nowhere to go except straight to his inner ear, bypassing his eardrum, so that he could feel the sound of the thump of his heart, the hum of his nerves, the wash of his stomach as its contents settled to their new position. He had become a being free of both sun and earth, defined only by the element which carried him, able to move in three
dimensions as never elsewhere by the skillful use of breath and fins, and all the time listening, listening to his body.

Finding the sand gully was not difficult: he soon saw it glimmering ahead of him in the water. Optimism had driven his fins steadily, kept him buoyant; but then as he reached the spot to which the flounder had led him as if to distract him from the chase, and hung there looking down, reality ran through him and made him sink a little in the water. What was he looking for? Here he was, twenty, twenty-five feet above the seabed, and although the water was clear and his face mask free from condensation he could barely distinguish between weed and rock, stone and shell. What did he hope to see from up here? And diving . . . well, if he drove down hard he could probably stay on the bottom for a minute each time, perhaps not even that. How much ground could he cover in a minute? He knew very well that a visual search even at close range would reveal little. If there were any more coins, they would not look like coins. The most he could hope to do would be to bring up likely-looking pieces of debris and examine them on the surface, or better still on the shore. He would have to bring a collecting bag of some kind, and perhaps a floating receptacle into which it could be emptied.

How long could he stay down? How much ground could he cover in one dive? He glanced at the face of his waterproof
watch, took a deep breath, missed the moment, took another breath, and jackknifed down, lifting his legs clear of the water so that their weight gave him an initial downward momentum which he added to by a strong pull with his arms; then his fins took over and pushed him down at a steep angle. As he went down and the pain started in his ears he held his nose and forced air through his Eustacian tubes to equalize the pressure, feeling his eardrums squeak and pop as he succeeded. By that time he was almost at the bottom, and levelled out quickly to avoid scraping his chest on the rocks at the edge of the gully.

It was not a deep declivity at this point—more a shallow, roughly circular depression at the seaward end of the stretch of sand, something like twenty square yards in area. He began to swim backwards and forwards across it, at right angles to the line of the gully. He found he was paying more attention to what was happening inside him—to the pressure in his lungs, the deep rhythm of his heart—than to the terrain over which he swam, and he forced his eyes to focus on the detail below him. He saw little of interest in the five passes he made over the sand before the urgency in his chest forced him upwards. As he left the bottom he grabbed without hope two small pieces of coral. On the way up his lungs spasmed for air, and he was glad to gasp his way out into the open. His head throbbed: he had stayed down too long.
He knew about hyperventilation. He had watched the local youths taking a succession of deep breaths before competing in underwater endurance swimming. He knew what they did not, that they were flushing the carbon dioxide out of their body tissues. This had the effect of making their dive-breath last longer. The danger lay in the fact that it was the build up of carbon dioxide which triggered off the breathing response. An artificially lowered carbon dioxide level meant that a swimmer might not feel the desire to breathe at all until he had used up all his oxygen and passed into unconsciousness. He would then breathe out, take in water, lose buoyancy, and just drift on the bottom like a piece of waterlogged timber: he would become another of the sea's playthings.

So forty seconds was as long as he could hope to stay down, and in that time he had covered about five yards of gully. It would hardly be any easier when the gully narrowed, as it did towards the shore, since turning took much of the time.

He lifted his face mask, and squinting against the glare of the sun he examined the two small lumps he had brought up. Both were of a shape which could have contained a coin; but neither had sufficient weight to do so, and he dropped them back into the water, watching them spin slowly down past his feet.
He was disheartened. He had quickly accommodated the realization that his search was hopeless, and was schooling himself to take his satisfaction from planning and executing it thoroughly and efficiently rather than enthusiastically. He was achievement fixated, as Sandra used to say whenever he became engrossed in some practical undertaking to the exclusion even of her demands on him. This desire to complete had shown itself in his career as lateral rather than vertical ambition—he always wanted to do his job more completely, and often wanted it to be a bigger job of its kind; but he never wanted to do anyone else's job.

Now he planned this undertaking. Five yards of gully each dive; he would have to mark his progress by moving a rock each time. No, better still, he would simply leave his collecting bag at the end of each complete turn, until it was full and needed to be brought up for emptying—then he would mark the spot. He reckoned the gully was two hundred and fifty yards long. How many dives a session—ten? fifteen? It would vary. Assuming ten . . . it would take him six sessions or thereabouts to search the whole gully—morning and afternoon for three days. Just about right. But he must begin the next day.

He did not even attempt another dive then. It would have interfered with his plan, which now began to take control. He had no wish to scrabble about on the seabed in haphazard
fashion; he wanted to apply the simple formula he had worked out, to set in motion the machinery of search. He was to be a needle, moving back and forward, back and forward, across the graph of the seabed as it rolled beneath him, ready to jump with electrical excitement at any spark from the sandy bottom.

He noticed the offshore current for the first time on the way back. He had decided to swim straight down the line of the gully for a while before veering off to the shallows. His progress was slow, and he felt tired; then he realized it was not because he was tired but because he was struggling against a steady flow of water out from the bluff. It was not strong enough to frighten him, and in any case he knew he could swim off to one side whenever he chose; so he persevered until his legs began to ache and his sides felt squeezed and there was not enough air coming to him down the tight snorkel. He had covered twenty or thirty yards but felt as if he had swum a hundred, and as he paused before striking off to the right he saw the seabed already slipping away from him again as the current pushed him backwards.

A few yards off to the side and he had broken free of the track of moving water, and then there was only a steady ten-minute swim back to shore.

That sun. . . it was rebirth to wade into its warmth. Just as he was always excited at the moment of immersion in
the sea, so he never failed to be amazed by his return to solid earth, and air. The sun melted in through his shoulder blades, carrying its warmth with it deep into his body, flushing out the cold. He stood for a moment in the shallows to soak up the renewal, then plodded on again towards shore, lifting his fins clumsily and slapping them down on the water. He did not know which made him feel more foolish—floundering forward in his ungainly fashion or turning around and shuffling backwards as recommended. It was better not to take off the fins too early because of sea urchins, but he always felt happier if there was no one to watch him struggle between two worlds.

He burned the back of his thighs when he sat on the driver's seat—he had not bothered to park the car in the shade, and now he wished he had, even though it would have meant walking a bit further. His clothes he left draped over the back seat, having decided to drive back to the hotel in swimming shorts and dry off on the way. He pulled his shirt over his shoulders to give him some protection from the hot plastic which sought to cling to his skin like burning tar.

The attention he attracted when he called in at a small hardware store on the outskirts of town was not due to the informality of his attire; it was because this was a shop not normally visited by white people, situated as it was on the poorer side of town. The shelves were half-empty, and goods
were spread out along them in a pathetic attempt to hide that fact.

He made his purchases quickly—a nylon mesh shopping bag, a plastic laundry basket, a clothesline, a kitchen knife, a light hammer, a small chisel. He could think of only one other item he needed, and was pleased with his success in such an unpromising shop. His next stop was at a garage, where he paid four dollars for an old but usable inner tube which when inflated would fit around the laundry basket and act as a flotation collar.

And all the time he knew he was playing, acting out an adventure story, which he was writing as he went along within well-defined boundaries, which was itself a version, a parody even, of the quest myth. His family would have cut him to ribbons with ridicule had they known. It struck him for the first time that they would have felt threatened. They had never felt threatened by him before.

The coin, though, the coin; he had the coin. They would not laugh at that. It was the solidity of the coin, its declaration, which lifted him again when he got back to the hotel. It lay in the soap dish, noticeably brighter, he thought, from its immersion in bleach. He lifted it out with the handle of his toothbrush, rinsed it, and took it to the window. There was nothing new to be seen, but the details
had been sharpened, and the whole thing gleamed with a hard confidence, as if it knew its own power. It was a Merlin awakened from sleep, freed from captivity, and poised to wreak a magic. On him? It was already directing his life, sending him back to search further. He had no choice. He was committed to one of those undertakings whose futility was obvious but which forced him on by the threat of the "if only curse."

He remembered the oil painting. It had stood on a dusty dining chair in a dark corner of a saleroom in England. He had been struggling up through the lower grades of the civil service then—it was before the time when he burst through the inhibitions of his upbringing and paced his way across the Atlantic, up and down the deck of the liner which could not get to America fast enough for him—and had hardly enough money to furnish his flat with basics, let alone oil paintings. But there it had stood; and he knew it was good. It was a medieval hunting scene, and he could still visualize clearly the somber richness of the huntsmen's clothing against the darkness of the trees they had dared to penetrate; the lithe timidity of the tall white hounds among the horses' legs; the tight grouping of the figures held in balance between pressing on and returning; and the brooding forest behind. He had wanted it, and it was slightly damaged and unwanted among the mahogany and old mattresses, and
cheap, and knowing nothing he knew it was valuable; but he had not bought it. He was frugal and weak and he had not grasped.

His regrets had loomed larger behind him than the incident itself deserved, he knew that, but they had their echo. Not long afterwards he had entered into a phase of his life where he found himself determined not to let any opportunity pass unchallenged. An insurance policy had matured and he used the proceeds to pay for his passage to America. Within a few days of his arrival he had come across a small electrical store, one of a chain down the East coast with nationwide and even overseas aspirations, closed through staff illness, and had called the Area Manager and offered to run it. He then moved up through the ranks to become, some years later, Caribbean Controller. He had met his wife at a tennis club, liked her, and married her from under the nose of the club professional. The painting had been his last failure of inaction for many years. And now he found he did not care about failure very much. But he cared about the coin. It had breathed brightness back into the dying flame of his hope of a future free of the past.

There was a knock at the door. Elbert had arrived for dinner as arranged. Sodek welcomed him, realized he still held the coin, took a snap decision and without a word held his open hand out to Elbert, with the coin glowing in the
middle of his palm. He watched Elbert's face closely. There was not much movement—a widening of the eyes followed by the quick grin, a sharp glance at Sodek.

"Nice coin. You buy it?"

"Found it."

A pause.

"You and my father have things to tell each other."

But the eyes on the coin. No move to handle it. A kind of respect. The past exerting its power on the present. History making itself felt in this darkened hotel room, telling this black man that once he could have been bought with such a coin. Did he know he was being bought now, with paper money?

"I can sell it for you if you like. I know a man who buys old things."

"I want to keep it."

"Mr. Sodek, don't tell anyone else you have it."

"Why not?"

Sodek knew why not, but he wanted Elbert to put it into words.

"People here feel strongly about such matters. They will want to take it from you. They will feel it is theirs. You have no right to it."

Sodek could not tell whether Elbert included himself in this summary of public feeling.
"Who will want to take it from me?"
"Government. Police. People."

A friend of Sodek's had once tried to operate a hydroponic farm on the island. The tomatoes had grown well, but as soon as they were ready for picking the local people had simply walked through the fence and helped themselves. The island was theirs. No outsider could have any claims which usurped theirs. A coin . . . it belonged in the museum, or in a chest under some local bed, to be brought out in times of hardship--not to sell, but to flourish as a way of maintaining credit. It did not belong in a safe-deposit box in Miami.

"How?"

"If you try to keep it and the police find out you could be arrested. It is not like fishing for lobster out of season--you can't give the policeman half your catch to keep him quiet."

"And other people?"

"If . . . other people find out that you have it . . . they will take it. They won't care how. Again, I have heard stories."

There were two kinds of justice on the island, Sodek knew, two legal systems--glass house and bush. Formal law and order were maintained on the streets by decree and enforcement from the elegant Government Building next to the
police station; but off the streets, among the shacks crouched in the undergrowth, things were done differently. A knife held at his back would be at least as effective as a summons as a means of wresting the coin from him, even if the knife were used only to tell him how little his life mattered here.

He did not ask for the stories. He would be cautious enough. Could he trust Elbert? He thought so. His hand had not reached out for the coin. His concern for Sodek's welfare seemed genuine—and his own future depended on it. The coin was probably worth no more than a few hundred dollars, after all—not much more than Elbert would earn in a month.

But if there were more coins? Sodek found himself taking paradoxical comfort from the thought that there wouldn't be: he shook out a blanket of doubt over his young hope and left it to sleep for awhile.

They did not talk about the coin again that night. There seemed nothing more to say: Elbert knew better than to ask him where he had found it, and he himself wanted to reveal nothing of his further plans. They talked about the job, Elbert with enthusiasm, Sodek without. The evening passed.
Maybe a sudden surge had washed it over; maybe a fish had nosed it onto its back intending to make a meal of it; but the starfish lay there on the sand, its channelled and light-colored underside opened out helplessly upwards. Before long the wrasses would come with their nibbling mouths. The starfish was crumpled, too, dejected, with its far leg bent over like a clown's cap, awry, the whole like a chidden jester, arms hanging down, knees bent, shoulders hunched.

Then the arms began to straighten, slowly, the head to lift; and one leg stiffened, lifted steadily off the sand. Now the starfish was like a gingerbread man, cut out in simple outline, sugared with pale orange granules; and the gingerbread man was going to dance, to kick his left leg high over his right shoulder. Up and up it moved, until the foot reached right up between arm and head and the body curled up after it as if it were being rolled by an invisible palm. The rolling continued, and it was only a matter of time before the right arm and left leg were taken up in the roll so that the gingerbread man was poised, curled over his own head and left arm. Then the water took over and pushed the curl over so that it could straighten and settle, its nobbled and armored back once more on top.
He ate lightly at breakfast. His purchases of the day before were still in the car, and while his gas tank was being filled at the garage down the road from the hotel he fitted the inner tube around the laundry basket and used the air line to inflate it. The pump attendant watched.

"You fishenin' for dirty laundry or sumpn'?"

"My mother-in-law has a birthday coming. I decided to buy her a boat."

The joke didn't catch--different culture and a poor joke anyway. But there were no more questions.

He parked the car in the shade this time. The shadows were long: it was still early. He loaded his assortment of gear into the basket and carried it down to the shore. There he tied the clothesline to the basket and waded well out into the water, pulling it behind him, before he put on his mask, fins and snorkel. He set off steadily for the lightish patch of water which he knew covered the sandy circle.

He had trouble at first. The basket was light--he had left the hammer and chisel on the beach--and even the small waves he swam through were enough to make it bob out of the tire and tip. He paused, dived down and brought up two big chunks of rock to steady the basket. While he was doing that, the clothesline, which was much too long, snaked its
way around a stand of staghorn coral and he had to dive down again to untangle it. He coiled it carefully this time and secured it in the basket with another coral weight. He had not swum much further before he felt the drag of the basket, now low in the water, slowing him down.

He needed to rest by the time he reached the basin, but he was anxious to begin. He had pushed himself a little too hard on the way out. He did not wait long enough, and his first dive was a short one—once back and forward across the gully before he had to come up. He had swum slowly, pulling himself close to the bottom and turning his head from side to side. That way he could closely scrutinize a path about four feet wide. But he couldn't use his hands to sift through the sand—as soon as he tried to do so, his body began to rise in the water. How deep would the sand in the channel be, anyway? The sides were not steep—he guessed the rocky bottom to be inches rather than feet beneath his fingers. He must find a way of using his hands. The chances of any coin simply lying on the surface were slim—it was by and large bare of debris, a smooth river of white grains with a surface rippled yet still, flecked with a shifting light which gave the impression of movement.

He took a longer rest before the next dive, and while he rested he thought about ways of making it easier to stay down and thereby of freeing his hands. He could anchor the basket
on the bottom--it was beginning to drift away and needed to
be fastened anyway--and use the line to pull himself down.
But that would not give him enough freedom of movement, since
he would have to hang on to the line with one hand and grope
with the other, and over only a small area at that. No, the
only thing to do was weight his body. He knew how dangerous
that might be: if he stayed down too long, and began to black
out before he got back up, the extra weight would make it
unlikely that he would break surface in time. He would have
to gauge the weight carefully, and take no risks with his
oxygen. He would need to leave a greater margin at the end
of each dive, but the fact that he would not be using much
energy in keeping himself on the seabed should mean that he
saved air anyway, so he would not lose real bottom time--and
his hands would be free.

The weights were a problem today. He considered finding
some rough lumps of coral and using part of the clothesline
to fashion a crude weight belt; but he did not like the idea
of having the weight so permanently attached to his body. A
scuba diving belt would have made more sense--that at least
could have been released quickly.

The compromise he found was simple and comparatively
safe, two lumps of rock in the nylon bag, with the handles
slipped over his wrist and up his forearm beyond the elbow.
That was enough to help him down through the water, and
although he had a tendency to tip to one side on the bottom he could use both his hands fairly freely. In an emergency he would be able to pull the bag off his arm without much trouble.

Even then, his sifting of the sand could not be more than perfunctory. It was firm under the surface softness, and the most he could reach down into it was four inches—and he could take only a few handfuls for every crossing of the gully. The alternative was to slow down his search and try to turn up every bit of surface sand. He had to balance the desire to complete his undertaking, to cover the whole of the gully in three days, against the knowledge that he might, unless he were thorough, miss a find by inches. But the coin he had found was on the surface, right? It was not even in the gully, but that now seemed to him the most likely place of deposit. He knew that what was really needed was a suction tube to lift the sand and filter out the debris but he was not interested in that sort of project. He wanted to work in the sea himself, to persevere into the sea's coyness. It was a measure of his doubt about the possibility of success that he would work only with his hands. Had he known in his heart that there were more coins in the gully, his business sense would, he knew, have driven him to organize things on a much larger scale, to enlist help and equipment, if he could have done so without attracting the public eye.
So the rhythm of the search began. A deep breath, hanging on the side of the inner tube, then up fins and down head, down, down, fifteen, twenty feet, his ears clearing more easily now when he swallowed hard, the weighted bag leading him to the sea floor; then a levelling out, pushing with his fins, running his fingers through the sand rather than lifting it in handfuls, dragging the bag alongside him. Across, back, across, back--four passes, sometimes five, once six. Then back up to the surface, his heart beginning to pound, his ears to sing, his eyes wide and staring, the top of his chest fighting to open up and draw in air when there was only water. He was never frightened at this stage--as long as his mind stayed clear he knew he was safe.

Generally when it was time to surface he slid the handles of the bag off his arm and left it on the sand; sometimes he brought it up with him, if he felt he could tell from the unevenness in the gully floor the point of his leaving off. The bag helped him down again, and he did not have to waste time pulling it onto his arm when he reached bottom. Once or twice it happened that having done that he could not tell where his last run had ended, and rather than drag along with him the knowledge that he had missed an area, perhaps the area, he backtracked until he was certain he was covering some of the same ground again.
The sand was cool—coarse sand with a dry feel about it which ran easily through his fingers. It began to cut him: it was after all ground-down coral, and often sharp. There were among it, too, more substantial threats—broken shells and sea urchin spines. His fingertips were soon stinging with small cuts. He would have to find some way of protecting them, but thick gloves would make it difficult to feel the small lumps he was searching for. Heavy-duty rubber gloves would be best.

There were few enough fragments in any case. On his first two dives he picked up only one promising piece—jagged and unusually square. Thereafter he averaged two lumps per dive. It was a long while before he felt he needed to empty the collecting bag into the basket. He hung on the surface for a long time then, turning the pieces over, weighing them in his hand. Not one of them seemed to have the substance of his original find, and certainly not one of them was even roughly coin-shaped. They were all bigger than the first piece, and could have contained something, but...

Looking at them, he began to feel concerned at the prospect of having to break them open. How easy would it be? Could he afford to strike mighty blows and risk damaging whatever might be inside?

He was beginning to feel tired, too: his head pounded, his lungs felt burned and raw, the back of his throat ached
with saltiness. He had dived seven times, and as far as he could tell had covered about thirty yards of channel. He had about twenty pieces of coral in the basket.

He lay on his back for a long while, floating limply, his hand lightly holding the anchor line so that he did not move away. He had taken off his mask and snorkel and put them in the basket, and the sun picked out his upturned face and chest amid the wash of water and locked onto them, pulsing its heat down through his skin and tissues to the very bones. His breathing slowed, the hammering in his head gradually lessened, he drifted, inside and out.

How long he lay suspended he did not know. His thoughts were random, and were not about gold. He shied away from fantasies: he was sensitive enough to the absurdities of the search itself without embarrassing himself with adolescent imaginings.

It was with some irritation, and suddenly, that he jerked himself upright in the water and prepared to resume diving. Again it seemed simply a matter of seeing the thing through. The water was cold, he was stiff. The bottom of the face mask hurt against his upper lip, and the mouthpiece of the snorkel tasted bitter. It was a long way to the bottom this time, and he stayed briefly.

By the next dive, however, he had begun to loosen up and develop a rhythm again. There were more lumps of coral in
this section, and in a further four dives he picked up almost as many as were already in the basket. On his twelfth dive, which he had already decided would be his last for the morning, a sea urchin spine pierced his finger, a sharp stab which began immediately to throb, and that settled the matter. Back on the surface he hauled up the anchor line, dumped bag, line and face mask in the basket, and set off more than willingly for shore, swimming on his back with the basket bobbing along in the wake from his fins.

He had not brought much in the way of refreshment—a small bottle of ginger ale in a styrofoam cooler which he hoped would have kept the drink cool but which had failed to do so, and a pack of crackers with some processed cheese. He wished he had brought more, not because he was hungry but because he would have been glad of the excuse to prolong his break. He sat in the car although the plastic seat was sticky and uncomfortable against his wet flesh, because it was a different environment than the one he had spent the morning in. The metal and plastic shell became for awhile a sort of retreat: he even closed the door and turned on the radio to rinse his mind free of seawater.

Even when after a good half hour he dragged himself out of the car he was not ready to go back into the water. He debated whether or not to crack open a few of the coral
samples; but could think of no respectable reason for doing so. He must press on.

The afternoon was a repetition of the morning, a shortened repetition. He was so tired by the end of his sixth dive that he decided it was too dangerous to carry on. He hardly had the strength to swim to shore, and when he pulled himself out of the water the weight of the whole sky seemed to press down on his limbs, pushing him into the earth so that his round-shouldered and shuffling walk backwards through the water took on the slowness and uncertainty of extreme age. He sat on the beach for a long while. The sea urchin spine had hampered him throughout the last part of his search, and continued to do so when he started to use the hammer and chisel: it was at the end of the first finger of his right hand, and he had to hold that finger away from the shaft of the hammer. Tired or not, he had decided to begin breaking open the coral lumps right away, now that the day's collecting was over. Curiosity was one factor; the other was that the hotel could not provide him with a suitably discreet workshop.

He picked out a piece roughly similar in shape to the one which had held the first coin. His initial blow was tentative, and the chisel slipped one way while the coral jumped the other. He had merely grazed the surface. His second blow was firmer, and he had lodged the chisel in a
small indentation. The coral split open, revealing a multicolored inside. He was much struck by its beauty, and looked at it for some time and with intensity before laying it aside and reaching for another piece.

And so he worked through the pile. Some pieces were easier to split than others. All had the same internal consistency. None held anything.

When he had finished he sat back and shaded his eyes against the sun, which was now low in the sky. He looked out towards the area he had searched that afternoon. These fragments which surrounded him on the ground were all he had managed to take. He had taken them without hope, and now he did not despair. He felt a bizarre impulse not to hurl them out to sea, which is what he might have expected, but to swim out and replace them in the channel, as if to tell the sea that he had no desire for what was hers in the hope that she would be more willing to yield up her borrowings. Instead he gathered his gear into the basket, loaded it into the car, and drove off slowly and thoughtfully.

It was that night he discovered that the real battle was with himself. His reason began to assert itself, provoked by the aching of his body and supported by a general gloom. The pointlessness of his total life gathered itself from the edges of his mind and came swirling in like a black cloak to wrap itself around his hope and smother it. The futility of
his plans for the morrow took on the proportions of a life-
long futility, and the one day was made to carry the burden
of the years. The question of particularity exercised his
mind. Of the two hundred or so million people in the United
States, why should he in particular expect to have his desire
given, his plans fulfilled? He was asking for a special
thing to happen, he was depending on a highly unlikely event
to open up his life. How many of the two hundred million
were likewise trapped by such a dependency? And how many
would be granted their petition?

But this was his special thing. It was not as if all the
world's dreamers were competing for the same prize. No one
else wanted exactly what he wanted. He could make this thing
happen. It was within his power, if there were more coins,
to find them. This was how his fantasy differed from that of
the lottery-ticket holder—he could work as well as pray.

Yet he sank. He sank in his chair, he sank inside
himself, the hands holding the coffee cup he had taken to his
room after dinner sank so that some of the coffee slopped
into his saucer, and the hope too began to sink down through
his mind and leak out through his eyes. He could have given
up then. It would have been a whole giving up, an act of
submission to circumstance, age, fear, and ultimately to
their marshal, Death.
But something in him refused to die. A part of him had always been young, would always be. Standing beside his contemporaries, he had always seen them as older. More mature, experienced, self-possessed, yes, but older. Bumping coffee cups at conventions with men several years younger, even, he had found himself watching their teeth and tired eyes. He had been frightened, was frightened now, in this hotel room. The inescapability. The creeping disease. The failing body. The dying brain cells. The forgetfulness and haze. The narrowing of possibilities. Everyone was being herded into a funnel-shaped pen, squeezed and gradually immobilized except for an inexorable forward shuffling, a movement only of the feet. Those businessmen's teeth, clenched, would allow fewer and fewer things worth hearing to pass. The tired eyes would see less and less, had perhaps already seen beauty for the last time--half way through a life.


He reached out and pulled open the dresser drawer. The coin barely gleamed. It had nothing to say.

It was not the coin itself, it was something about it which stiffened him, made him sit upright in his chair. The coin had been moved. He had left it with the quartered side
upwards: now it was down. Whoever had handled the coin had
done so thoroughly enough to have forgotten which way it had
lain, had guessed, or had not been concerned, and had
replaced it wrongly. This was the turning point, the touch
that stopped the sinking. The coin, real for him, was now
real for someone else. Another hand had held it. It had a
place in someone else's world. He now had a cross-bearing on
it; he could rely on it, believe in it, more fully. Elbert's
hand had not been enough; Elbert was his, he could control
him, he was a part of Sodek's own world. It took this other
person's touch to remind him again that life was in the end a
physical thing, the morrow's task of which he had begun to
despair was just a job after all, not a symbolic ritual, it
was something to be got on with.

He fell asleep wondering whose hand.
One sea urchin was much like another. Some marine biologist somewhere must have counted sea urchins' spines, and they probably all had the same number, not that the number mattered here on the sandy sea floor any more than their precise length mattered or the material of which they were made. Only their direction was important--outward: each urchin was its own sharp statement of unapproachability, a Rorschach ink blot gone psychopathically spiky. If a black hole in space could look like anything, it would look like a sea urchin, an ebony star with myriad points, a petrified black explosion but representing really the collapse inward of enormous forces, a withdrawal through to the negative side of creation with only the outline of what once was left behind.

Any one of these lying here now could have been swung on the end of a chain by some legendary black knight, aimed at an adversary's head, the spikes driven in through a helmet and a skull; but they were not weapons, they would not attack or be used in attack; this was inverted aggression, the aggression of passivity, *noli-me-tangere*. To disregard would be to recoil with a black lance snapped off deep in the flesh where it would pain until it was absorbed by the bloodstream.

The queen triggerfish looked absurd. For one thing, it was an ungainly shape, like bits of several other fish joined
together, a fish created by a blind man. The head was large, long-nosed and bony like a sheep's head, as if this were going to be a big fish, and the underside swept down in a bold open angle; but the promise of the front half of its body was denied in its back half, for the belly turned sharply upwards again and the back dropped down to meet it so that the fish was chopped off short into a rough horizontal diamond shape with a sagging lower point. Then when it turned head on you could see that it was pathetically flattened as if by some cartoon steamroller.

The other parts were no less incongruous. The spinous dorsal fin was tall, spiky, triangular, with the jauntiness of a marlin's, a fighting dorsal; but the soft dorsal which ran from there to the tail was delicately ribbed and raked back like a feather in a lady's hat, too big by far, big enough it seemed to tip the fish over on its side, even though an anal fin half the size fought to balance it. The tail, too, had an exaggerated streamline like the tail of a child-drawn spaceship, with two long symmetrical trailers at top and bottom.

The pectoral fins should have been broad and strong to keep that unsteady body upright, but they were short and stumpy as if they had been partially amputated, and were tucked away upwards: the fish was ashamed of them.
The face was both comic and sad, a clown's face with big blue greasepaint stripes wiped across the nose and down the rouged cheeks on both sides. The fish did not know what it was.

It knew, however, what the sea urchin was, the big sea urchin threatening upwards. The triggerfish dipped downwards and crunched off the end of one of the longest spines with the posed unconcern of a drunk in a pub eating a beer glass. It crunched its way down the spine, its pouting mouth and narrow brow allowing it to work its way in between the spines and its horny head deflecting their sharpnesses. It went as far down as it could, then backed off and started on another long spine, not eating, just nibbling off and dropping so that fragments of broken black lances floated down onto the sand. Its purpose was to get in to the heart of the bristling mass, to the fragile pumpkin-shaped shell which held so much succulent meat. The urchin was helpless, its defences being chomped away and spat out with calm content.

Soon the coordinated unruliness of the waving spikes had been levelled to a low fuzz of shorn stumps, and the triggerfish could break its way in through the shell, battering now with its hard mouth until the casing cracked and fell apart.

When the triggerfish left not much remained. A few white shards like rounded pieces of eggshell from which a chicken
had just hatched: a scatter of glistening black spines, an abandoned game of dexterity; and two wrasses, cigar-shaped, blue and green with black and white saddles, which nosed among the debris.
CHAPTER IV

He disliked air conditioning. Most units seemed to vibrate with a resonance which reached into him and made his bones rattle and his teeth grate. In any case, he had never much enjoyed the shock of moving between two atmospheres thirty degrees apart in temperature, of stepping through a sheet of splintered ice into the clammy cave of a darkened hotel room, or of washing back out of the door in warm waves of bathwater-warm air. So he rarely used air conditioners, and it was the heat of the sun rather than its brightness which woke him this morning. Its rays were filtered through the weave of the coarse cotton curtains, and produced only a ghostly gleam, but the heat somehow slipped through the mesh and breathed over the bed so that when he woke it was to find himself cooking gently in his own sweat.

He had slept late, and the stiffness in his back and limbs when he tried to lift himself from the warm wet sheets told him why, and it also reminded him of what lay ahead of him that day.

Before he left the hotel he put the coin in a matchbox, sealed the box in an envelope, and left it at reception to be placed in the safe when the manager came on duty.

He entered the water this morning with resignation and little hope. The sea was no longer a fairyland where wonders might happen; it was again a place of work. So he worked.
He could not remember afterwards just where he picked up the squarish piece of coral which contained the second coin. He thought it was towards the end of the morning, when he was roughly halfway in to the shore.

The blow which cracked open the lump was struck in some frustration—the pile of pieces was getting smaller, his arm was tiring, and the previous piece had been particularly tough. This one would have cracked open under a light blow, so that his heavy one made the coral chips fly, and the chisel drove into the metal underneath so that the first intimation of his success came to him as a gleam which leaped out in response to the biting light of the chisel's edge, soft gold crying out to hard steel.

He did nothing for awhile, just sat staring down at the partially revealed coin on the flat rock between his outstretched legs. There was no feeling in him—or perhaps a hint of relief rather than anything else, of satisfaction that his sanity was no longer in question. He was surprised to find that secret fear emerging now that it could do so safely.

There was no regret over the damage he had done to the coin. The mark of his chisel was confirmation of tangibility; whereas the first coin had been a symbol, this one was a fact; the first had been Beauty, this was Power.
Things happened slowly inside him. The sparks from the revealing blow set off a slow-burning fuse to the keg of excitement way down deep. For the moment he chipped his way in a controlled and mechanical fashion through the remaining fragments. Nothing more.

He curtailed his lunch break, did not go and sit in the car. He gave no other outward sign that anything much had happened.

His work throughout the afternoon, too, was calm and unhurried—only at the beginning did he have to stop himself from driving too hard with his fins, grabbing at the sand, moving too quickly over the seabed. He encouraged a slow deliberateness in himself, damped down the smoldering fire, and merely toiled.

Such was his control over his feelings that he was able to decide to carry the results of his afternoon's work back to the hotel. He had reached a plateau of confidence across which a steady march was possible: no need for haste. In any case he was tired, and hungry, and he had gathered a large number of fragments: now that anxiety had passed away from him he could contemplate, placidly and with bearable expectancy, an evening of rhythmic chipping.

The hotel, however, offered little in the way of a suitable work area. He needed somewhere private, but could not really bury his room in coral chips. Then he thought of
Elbert. He had not seen him since their meal together, but he had received an invitation to call at the house. Yes, he felt he could trust Elbert, and an extra pair of hands would lighten the task ahead of him; but the principal factor in his decision to turn off the main road down the track to Elbert's house was a desire to speak out, to make the growing tree of his exuberance flower with words.

The old man was not on the porch, but Elbert himself emerged from the doorway as he rounded the corner of the house.

"Hello, Mr. Sodek."

An inquiring tone, as if he had not really expected Sodek to call. Or perhaps it was his physical appearance which was being queried—he had pulled on an old tee shirt above his swimsuit, and his hair was still tangled and wet.

"I need some help, Elbert."

"Trouble, Mr. Sodek?"

"No . . . no. I need to do some work, break open some pieces of coral—can I use your verandah? The hotel's no good."

"More coins?"

Level voice, level eyes.

"Yes. Well, one more."

"Same place?"

"Just about."
"Well, Mr. Sodek . . . well. You seem to be a lucky man."
"Today, yes. I almost gave up the idea last night."
"The idea?"
"The coin I showed you. I came across it by accident. On the seabed. I was chasing a fish. I didn't expect to find any more. But I had to try. Yesterday, nothing. Today . . . this."

He held out the damaged coin, still partially encased. Elbert took it, turned it over, handed it straight back.
"And will there be more?"
"Why not? We'll see."

They were fencing with each other. Neither knew what their relationship would be from now on. Certainly different.

Elbert was quietly efficient. In no time Sodek was provided with a stool (which he rejected in favor of the concrete floor itself), a cool beer (which he accepted happily), and a rather heavier hammer and chisel than the ones in the basket he had lifted out of the back of the car. Ten minutes later, when he was working at only his fifth piece of coral, he was given two warm spiced meat patties on a plate. The old man was not to be seen. Elbert squatted beside him as he ate, fingerling the unopened coral lumps. Without asking he picked up the smaller hammer and chisel, which Sodek had set aside out of consideration for Elbert's promptness in supplying alternatives, and with a single solid blow cracked one piece into two neat halves. Then another.
They worked without speaking. When they had finished there was a large pile of broken coral between them. They looked at each other. Sodek creaked backwards, leaning on his hands, arms stiff, and lifted his rear end off the concrete.

"I'm tired."

"I'll get another beer. Have a seat."

He indicated a low couch against the wall at the far end of the verandah. Sodek sank into it.

"Thank you . . . and thank you."

For the beer and for the assistance. Elbert nodded.

"Will you look again?"

"Yes. I think so."

"What will you do with them?"

"I don't know. I can't sell them locally. They'll have to come with me."

"What if you find a lot more?"

"Unlikely. But I'd work something out."

Elbert did not offer to help with the search, and Sodek was glad. He felt possessive, not so much of the coins but of the experience.

Neither of them knew enough to talk much further about treasure, and Sodek was feeling more and more tired, so after helping clean up the mess he loaded his things back in the car and was ready to leave.
"Come again, Mr. Sodek. You can use this place anytime. Good luck--and take care."

Sodek looked back in his mirror as he pulled away. Elbert was still standing watching the car as it rounded a corner in the track and the rich green bush wiped him off the bright surface.
Two porcupine fish were mating.

They were whale-like in shape, with squared heads and straight-sided, tapering bodies. Their mouths, however, were small and slightly beaked, smiling like dolphins, and their eyes were large and set well apart on each side of the blunt heads. The expression on each face was one of openness, innocence, good-humor, gentleness: each was a newborn face. The large spines which covered their spotted and barred bodies from nose to tail would not be raised in anger, only in fear; and they were flat now, used only to fasten the pair together. For the male lay across the female at an angle; facing in different directions, they were in whole harmony, finning softly to maintain the positions in which their interlocked spines already held them, a few inches off the sea floor.

Their shared rhythm was enough to draw forth the ribbons of their purpose, the thin stream of eggs from the female, a skein of sperm from the male; and the freed eggs drifted up through the wisps of sperm so that the two were fused as the fish were fused, only permanently.
CHAPTER V

During the course of the next day the whole nature of the project changed. When he reached the starting point for the morning, which he had marked with a pile of rocks, Sodek was tempted to leave the basket and collecting bag and swim up the channel towards the shore to get an overview of the terrain.

He was lucky, luckier than he ever could have imagined. He was well into shore, almost at the foot of the bluff so that the black shape of its wall hung ahead of him in the water. There was a close scattering of coral lumps to one side of the gully, and here and there among them a gleam.

His first attempt at a dive failed. In his excitement he took too deep a breath without making sure his snorkel was clear, and had to jerk back into the air, coughing and sputtering.

He went down again as soon as he was able. There they were, unmistakably coins—largely encrusted, but with more of a disc-shape than either of the other two had had, and with a clear hint of metal shining through. Six or seven of them without doubt, and several more with promising shapes. They were within a yard of each other, and it was not too difficult for him to pick them all up at once, although he dropped one of the bigger and less-promising pieces on the
way up. He let it drift back down to the seabed. He had enough, more than enough. He had stepped through a mirror into a world where anything could happen, where everything could be controlled by a man with the kind of magic in his hands which he now held. The Disneyland corruption of his imagination, which he had often regretted, now made a kind of sense—a yearning for perfection which could in the end be gratified was not a disintegrating force after all. The world was his; and it was a golden world.

On the surface he piled the collection precariously in one hand while he pulled off his mask with the other, and then tipped all the pieces into it, not caring that they might scratch the glass. Then, holding the upturned mask close to his chest as if it were some religious relic and he a high priest, he finned on his back out to the basket rising and falling on the slight swell.

After he had emptied the mask into the basket he stayed there, blinking his eyes, until he realized it was not the sharpness of the sun on the water but the glare of his discovery which was making him dizzy.

He kept an anxious eye on the basket as he pulled it behind him towards the bluff. Having caught the future he was not going to let it escape easily.

He could not understand how the coins had come to be there, the whole batch lying on the surface of the sand. They could not have been there long.
Last week's storm... he had read about it. It had swept over several of the islands, and while not of hurricane intensity—the hurricane season was almost past—had been severe enough to demolish wooden houses on more than one island, this one included. Now that he thought of it, he had seen signs of storm damage on the outskirts of town; and the wind had come from the north. Tremendous seas must have pounded the bluff. The underwater upheaval must have been at least as awesome as the terrestrial one. Had the sea in a fit of viciousness battered open some age-old cache and released the flood of coins? Where could the cache have been?

He soon thought he had the answer. He swam past the place where the coins had been scattered and came to the foot of the bluff. At the end of the gully, where the sand thinned out onto a bed of jagged rock, there was a black patch on the cliff face. As he drew nearer, the sharpness of its edges, the impenetrability of its center, told him he was right. It was a cave. It was not at the bottom of the cliff, but some fifteen feet up, a roughly circular hole. It was still ten feet below him—the water was if anything deeper here, where the bluff breasted out into the sea, than further out along the gully.

He dropped the weighted anchor rope down through the water, took a deep breath, and dived.
There was no way he would have gone into that cave just then. It was like a great round mouth in the cliff, waiting to draw him in. Water seemed to be flowing in and out, and that puzzled him. It was no more than three feet across, so that he was able to brace himself with a hand on either side of the entrance and allow his body to be tugged to and fro.

He could see no further than a few feet before his vision was inked out. He might have been looking through a hole in the sky towards another Creation: his imagination could have fashioned a new world in the black vacuum.

The shortage of breath he soon experienced was not due to the length of time he had been submerged but to the nervousness he felt as he looked into the hole. The awful, the inescapable thing was that inside him, in his own darkness, was the knowledge that he would have to enter the cave, that he was being led to that.

There were sizable boulders littering the sand beneath him. It seemed more than likely that the sea had broken open a hole which had been blocked up for a long, long time.

He was glad to burst back through the surface.

He worked quickly back from the cliff, not digging into the sand, just skimming over the surface, scooping up anything and everything which might contain a coin. At least one encouraged him with a glimmer. They were all tipped into the basket. He did not even go as far back along the gully
as his finishing point of the day before: his attention was now focussed elsewhere.

He came back for a further look at the cave. It was no more attractive the second time, and he shuddered at the thought of entering it. How could he anyway? He would need more than mask and snorkel.

He was not a scuba diver. He had tried once, but had not enjoyed the experience. A friend had initiated him brusquely into the sport. He had loaded twin tanks onto Sodek's back, who had felt his knees bend; then a leaded weight belt, and his knees had bent still further. Mask and fins on (with some difficulty), mouthpiece in, air on, and into the deep end of the swimming pool. He had not sunk like a stone, as he had expected, but he did go down rather than up. He had, unfortunately, not been told to hold on to his mask as he hit the water, so that it was knocked sideways, and everything blurred as the chlorinated water gushed over his face. That in itself would have been no disaster: but he must not have had the mouthpiece in correctly, for his first inward breath brought with it enough water to fill his throat and make him cough and gasp in, drawing more water into his airways. He thrashed in the water, having lost all sense of direction, his weightlessness and lack of vision completely disorienting him so that he did not even know where the surface was.
By the time they pulled him out he had died many times over in his own mind, and his body felt as though it had died at least once, but thoroughly. He would be glad to settle for free diving, he thought, for the rest of his days.

Now there was a need for something more. The thought appalled him yet attracted him with the fascination of a secret terror which might have to be faced, a spectral cellar which could be entered only by means of an abrupt and awful leap through the doorway. There was no time for caution anyway. If he was going to go through with it, he had to get on with it. It was still only ten-thirty. Three quarters of an hour back to the hotel. The dive shop should still be open. At least he could get some equipment, and they might be able to take him quickly through the basic skills. In his present mood, he would be prepared to take a headlong rush at the thing without any assistance, and in some ways would prefer to do so. The desire for independent action, complete self-determination, was almost as pressing as the need for secrecy.

But he encountered a problem in the dive shop. No, they could not show him how to use scuba equipment in an hour; no, they could not let him rent equipment unless he could produce something called a "C" card showing that he had successfully undertaken a recognized and complete diving course. His initial reaction was one of frustration and anger, the anger
of a little boy thwarted in some grandiose scheme mixed with the anger of a man nagged by fear and guilt. Fear, yes, but guilt? He did not understand. The legalities of possession did not trouble him. He was trying to cheat the System, perhaps, the System which kept a man in his place until it was too late for him to struggle free, the System which floated its gossamer threads around you from the day you were born, wrapped you up and paralyzed you with an injection of scorn if you showed signs of struggle so that you were numbed into acceptance and even felt guilty, as he now did, if you tried to steal an advantage, to wriggle a hand free so that you could begin to pluck the threads away.

He had to bluff his way through; but not at this dive shop. At the only other one he knew of, he explained that he had not intended to dive on this visit and so had not brought his "C" card (he used the new term with old assurance) but had been invited along on a boat dive to a remote and particularly interesting part of the drop off and he didn’t want to miss the chance.

He was soon struggling out to his car with all the equipment he needed—tank and backpack, regulator and pressure gauge, life jacket and underwater light. To set the seal on the whole thing, he had hired a compass and depth-gauge unit, which he could not possibly need, and had bought a dive knife, which he might. That last purchase was in part
a way of expressing his relief and gratitude at the lifting of the barrier which had so suddenly dropped between him and his afternoon's plans.

He ought to have eaten, he knew that, but he was far from hungry. He stopped at a bar and bought some peanuts and two cans of soda. He munched the peanuts as he drove and washed them down with one can of soda; the other can he secured in a small rocky basin into which the largest of the wavelets washed. It would roll endlessly around, but could not escape over the jagged seaward rim and would afford him a drink less than blood-warm when he returned.

After he got to the beach he set to work to sort out the various pieces of equipment. The only two items that he had to fit together were the regulator and pressure gauge on the one hand, linked by black rubber hoses, and the tank on the other, since the latter was already clipped into the backpack. His first attempt at uniting them was a failure. The thumb-screw clamp on the chrome T-junction of the two hoses was fairly obviously designed to fit over the squared neck of the tank outlet, with a circular orifice which would seal against the rubber 'O' ring set into the tank head; but the hoses were angled so that when he clamped the whole unit in position he could not turn on the air, since the tap was jammed against the base of the pressure gauge hose. Once he had reversed the T-piece, however, the whole thing fitted
snugly. He turned the air tap, and the hoses jumped as they took the pressure. The pressure gauge showed two thousand four hundred pounds of pressure, whatever that meant.

He could think of nothing else to do except try the air, which he did by putting the dry rubber mouthpiece into his dry rubber mouth and sucking tentatively, as if he were afraid that poisonous gas would gush forth. Nothing happened, he sucked harder, heard the dull click as a valve opened, and drew in a stream of what seemed cool air, perhaps because it was passing directly over his teeth. That much was easy. The rest of the stuff just had to be somehow draped, clipped, strapped, tied over his body. He paused to take stock.

He did know a little about the theory of diving, having done some brief reading before his undignified and near-fatal baptism. It was mainly a question of going down slowly and breathing naturally; and there were a few other details having to do with deep diving which need not concern him. One other thing he remembered, one horrific detail which served to remind him that this was not just a game. If you took a lungful of compressed air at any depth greater than, say, ten feet, as you came back up the water pressure lessened and the air would expand rapidly, and if you held your breath it would burst your lungs as if they were wet paper bags. He had to remember to breathe out as he surfaced.
Apart from that he just had to watch his pressure gauge and finish the dive well before the pointer reached the red danger zone at five hundred pounds.

He strapped on the knife first of all, and immediately and illogically felt bolder. Toys. As for the other items, he reasoned that they should go on in the reverse order to the one in which they might have come off in a hurry. So he put on the inflatable life jacket first, passing the longest tapes between his legs (although he was not sure they were meant to go there) and clipping them onto the D-rings at the front. The tank he struggled with. It was very heavy, and he staggered backwards when he first tried to sling it over his left shoulder as if it were merely a knapsack. He eventually got one arm through the strap, only to find that the other strap had gotten caught under the molded pack itself. The whole lot had to be lowered to the ground and the straps untangled. The second attempt was more successful: leaning forward to carry the weight on his back, he wriggled his way into the rest of the straps and eventually paired them up and clipped them together—rather loosely, perhaps, but already their nylon was rasping into his sun-sensitized shoulders. He tottered about for a while trying to fit his fins: every time he lifted a foot the weight of the tank pulled him backwards, and his over-corrective jerk threw him forwards. He fought the temptation to give in and sit on the ground: he
wanted to do things the way he wanted to do them., He was playing something of a role, yes, but that was important to him. He needed to feel in control.

He realized with some relief that he had left the weight belt in the dive shop. That had been one of the more difficult moments, when the assistant had asked him how much weight he needed for neutral buoyance. He had not known, and had muttered something about taking plenty, since he had been too light last time. So the assistant had slipped four two-pound weights onto the broad belt and hung it over the edge of the basket holding the spare weights, where it still was. He was sure he could manage without weights, would have been even unhappier than he already was if he had had to clip on that circle of dull, dead and earth-bound metal: it would have felt like Death’s thumb and forefinger, ready to pull him down from the air into the drowning depths.

At last he was able to pick up his snorkel and mask and shuffle backwards, stooping slightly like some grotesque hunchback. He felt far from heroic, but yet not altogether frightened--fear would have been too dangerous.

He was in about three feet of water when he toppled over backwards: it was half an accident, half a decision to let the accident take its course and not to fight for restored balance. The loss of weight after the splash was startling: far from being dragged under by the equipment he felt supported by it, perhaps just an illusion of contrast.
He swam out until the water was a foot or so deeper, then stood up, fitted mask and mouthpiece, and dipped his head forward into the water. So easy. The flickering fish were the same, the sun patterns on the mossy rocks, the waving outline of his black fins; but there was a sense of freedom he had not felt before, a knowledge that he now belonged to this secondary environment. He was on equal terms.

He launched himself forward in the water, drawing steadily on his air: trying to breathe as normally as possible; but his breathing rhythm was quicker, shallower, an effect of the regulator. He forced himself to breathe more slowly and deeply; held his breath for a few seconds; emptied his lungs and waited a little while before breathing in again--all to reassure himself that this thing in his mouth was rightly termed a demand valve, that it would give him air whenever he asked for it.

He began to move parallel with the shore towards the point where the bluff rose from the beach, and almost immediately pulled himself down through the water so that he was swimming a foot above the seabed. Staying down was not too difficult, but he immediately realized that a weight belt would have given him even more three-dimensional freedom than he had. For it was this ability to move in any plane he wished which began to delight him.
When he had free-dived he had always been strongly aware of what was up and what was down: down was where he had to struggle to stay, up was where life was, and he was in a state of perpetual tension between the two. Now he was free of that awareness. Staying down was no effort, going up no necessity. The whole volume of water was his to move through at will.

He came to a coral head, squat and uncompromising, sitting directly in his path. No need to go around. A quick flick of the fins, a downward push of the palms, and he sheered up its front face, skimmed over the top and angled down steeply on its far side so that he had to pull out of his dive sharply to avoid crashing into the sea floor. Control was so easy, so precise. A dream of flying. He had soon forgotten about breathing altogether. He was no longer a mere man, he was a bird of the sea, exploring one environment with the sensations of the other, moving through the sea with the freedom of the air. He began to realize that the frequency with which fish were given avian names had to do with more than their coloring—the parrot fish, hawk fish, sea robin, he now saw them for the first time as birds flitting about among the coral trees, pecking at the branches and chasing the insects among them.

Such was his feeling of elation that he forgot for awhile why he was there. He experimented with his body, twisting
this way and that, rolling over onto his side like the parrot fish; then head down in the sand, feet straight up above him imitating a slender pudding-wife about to dart into its hole; and then, like a purple and orange fairy basslet, lying on his back, pulling himself around with his hands, watching the bright mirror above him.

This was not rapture of the deep, it was rapture of the shallows, the rapture of a man to whom doors were suddenly opening.

He was not far out from shore. He decided he was as ready as he could be for the assault on the bluff and he turned parallel to the beach, swimming along past the point where the bluff began to rise and the water to darken; then he turned in at an angle, heading for the flat slab of rock halfway up the cliff face below which he knew the cave to be. He swam on the surface without his mouthpiece in, savoring the last of what he thought of as the real air, but the effort of keeping his head up with all that weight—and it was beginning to feel like weight—on his back was too great, and he was relieved to put his lips and teeth around the mouthpiece, draw in a lungful of metallic air, and sink down, down, in an upright position, until he was standing on the sea floor for all the world as if it were a sidewalk and he were waiting for a bus. The hiss and suck of his
breathing, the rattle of the bubbles, were all that he could hear: they even drowned out the pumping of his heart.

But he was too light and could not stay down without using his hands. He lifted off easily, drifting up towards the black hole above and ahead of him.

It was just as frightening as it had been. He held onto the edge with one hand while with the other he fumbled for the cord of the hand lamp, which he had pulled through under one shoulder strap.

The light of the lamp showed him very little from where he was. He put his head and shoulders into the mouth of the tunnel, resisting the push of water behind him which seemed intent on urging him in. Immediately the lamp gained power, having lost the competition of the sea-filtered sunlight. The walls were very close around him—rough, encrusted with coral and other growths in a variety of subdued colors, with here and there a weak sparkle. Tiny bubbles clung to the rock, and in what seemed as if it might be a regular pattern; individual bubbles, tired of hanging on, let go and wriggled up to the roof of the cave like silver tadpoles, to join the larger, more confident bubbles of exhaled air which streamed up from his regulator and gathered in quicksilver pockets.

He pulled himself further into the tunnel. Going in was easy. But there was no room to turn around, and coming out would be difficult, a matter of pushing himself backwards
with his hands. He had no way of telling how far in the tunnel went. He knew that further along the coast there were blow-holes driving well in from the shoreline and bursting out through the ironshore, but there were none on the bluff—it was much too high. This might well, however, be the beginning of a blow-hole tunnel which would never make it to the open air.

He was three quarters of his length into the tunnel. Just to reassure himself, he pushed backwards and cleared the mouth, hanging upright for a short while and looking around, as if he were only there for pleasure, sightseeing.

The bluff-face moved off on either side into vague reaches where rock and water ceased contending and merged into shades. Closer at hand they continually pushed against each other, the bluff seeming to lean forward to meet each swing of the sea, their ill-tempered insistence causing bubbles and turbulence and whipping the purple and green sea fans back and forward. Away from the bluff the water hazed; he could see no further than the beginning of the sandy path which had brought him there.

He turned back to the tunnel. Now was the time. He checked the pressure gauge. Nineteen hundred pounds. How had he used five hundred pounds so quickly? He would have to check the gauge every few minutes. He shied away from imagining the horror of trying to draw air from the tank and failing, somewhere inside that fastness of rock.
In he went, and immediately wished he had a weight belt on: there was very little clearance above him, and a slight drift upwards as he nosed slowly forwards brought his tank into contact with the roof. He forced himself to move more smoothly, and not to jerk away when he bumped into something ahead of him or to the side: he had a fear of catching his air hose on something sharp and pulling it away from the tank.

He twisted sideways and looked back under his arm at the cave entrance just a few feet behind his fins. It was like being in a darkened room looking at a lighted aquarium: small jewels drifted across the circle of light, occasionally darting forward a few inches then stopping and hanging there like tree lights in a bonsai garden. Beyond them larger and less-colorful fish—a black and white cony, a bright silver mojarra—swam effortlessly and slowly back and forward. Perhaps there were schools of such fish, perhaps only one or two of each kind turning and turning again across the cave mouth.

When he turned back he could not see, and had to wait.

The floor of the tunnel was flattish, levelled off by rock debris and sand. The rocks were of various sizes, one or two of them large enough to force him to wriggle and twist to get through. The first one almost made him give up, although it was not the worst; he thought of the difficulty of getting out backwards. What he did was allow his body to
act while his mind hesitated--a detached part of his brain which looked on while two other parts debated the wisdom of struggling past the rock was aware all the time that while the discussion went on his body was proceeding as though programmed to move forward until instructed to do otherwise, so that by the time he had decided it was foolish to go further and he was integrated again he was already past the obstacle. He had tricked himself, and the realization of his gullibility pricked him into a defensive bravado. What he told himself now was that if anything went wrong with his equipment there was no way he could get out in time, so it did not matter how many rocks he squeezed past.

It was at this point that he collided with the knowledge that he was prepared to die in this quest: it stopped him there and then as if he had swum suddenly into a strong opposing current and could make no headway. Did his life really mean so little to him? He had not known.

Then the current reversed, swirled around him, and began carrying him forward, purged as he was by this new knowledge. He felt lighter, freer, as if he had jettisoned a weight belt from his mind.

But death itself, the process of death, still terrified him. To be dead, yes, to die, no; to die by choking as water from this great underground tube forced its way into his body's tubes, no, no! He knew that not very far beneath the
surface of his mind a panic seethed ready to burst up through and wash away all controls at the first hint of real danger, and he knew too that to panic here was certain death. He looked away from the panic: when you are walking a tightrope, don't look down; when you are treading a haunted path, don't look back; when you are standing on the edge of a grave, don't look in.

He soon learned it was better to pull himself along than to swim forward: the wash of his fins if he used them drew up flurries of sand which hung in the water and reflected the light from his torch so that when he glanced back all he could see was a swirl of golden grains. He continued to pull himself forward and the tunnel moved ahead of him, ten, fifteen, twenty feet. There was no thought of stopping. He did not even pause to examine the tunnel floor he was scraping along, although it was only inches from his face: he kept the lamp pointing ahead, where he was driven to go. It was no longer a search, it was a race: he had to get to the end before something went wrong, before his air ran out, before . . . even before he discovered something—the urge was now not to find, but to complete. He was experiencing a kind of inverted panic, a panic which forced him not to withdraw but to press on, not to flounder but to become even calmer, to be not hesitant but relentless. He pursued his own death.
His air . . . fifteen hundred pounds. Quite good.

Then came the rock. It was not the largest of the lumps strewn along the cave floor; but it lay below the down-hang in the roof so that the gap was barely a foot--an arc of black moon fallen on its face, a mouth turned grimly down. There was no way through.

He pushed himself back a little way and allowed himself to drift the few inches up to the top of the tunnel. He rested there, scowling at the gap, the gap scowling back at him, while his tank scraped gently against the roof as the water rocked him forwards and backwards. It did not pacify him. He began desultorily to examine the tunnel floor below him, turning over this rock, fingerling that coral fragment. He was not interested. He only wanted to go forward. But there was no way forward. Without a tank he would have been able to squeeze through.

Without a tank . . . supposing he took off his tank. He need not take the mouthpiece out, and should be able to continue breathing without much trouble. As long as air came to him freely he would be all right, but any threat to his air supply and he would become a shaken madman tearing at the walls of this mute and sunken cell until his contorted body stiffened into debris.

Move slowly and carefully, unlock the waist belt, pull free, then the left shoulder strap, hooking the thumb under
the right one; bite hard on the rubber lugs of the regulator to stop any sudden jerk pulling it out of your mouth; tip the tank off slowly, supporting it with the left hand and lowering it to the tunnel floor; work it forward along your body, cold steel and rough straps, until it is ahead of you; the hose is taut so swing the tank around slowly to relieve the pressure on the hose and so that the business end of the tank is towards you. Now you are ready to move forward again.

He lifted the tank in both hands like an offering, and swam the few feet towards the rock. So far so good. He chose what seemed the widest part of the gap and pushed the end in. It only went as far as the bottom of the backpack: there was not enough room for both tank and pack together. Well, the tank could be freed from the harness easily enough. He drew the whole thing back and laid it on the bottom. The lever on the side was stiff, but eventually moved, and he was able to slide the metal holding band down the tank and off the bottom. The unencumbered tank slid easily enough between tank and roof. It was now a matter of lowering the tank gently down the other side so as not to strain the hose. He reached forward, arms extended, pushing the tank forward. The rock was wider than he had thought: his head and shoulders were into the space before he felt the tank tip down. He inched forward, wriggling his body, the coarse rock scraping his chest and then his stomach. He was
conscious all the time of the great weight of rock pressing down above his head. At last he was far enough in to hold the tank free of the far edge of the rock and slide it so that its foot was resting on the tunnel floor. He paused; and that moment of relaxation nearly caused his death.

He took one hand off the tank to steady himself against a sudden eddy; and the backwash of that eddy took the tank out of his other hand. It toppled, slowly, but with enough pull to pluck the regulator from his mouth before he realized what was happening. The rush of panic was all he had expected it to be, a great wave which swept up from his feet. He had just taken a breath but there was no more, no more air; what he held in his lungs was all. He lunged forward into the dark space beyond the rock and scrabbled downwards with his arms, but could feel nothing. Had the tank rolled away from the rock? He squirmed violently in an ecstasy of despair . . . and stuck. He had moved away from the center of the gap and was now held by the chest between the roof above and a sharp pinnacle below. The pain outside his chest matched the growing pain inside it as his lungs began to strain after what was not there, and both pains were obliterated by the agony of fear which exploded inside his head.

Yet a part of him remained untouched, as it had in the debate about the first rock. It told him what to do, and
while it did so a heavy clock ticked away in the background. It remembered a double-decker bus caught under a bridge, and how it was freed by having its tires partially deflated. First he had to stop struggling. Then, it was his chest which was jammed, so he had to let out some air. Let out some air! He needed it, every last cubic inch. His air! The clock ticked.

He forced himself to breathe out, half out; and he could wriggle sideways into the larger space. He was free. His first impulse then was to go backwards, to get out of this hellish place back to air, space, life, back along the tunnel. But the tank was his only hope, and the tank was further in.

He pulled with his arms and shot through into the space beyond the rock. The tank—where was it? Somewhere behind him. No good. The clock hammered. It was not a clock, it was his heart, pounding away, driving the blood around his body as if that would somehow make up for the lack of oxygen—an endless train racing around a continuous track, faster, faster, with its cars becoming emptier as their contents were scattered on the corners. Soon the train would be empty. What would the end be like? Would the train hurl itself from the track, reach out for Eternity in an awful attempt to fly ending in a great bursting? Or would it lose momentum, run
gradually down and expire with a hiss? What _would_ the end be like?

There was room behind the rock for him to turn and he twisted back towards it, sweeping his arm over the floor. There was a dagger in his chest now, and the clock in his head had become a bell tolling his imminent death, a reverberating whang which shook his whole body into overlapping images of itself.

All the time he was moving away from his body, leaving it behind in the tunnel with its pain—he could see it there, twisted, ringing in agony. He watched its suffering, pitied it but was free of it as he floated upwards through the roof of the tunnel.

His left hand found a hose, gripped it. Using that last weak hold on reality he pulled himself back down towards his body—not into it but close, closer. His free hand fumbled its way down the hose to the end, grasped the mouthpiece, pulled it to his mouth, still several feet below him.

It was not the regulator. It was the pressure gauge. He had hold of the wrong hose. Frantically he felt his way back along the hose to the tank, found the other hose, jerked the whole thing towards him, jammed the mouthpiece into his mouth, forgot to clear it of water, sucked in, got a mouthful, half-swallowed half-coughed it out, blew, drew in,
blew, drew in—great sucking inward heaves as if he were trying to drain the cylinder in a few massive breaths.

So he hung there, head downwards like an enormous sucker fish attached to a strand of weed, washing back and forward, scraping against the roof, not caring. He came back into his body as the pain sank away and made room for him. The bell died away in the distance and the dagger was withdrawn from his chest leaving only a raw wound.

It was a long time afterwards that a purpose began to assert itself: until then it was enough that he existed in that place at that moment, enough that he had air, could breathe. That was sufficient joy. He bathed in the warm lethargy of survival. But shook.

He could not stay there forever. He had to get back past the rock. When he felt himself ready he lifted the tank with both hands and slid it into the space. This time he held it tightly by the neck: there was no way he would be parted from it again. He did not let it down on the far side of the rock, just held it straight ahead of him as he wriggled through by using elbows, hips and knees.

When he was on the other side he tucked the tank under one arm, groped around for the lamp, which had gone out, found it and got it to work by flicking the switch a few times, and began to move back down the tunnel. There was no panic now. Nothing worse could go wrong. He had passed
right through essential water and it had failed to quench the
flame of his life: he had fought it and won, would not need
to fight it again: once for all. He was reborn into this new
element, and it could harm him no more. He did not even have
any great desire to get out of the cave.

He left the backpack behind. If . . . if? When . . . he
came back he would travel the same way, with the cylinder
under his arm free to be maneuvered through the crevices. If
only he had taken more care the first time he could have been
at the end of the tunnel by now. He still had seven hundred
pounds of air left, he saw, shining the lamp onto the face of
the pressure gauge.

The light from the end of the tunnel grew gradually
stronger and overpowered the lamp, which seemed to be dimming
anyway. Certainly he should bring a spare next time. There
it was, the circular porthole into the fishtank with the same
fish swimming back and forward. He finned hard for the last
few feet and burst out into the open water as if propelled
from behind. With the cylinder out ahead of him like that he
thought he must look like a wartime frogman hanging onto an
underwater propulsion unit; but there was no one to see him.

Not in the water that is. For as he bent upwards, tucked
the cylinder under his arm again and pushed for the surface,
he passed something coming down.
It was a rock. Not a big one--he had not heard a splash. It was followed by a few smaller fragments, floating down at something of the same speed at which he was moving up. He hardly had time to notice them before he broke surface and was free to spit out the mouthpiece; and breathe sweetly. He threw back his head to do so, and through the haze of his mask, which had begun to mist up and was partially obscured anyway by the droplets of water running down it, he thought he saw a movement on the bluff above him. He might have been mistaken, but he had a fleeting impression of someone backing away from the edge of the cliff as he broke surface, as if they had been watching for him to reappear but did not want to be seen.

He lifted his mask and swam on his back along the rock face towards the beach, cradling the tank in his arms until he found its weight pushing him down in the water and had to begin towing it behind him as if he were rescuing it. There was no further sign from the bluff.

The whole escapade churned in his mind as he swam, with the terrible centerpiece turning steadily in the middle and the other details in satellite around it. How near to death had he been? Very, he decided, if you measured nearness to death in seconds rather than will. He had almost withdrawn into unconsciousness, and the pain which had driven him to struggle had almost passed away from him. Perhaps that was the point at which you began to die, when the hurt stopped.
The hurt was coming back again now. The fire in his lungs reached up the back of his throat and sent stinging smoke into his nasal passages. His back smarted with he dared not think what lacerations and one elbow, he noticed, was raw and bleeding. His whole body ached from the nudibranch contortions it had undergone, and heavy blood was beginning to pulse through his temples.

He glanced over his shoulder occasionally to judge his distance from the beach. What he did not notice was a wayward branch of elkhorn coral lurking just under the surface near the end of the bluff. The first he knew of it was a searing pain down his back as the sharp claws of the massive coral paw screeched from shoulder blade to waist. He doubled up in agony, dropping the tank the few feet to the bottom. There was nothing he could do except squirm in the water and try not to drown, cursing and hugging himself with his arms as the acid burned into his back. The pain climbed to its peak within a few moments, and he ground his teeth while it paused, then fell away slowly to a point where he could undouble and let go of himself. A last warning from the sea, a lashing out of an enraged and frustrated animal through the bars of its cage striking him in his moment of calm after the struggle. He held onto the coral with one hand while he fitted his face mask so that he could dive for the tank and he saw, close to his face, the tattered white
ribbons of his own skin caught on the coral claw, streaming out in the current. He was angered by the collision, goaded by the pain, and he hated the thought of leaving a part of his body, however superficial, behind in the water in case the sea, having tasted his flesh, would want more. He knew that the small reef fish would soon be nibbling at the skin, and that idea, too, appalled him.

Trying to ignore the screaming of his flesh he collected the tank and headed for the shore, this time swimming face-down with the tank alongside him: the thought of more treacherous coral made him wince.

His back hurt more as the air and sun got to it, and by the time he was lugging his equipment up the beach to the car it felt as though someone had poured alcohol over it and set it alight so that flickering blue flames danced up and down his spine and lower shoulders. He draped his towel over the back of the car seat and lowered himself gently against it; but even the minimal movement required to operate brake and clutch pedals caused him increased pain. The drive back to the hotel was long and agonizing, and his mind sought to escape into other thoughts, even into other unwelcome feelings.

His predominant emotion was still one of disappointment at not having reached the end of the cave: surely it could not have been much further. What he did not know, however,
was that the end of the cave was probably attainable—he had had plenty of air left, and provided there were no obstacles further in than the one he had just overcome he felt that now he had the confidence and the experience to see him through. He had few thoughts about what he might find, the principal one of the few being that there could hardly be very much so far into the interior of the bluff: he could see no way in which anything could have been placed even as far in as he had already penetrated; and if there had ever been anything there even the sea's long arm would have had difficulty reaching in and raking it out past so much fallen rock. Unless the rock had fallen after the coins he had found had been washed forward; in which case whatever remained of whatever treasure there might be in whatever part of the cave would now be held there as surely as it had ever been.

He was not daunted by the prospect of a return to the cave: his victory there had made it his cave and in the escape from his body which it had experienced his spirit had become fused with the rock through which it had tried to pass. The cave was no longer a trap into which he was foolishly allowing himself to be drawn but a passage through to a new existence, a life beyond his present one, lit in his imagination not by the feeble light of a hand lamp but by some other strengthening glow; he could see the whole interior of the cave now with a clarity which had not been
afforded him while he was in it—it was as if his body had recorded contours and textures which his eyes had not, had brought them away and reassembled them now as startling images of things he had never seen—a head-shaped rock here, a glistening patch of mineral over there. He had created the tunnel, it lived inside him as he inside it. He knew it in his very being, and he fell asleep inside it that night, lying on his stomach to protect his ointment-smeared and throbbing back.
The octopus had almost finished decorating her lair. Soon she would be able to retire to it, lay her two hundred thousand eggs, and cement them in skeins to the roof of the little cave she had built. She would spend the next month in foodless devotion, caressing the eggs with her suckers and squirting water over them to keep them oxygenated.

She was magically shaped and colored, this small creature, never seeming to exhaust the forms and hues of her infinite adaptability. Upright in the water, she tottered on her straight tentacles; horizontal she displayed the panicked eye and pendulous jaw of a drooping hippopotamus; coiled and at rest she was an illuminated capital at the beginning of an ageless manuscript, looping herself into casual yet precise pastel spirals.

She needed something special to complete her work. The mouth of her den was already agleam with the white of small clamshells, the bleached purity of bone-like coral fragments and the mother-of-pearl sheen of shattered whelk shells. A single beer bottle cap added its crimped comment to the pile of testimonies. One thing more, and she knew where to find it--over there where she had not ventured since she chose this spot. Under that coral head, between two small rocks, she had glimpsed the highly polished and mottled roundness of a cowry shell. She was drawn to its smooth, bright hardness. That was what was needed. She flowed over to the
coral head like slow brown lava and reached under delicately
to where the shell sat confidently, such a finished thing in
those changing and incomplete surroundings.

The moray's teeth took her high up on the reaching
tentacle, the sharp needles biting down into the firm flesh
with a grip which would never let go. Her squirt of ink was
no use, no use now her desperate and automatic change of
color. She flapped her mantle and tried to jet away, but was
held, was jerked back under the coral.

The moray was twice her size, treacherous black bile-
green, with spiteful eyes set close together below a bulbous
forehead. She did what she could, wrapped her tentacles
around the eel's lumpy head, blinding it, smothering it,
gnawing down with her beak-like mouth. The eel rippled,
loosened the grip of its tail from somewhere inside the coral
head, and the two creatures rolled and twisted out into the
open. Small yellow wrasses watched nervously; a pair of
black and white spotted drums wavered under a rock; a hard-
shelled triangular trunk fish finned and tipped this way and
that in cockeyed disapproval.

The octopus gripped and squeezed, the moray gripped and
writhed. Then it was over. The eel knotted itself, swept
through the loop of its own body, breaking the clamp of the
octopus. Freed, it moved its bite up, took hold again
between the octopus' eyes, stabbed in, and the snaking,
sucker-covered tubes became still. Soon only a haze of sand hung in the water. The wrasses, the drum and the trunk fish watched that instead.
CHAPTER VI

He was approached at breakfast next morning by a man he had not seen before—local, very dark-skinned, well-dressed with the casual smartness of a man who wishes to impress but does not want to be seen trying to. "Yes, I am well-dressed," he seemed to be saying, "but for me, not for you: these are the clothes which give me pleasure—I do not care what you think." There was the same obliqueness in his manner—he was mildly polite, but made it plain by indiscernible means that he was so through choice, could equally well have been aggressive. There was a hard man under the mannered softness, as there was a rough one under the sartorial gloss.

"May I join you, Mr. Sodek?"

Sodek jumped slightly—he had not seen the man until he spoke, was surprised to be addressed by name.

"By all means," indicating the chair across the small square table. He had almost finished breakfast.

"Coffee only, please."

This from the newcomer to the waitress who had appeared behind Sodek's back, pad in hand.

"And you, Mr. Sodek—more coffee?"

It was as if he were being told what to do. He nodded, and sat very still while the chrome coffee pot came over his shoulder at the end of a black arm.
"Have I met you before?"
He knew he had not.
"No, I do not think so."
The man's speech was European in structure and vocabulary, but with the shiny roundness of West Indian pronunciation.
"Is there anything I can do for you?"
He assumed the man had come with a purpose. He was probably not a hotel guest, and Sodek was beginning to fear some sort of delay. Perhaps the man had come about the manager's job. That would be easy. Then he could begin. He had been up the road to the other dive shop before breakfast and had exchanged tanks without saying anything about the backpack. He had in addition hired a wetsuit jacket to protect the skinned meat that was his back.
"Well, maybe. I understand you have found some coins."
Sodek's hand paused momentarily as it brought the coffee cup up to his lips.
"How do you know that?"
"Someone told me."
A non-answer.
"Who told you?"
"I can't say."
"No one knows."
Someone did.
"Don't worry. It doesn't mean trouble. I can help you."
"How?"

"Well, you have coins. They don't belong to you. But
you'd like them to. I can make them yours. Most of them."

"How? And what do you mean, 'Most of them'?"

"Well, now, Mr. Sodek. Here you are, in a foreign
country trying to steal something which belongs to the people
of that country. That puts you in a rather delicate
situation, does it not?"

"Steal?"

"Well, keep if you like."

"I do not like. I do not like your being here. I do not
like your intrusion into my business."

He was surprised to hear the words; he knew too that he
should be cautious, but he sensed a threat pushing its way
through the man's suavity and he wanted it to find him ready,
crouched behind the shield of his own aggression.

"Mr. Sodek."

There was an edge to the voice now, a blade just breaking
the calm surface and creating a slight turbulence.

"Do you know what would happen if it were generally known
that you had coins from the sea? They would of course be
taken from you. If it could be shown that you intended or
had tried to take them off the island, you would be fined
heavily. You would not be imprisoned, but your freedom of
access to the island might be severely curtailed--put simply,
you might not be allowed to come here again."
He knew it, had known it all along. He had trampled the knowledge underfoot in his headlong rush forward. He was running a sizable risk, but he had to. He stopped his tone from softening.

"You said you could help me."
"I can help you by not helping the police. That is all."
"Your price?"
"Half of what you find."
"Half of what I have found."
"Half of what you find. I was there yesterday. I know about the cave."
"Then you also know that I didn't find anything yesterday."
"But you may today. I watched you load up your car."

A pause. Sodek needed time to think, did not really want to think at all. The collision of his dream world and the real world was upon him, as he knew it would be. Not yet, not yet. . . . He wanted to be free for a little while longer, wanted to prolong the fantasy, wanted to create the whole story, take it to its end, before it was torn to shreds.

"Leave me alone. We will have to talk again, I know that; but not now, not today."
"This evening? This evening."

He just wanted the man to go. The man went. He sat over the remains of his coffee, partly to let him get clear, partly because of the weakness in his lower limbs.
His first stride after he eventually levered himself up from the table took him all the way to the bluff: he lifted his hands from the white tablecloth, stepped out towards the blue carpet of the dining room, and his foot fell on soft white sand. The time in between was a slice taken out of his life. There was no thinking, there was only doing. Once he reached the plateau of fulfilled aspiration, he knew, he would have to pick his way very carefully; but there was more climbing to do first.

The sea was so calm. He could not make up his mind about the sea.

He passed quickly through the first part of the tunnel. Holding the tank alongside him, he could move it around his body at will to assist in the negotiation of the rock contours, but his one free hand had to do the work of two in pulling and pushing him past the larger obstacles and his arm was tiring by the time he reached the contraction where he had almost died. Already the pain which had scorched his back when the saltwater had seeped through to his lacerated skin had sunk away to a dull ache.

He rested, then went through the gap smoothly—backwards: it was less difficult than he expected to work his body through that way, and he retained greater, more secure control of his tank. There was no sense of oppression, no stirring of panic, just a cool process which delighted him.
The shimmering yellow moon of his torch rippled over the floor of the cave behind the rock as he knelt there, protected from the tug and push of water which had helped him through the gap: he swayed only slightly as he looked around. The walls seemed to be moving out and in to the same rhythm, but as he swept his torch first along one side then along the other he realized that the cave widened here; when the sea momentarily allowed him to stay still the moving rock walls settled down at an angle of thirty degrees or so from a line straight ahead and were soon lost in the utterness of beyond. He switched off his torch, and the sensation of being in water immediately passed away from him; instead, he was washing back and forward, back and forward, in molten darkness. Light's antithesis had become a physical thing which wrapped him round and wanted to roll him over and over, and which worked its way more completely than water could ever have done into the crevices of his wet suit, the wrinkles and orifices of his body, through the pupils of his eyes into the recesses of his mind. All was dark, dark. But calm.

Seconds? Minutes? passed, and he switched on the light. Something big immediately moved through the beam at its furthermore limit, a dark shape against an even darker background. Fish? Must be.
Time to move forwards, but without urgency. He pushed himself off in slow motion from the rock and maintained his initial momentum with a gentle finning action which rocked his body slightly from side to side as he moved down the wall, brushing it lightly with his fingertips every now and then to stay in touch with the world. The texture was fairly uniform—a smoother version of the ironshore he had left far above him. Little grew here, little lived: a small, pale shrimp jerking upwards, a gangling arrow-crab on insect legs stalking nothing, a many-legged worm rooting and snuffling mindlessly among the grains of sand which lay in scattered patches on the floor, filling hollows, lining fissures. The floor was even. He could not tell whether it was level: he had no sensation of moving up or down, but gravity's signals were so faint here, and his bubbles burst out when he exhaled with such a vigorous scattering, bounding up to the roof, that they gave him no precise vertical. When he looked up he was amazed to see holes in the roof through to the open air. He could have put his head up into them and breathed sweetly without the aid of this clicking monitor his mouth was wrapped around. But when he put his hand up to one of them, and shattered its mirror surface into gleaming golden turbulence, he realized that it was no more than the residue of his breathing, his exhaled air which had pooled under the rock and formed a false surface, a miniature atmosphere. It
was not a way through, but a way back to himself, and as he watched the pool reform and settle he could see in its underside the clearing reflection of his light and even of his own upturned face.

He checked his pressure gauge. Eleven hundred pounds. He was using much less air than he had done the first time, a function of his comparative calm. He was not deliberately holding his breath, but sometimes when he breathed out he knew that he had had that particular lungful for a long, long time, had drawn every last drop of sustenance from it. Nor did he fill his lungs to capacity so that he could feel their stretch: to do so made him too buoyant so that he drifted up to the roof and scraped and bumped until he could breathe partly out and dip down again.

The right-hand wall suddenly swung away sharply. He turned his torch across the tunnel. The other wall was already just beyond his range, nothing more than a feeling of something there. But ahead and slightly to his left a thick shape loomed, reaching from floor to ceiling: a rounded pillar of rock, splitting the tunnel—making it, perhaps, into two tunnels? More than two? He paused, a counter-current of caution holding him suspended. Suppose this simple tunnel turned into a labyrinth, and suppose he lost his way? He knew nothing about geology, but was surprised to find that this straight hole driven by the sea into the solid
earth might diversify, that its simplicity might become subtle.

He could do nothing but continue. The tunnel did branch: a new left-hand wall came in at him from behind the pillar, this one more jagged and irregular than the original, with black holes sucking in light from his torch as if to slake a thirst. He peered into one, pushing his torch ahead of him so that he could get head and shoulders into the gap. It did not go very far, took a sharp upward turn up a small bank of sand and then narrowed to nothing. The next one was smaller but then widened out and twisted upwards also, and he could see no end—he did not go past the elbow, and the chimney continued to climb at a steep angle beyond his torchlight.

Back in the main passageway he rested, lowering his tank to the floor and lying alongside it like a sleeping nurse shark. The purpose of his being there moved forward again in his mind. Up till now he had been lost in penetration of this new, this different, this discovered world. He had not even been watching the floor as it passed below him—he could have glided over dozens of artifacts and known nothing about them. He was not concerned: they would still be there when he swam out, or when he next swam in. First of all he had to survey the extent of the cave system before he could decide which search technique would serve best. The presence of so many cavities worried him: there was no way he could explore
every one, and taking account of the fact that if there were
treasure in any substantial amount it might be buried under a
good depth of sand at the back of such a cavity his task
seemed more hopeless than at any time since he had begun it.
All he could do, again, was swim on.

Nine hundred pounds. It had taken him five hundred
pounds to come this far from the rock. He would go back at
six hundred. No, seven hundred. Soon.

The tunnel split again, one branch curving up to the
left, the other twisting down and narrowing to the right. He
felt an urge to take the left-hand passage--because it went
towards the surface? In terms of distance from the exit, it
made no difference.

He took the right-hand. Before he knew it, he was hemmed
in from above, below, each side, holding his tank straight
out in front of him, able to do little more than waft his
fins from the ankles, bouncing occasionally up on his elbows,
twice banging his head, very glad of the wetsuit which bore
the brunt of the scrapings and buffettings. His great fear
was that the tunnel would narrow to the point where he would
be able to go no further without running the risk of becoming
jammed, and that he would then have to wriggle his way out
backwards. His fins would be no use to him: his knees and
elbows would have to do all the work, and it would be slow.
Once already his shoulders had stuck, and he had had to twist
on his side to free them. He now knew how important it was, if he did find himself gripped by the squeezing rock, to relax, not to fight, to allow the combined pulse of the water and his body to bring him free.

When he broke through into the cavern the torch went out. It just went out. He just had time to glimpse a rounded chamber fifteen feet across. There were craggy rocks, eyeless holes, mounds of sand, then the light was out and those things were projections on the back of his eyelids which he closed in the hope that when he opened them again he would be able to see.

He could not. He shook the torch, clicked the switch rapidly, banged the base on his tank, creating a ringing echo which startled him by its nearness. He had not brought a spare torch.

The panic began low and surged up through his body, it spilled out into his mouthpiece in a gagged cry of rage and fear. He worked the switch again and felt something give way inside, a little snap which left the button rattling loosely in its socket; but even as the switch gave way, a brief flash of light burned his eyes. By pressing down hard on the broken switch, he found he could squeeze from the dry instrument a droplet of light, a dim momentary glow which did no more than tantalize him with a glimpse of his surroundings too brief to allow an orientation. The switch was awkwardly
placed under the handle so that he had to use both hands to work it. He could not swim like that. He groped around for a rock fragment which would take over the job of his tiring fingers, found one, discarded it as too small without trying it, scrabbled up another—too large: it would not fit under the handle—and finally forced between handle and switch a rough and solid-feeling lump which held the switch firmly down . . . to no avail. After a sharp jiggling which produced two more flashes, nothing happened. Nothing would happen, he was forced to accept, and a fragile glass cover of coolness settled over him, protecting him from the wash of passion around him. Inside that cover he could think, plan, even more; and he had to move soon. He had noticed an increase in his breathing rate as soon as the light went out— or was it an illusion? He was easy prey to hallucination now: his sensations were magnified, even within the glass dome. The sea seemed to be pulling and pushing him more violently, the floor was moving under his feet so that he had to step first forwards and then backwards to stay in one place. Something brushed his head, and he wondered if the roof were sinking on him, pushing him to his knees. That was where he went anyway, down where his feet were secure, where he could reach forward with his hands over the floor and look for clues, any clues, as to the direction he should take. The wall had been to his right, but he had no way of telling
how many times he had spun around in his struggle with the darkness, his only weapon jamming as the enemy closed around him. He began a sort of shuffling hop, still on his knees, not daring to lose contact with the ground and swim forward, fearing that he would drift too far from the mouth of the tunnel which could, which must, take him back. The tank he gripped under his left arm, the useless torch he clasped tightly in his left hand, reluctant to let go of any item which kept him in touch with the safe world he sought.

Not knowing in what direction he faced he struggled around in what he hoped were ever-increasing circles until the knuckles of his tentatively outstretched left hand scraped across a jagged surface which left them stinging and his heart pounding. This was to be his most crucial choice. If he were where he hoped, not far beyond the beginning of the tunnel on the same side, its right-hand side as he had first looked into the chamber, then he needed to move to his right now. If, on the other hand, he had unwittingly crossed the chamber, a turn to the right along the opposite wall would take him away from life.

He moved the torch to his right hand so that he was holding it under the tank, and touching without grasping with his left hand he moved sideways to his right. He was feeling for a space where there should be rock, a gap where there would otherwise be wall. The whole body of water around him
was moving, and he had no hope of using its pull to locate the entrance. As he remembered it the tunnel emerged fairly low down in the wall, and he leaned forward and downward as he moved along, brushing the wall with his fingertips. He could not afford to miss the gap the first time.

When his fingers encountered nothing for a yard or so, he almost sobbed. There was a chance after all, and that sob told him what he had not known—that he had not expected to find the tunnel again. The glass dome shattered; it had served its purpose in protecting him from his own feelings so that he could begin; now that he had begun, the glass could fall to the ground in fragments and he could emerge with a driving passion to survive, a passion which now pushed him forward, trembling, to lie full-length in the tunnel in swimming position. For it was the tunnel, he was certain, and he reassured himself by feeling the rough shell around him, fingerling its circularity, before lodging his fingers in a small crack, pulling himself forward and beginning the long swim through darkness.

The sound was awful. There was no visual distraction from the suck, click, hiss and bubble of his breathing, which now seemed ten times louder than before. Each cycle of sound meant less air in the tank. He had once read that each human heart was programmed to beat a specific number of times before it stopped forever, that a lifetime was determined by
cardiac exhaustion when all other ills had been avoided. He had refused to believe it: it was too hard to think of that clock ticking away inside him, using itself up in order to feed itself, dying in order to live. He abhorred a medical theory which would have produced in him a conflict between the urge to embrace the world and beget experience and the desire to fold his arms around himself and conserve. Yet he was haunted by the image of that dark little muscle counting, counting.

And here he was, measuring out his life in gasps. There was no way of telling how many lungsful of air were left in the tank; he had already lost any idea of how many pounds of pressure there might be. He must already have reached the seven hundred pound limit he had set as a turning point; and he had to move so slowly now, fumbling his way forward, perpetually bumping with knees, elbows, head into hard rock, tearing fingernails and pricking fingers on sharp projections and the needles of unnameable spiny growths. What he noticed now were the specks of luminosity which twinkled along the rock close to his head whenever he brushed against it, minute phosphorescent stars which winked and went out, then winked again. This was no fairy grotto, however: the rock grated along his body. The tunnel narrowed beyond what he remembered it to have done on the way in, so that he began to wonder if it really were the same passage. The thought that
he might have found his way into some other tunnel which would lead him into some other place, made his body prickle with sweat even as it was washed by water. He could feel the sweat trickling down his forehead inside the face mask, running down between his eyebrows and into the corners of his eyes where it stung like the sea. The irritation grew worse and he was startled to find his annoyance at it overcoming the fear, and in little less than anger he stopped finning, laid the bottle down, pulled the face mask forward away from his face. He felt the water rush up past his nose, probe his nostrils, fumble at his eyes, and he quickly inserted a forefinger, rubbed hard at the offending spot until it itched no more, clamped the mask back in position and tipping his head back and pressing against the top of the glass blew out hard through his nose. The water gurgled and grumbled its way down, and a second strong exhalation cleared the mask completely. He had neither time nor air for such triviality, he knew, but it was an act of defiant optimism which gave him relief not only from the irritation but from the creeping doubt which was beginning to worm in his gut. The tunnel, certainly, was narrower, and it was all he could do at times to wriggle his way through: he seemed to be using not so much his elbows, knees and fins as hips and individual ribs to squirm along, each muscle ripple working him forward like a fat sea-cucumber hunching and twisting slowly ahead. When he
lost a fin it did not much matter, and there was not much he
could do about it anyway: the back of the heel strap caught
on a roof projection and pulled half off, and as he tried to
reach down the tight side of his body to ease it back on an
eddy took it away from him. He could not turn, did not want
to shuffle backwards; he went on, his bare foot trailing
behind him and feeling suddenly cold and vulnerable and small.

He tried to keep in touch with both sides of the passage,
even when it eventually widened out, but he hated the moment
of suspension when he had left one side and was crossing to
where he hoped the other would be. At least the wall he was
travelling down was going somewhere, and he had to keep
moving. He was beginning to dread every breath he took, to
dread and to need it desperately, waiting for the one which
would be more difficult than the one before and which would
tell him that he had all but finished his air. Already he
felt that he was having to pull slightly harder on the demand
valve to overcome the inertia and start the air flowing.
That couldn't be: he must still have plenty of air left. But
he was breathing more quickly. He must slow down, must use
every bit of air.

Suddenly, there was no right-hand wall. The tunnel was
narrow again, and he could reach out and touch both walls,
except that one of them wasn't there. He stretched out his
hand cautiously, then moved his whole body over. No,
nothing. He worked back a little to where the wall seemed to end. Was this the second fork, the point where he had taken the downward passage? He could not tell whether he had been ascending over the last stretch. If that was where he was, it was not much further to the first fork, and from then on he would be in the straightforward main passage which for him represented the home stretch: he even thought with some warmth of the rock which had almost killed him.

He returned to the left-hand wall and increased his pace slightly, but for the first time, now that he was in freer water and wanted to move more briskly, he felt the lack of his lost fin. Not only was his swimming rhythm halting and tiring, it was more difficult to hold his course, and it was particularly frustrating to feel the impetus of his single thrust lost as his bare foot waggled ineffectually instead of pushing him further forward. Each surge died away and he drifted down almost to a stop before he could push again with his one fin: it was drive, sink, drive, sink all the way.

That was why he went wrong. Concentrating too much on getting along, he became less cautious, less careful to check his direction. In any case he must have been feeling along the wall too low down so that he mistook the jumble of rocks across the mouth of the first passage for the foot of the wall, whereas in fact the wall stopped and the gap into which
he should have swum went past him silently in the darkness and the first thing he knew was that the wall had changed direction, was bending around to his right. He was certain of it, even in the darkness, and the bend became more pronounced as he swam on: the wall was pushing him further and further over, leaning on him in a manner which could not be accounted for by his lopsided swimming. There was no such bend in the tunnel. Further round, further round, in some desperation now, the panic which had so amazingly kept its distance closing in on him, beginning to smother him so that he started to choke on it and his mind began to retch, gasping for hope between each convulsion as his body would soon be gasping for air. His throat tightened, became like the narrow black tube which fed him air from the tank; but it was knotted so that he had to gulp the air down, force it past the sobs which rolled up to meet it and almost drove it back. He should have turned back, he knew, as soon as he felt things were wrong, should turn back now; but his panic, his limping, gasping, sightless panic made him begin to thresh forward brutishly, hoping that he was wrong, that there was a bend after all, that soon his groping left hand would find the entrance to the main passageway. His air was running out, he was sure of that now; the tightness of his throat was added to by a tightness in the regulator and after each full expansion of his chest there was a slight but awful
pause as his lungs caught up, waiting as they had to for the less than abundant air to seep in through the constriction. Yet he swam faster, flicking rather than driving with his fins, clawing rather than pulling with his free hand. He hugged the tank close to him, ready if need be to squeeze out the last of the air.

He had no plan now except to swim on as fast as possible in the jagged hope of bursting through somewhere, somehow. There was no foreseeing the collision with the rock. His bare foot had been raked by a spiked edge and he had flinched away to the right as if he were being attacked from the left. The blow on his head was totally unexpected. There should not have been anything there, in the middle of the passageway. The crack of the impact on the crown of his head sliced through him before the pain started. The longer the pause between injury and pain, he knew, the greater the pain when it came; and this pain when it eventually arrived was an explosion in his head. Suddenly he could see, not because the torch had come to life, but because his underwater prison was lit up with rockets and starshells, green flares and thunderflashes, the pyrotechnics not of celebration but of war. Someone hiding there in the darkness had taken a meat cleaver and split his skull and was now rocking the blade back and forward to free it and open up the bone for another blow. He vomited into his mouthpiece, could do nothing about
the eruption of his stomach which gushed mouthpiece and all out into the water. He grabbed for the mouthpiece and found it right away but had to wait for another convulsion to spew out bitter bile before he could put it back in. The raw fluid burned its way down his nostrils into his face mask. The battle inside his head barely left him enough consciousness to tell him not to breathe in between retchings. Vomiting without air was painful, a total collapse of stomach and diaphragm with nothing to reinflate them so that the muscles squeezed his whole middle body. He stuffed the regulator back into his mouth but as soon as he began to breathe in he knew he was lost. Water, it was full of water, and he could not breathe water. He had no breath in his lungs to clear it. There was water between him and the air he needed so badly, and he could do nothing about it. The purge button, that was what it was for, to blow the water out of the regulator. Round the front, quick, fingers round the front, push. A burst of bubbles into his mouth, hitting the back of his throat, streaming into his nasal passages. Air . . . but the first breath tasted so foul that he had to take the mouthpiece out and vomit again, a more controlled evacuation this time, with a lungful of air to sustain it and the hollow groan which accompanied it. Back in with the mouthpiece. Purge. Water, choking water. The exhaust valve must have become clogged with vomit so that he
was simply drawing in the sea around him whenever he inhaled. Purge. Purge. Purge. Shake. Purge. Back in. Breathe. Air, air, air, a long uninterrupted expansion of the lungs until they were fuller than they had ever been before. Hold, hold that air, use it. Not too long—perhaps the exhaust valve had stuck again. Try it, try it. All right, all right. Slow down, control, concentrate on the pain, forget the breathing, let that come, it will come, think of the pain, the cleaver, the glaring chemical fires, lie still, still.

It could not be long. He wanted to lie there forever, but forever for him was two or three minutes, then it would be forever. He reached out for the solidity which had stunned him. It was as he ran his palm over the rounded surface that he began to realize what it was. The pillar, it must be the pillar that had split the passageway and had now split his skull. Through the horror inside his shattered head the knowledge that all was not lost began to form into a shape of light, a constant beacon among the erratic flashes and bursts which still fired away. He had come completely around the outside of the first cavern, must have missed the passage he was seeking, was back now at the branch whose right-hand fork he had initially taken. If he moved to his right now he should be able to make contact with the wall which had been leading him out. He could then work his way back down, more carefully this time, to where the hole should be.
He found it easily the second time and pulled himself quickly into it. Now that the turmoil in his head was subsiding, leaving the searing cleft in the top of his skull which felt as if it were open to the water, he became aware again of the growing tightness in his chest, which was not now getting the air it needed. There was no time to slow down and regain control of his urgent breathing: he had to make a dash for it. Yanking himself forward with his free hand, thrashing with his legs, dreading another crack on the head, he wriggled, rolled and twisted his way forward, having to suck harder and harder on the regulator and receiving less and less in return so that his lungs were soon burning as fiercely as his head. He never managed to more than half-fill his lungs before his bloodstream was crying out for more air, fresh air, and he had to exhale forcibly and swiftly to begin again the painfully slow drawing in.

Fortunately it was his hand and not his head which banged against the rock, the big rock. That was painful enough, jarring his arm right up to the shoulder. He should be able to see light by now; and then he realized that his eyes were tight shut, screwed up against the saltwater, the salt vomit, the fear which washed around inside his mask. He opened them, and there was the crescent of lit water. He felt he could count the number of breaths now that he would need to get out—fifteen? twenty? Were there that many left in the
tank? Half-breaths maybe, which would soon become quarter-breaths, then the last whimpering suck. He forced the tank ahead of him through the gap, then humped himself after it, pausing neither before nor after. Straight down the tunnel now at the target of light, arrowing his way to sunshine, air, life. There was no more air in the tank, but he did not need air. His lungs went through the motions of breathing in but he did not care that nothing came, as effectively as if the hose had been corked. He was there, and he burst through the dazzling blue disc as if it were a tissue of light stretched over a hoop and he were a performing dolphin. Once out he dropped tank and torch, twisted sharply upwards, so sharply that he almost caught his back on the top of the cave mouth, and spiralled rapidly up to the surface, his one fin spinning him round and round, his arms stretching up in supplication until he broke through into the air.

When he got back to his hotel room he was sick again. To be sick in a bathroom with his head cradled in his hands on the edge of the pedestal was a luxury, and he fell asleep there on the floor afterwards, his forehead on his hands which in turn were on the cold tiles so that they were sandwiched between two extremes of temperature, the cool ceramic and the burning skull.

The doctor who had dressed his wound had said that he was lucky. He recommended at least a full day in bed. He did not ask questions.
The sea fan was a soft coral. It waved as the sea waved, back and forth. It was two feet across, tree-shaped but flat, like a two-dimensional plastic elm on a stand from a child's farmyard set.

It looked for all the world like a plant. And as dark came and the farnesses of the underwater grayed, then blackened, the plant changed. The blueness of its fronds lightened slowly, then became a yellowish orange as if the whole bush had ignited and some inward glow had burst through, with fire running up and down the network of fine branches. The plant was transformed into an animal, a feeding animal: for the whole was made up of tiny coral polyps, fleshy, tentacled buds which blossomed at night from their limestone cells and sieved the water washing through. Each bud was a creature in its own right, but all were held by a thin skin sheathing the fretted framework, and through this skin they talked and held their station.

The flamingo-tongue snail, too, was a creature of transformation. This one lay in the sand at the foot of the sea fan, smooth, pearly, bean-shaped, not immediately remarkable in any way, stillness being its most assertive characteristic.

Then out from the opening crept a thin line of color, a wash of translucent yellow which oozed over the whole shell, carrying with it islands of strong orange outlined in black.
The pattern moved on until the whole was covered and the dull shell had become a semiprecious stone.

It too would eat now. It would eat the polyps of the sea fan. It started up the base of the fan, gliding its single foot up the sheer trunk as slowly as its mantle had glided out over its shell: it was all one rhythm. At the first touch of the mollusk on its base the sea fan reacted. A ripple of warning and withdrawal ran up the stem, out through the network. The whole structure shrank, was diminished from animal to plant again, from busy community to empty city. The flamingo-tongue snail continued its climb. It would eat what it could.
"Mr. Sodek. Mr. Sodek."

The knocking was soft but determined, the voice low but intent: he recognized it and tried to ignore it. He tried to ignore everything. He had sufficient consciousness and sufficient pain to realize that as one increased so would the other. He did not know how badly his head was going to hurt and did not want to find out. He did not want to know the man at the door, either, the one who had spoken to him the day before.

He was in bed, not certain of how he had gotten there. He had no idea what time it was. All he could remember of the night before was the clatter as he fell at the reception desk, taking the pen stand and telephone with him to the floor. They had helped him to his room and left him at his behest sitting in the armchair. Then there was the bathroom; he remembered the cold tiles. He must have crawled into bed later on. The bedside lamp was still on, although its glow made little difference in the already bright room. Why was the room so bright? The curtains were partly open, that was why, had probably never been closed. The man at the door must have been able to look in and see him sleeping, had probably also watched him stir. There was no escape.
"What do you want?"

His voice was coarse, roughened by sand and saltwater, and sourly tainted.

In reply the room grew brighter still and he realized the man had opened the door and walked in. The door closed. His visitor walked around the screen which cut off the doorway from the rest of the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Sodek. I was sorry to hear that you had been injured."

The concern seemed more genuine than that of the day before. An investment was at stake now; or maybe he had misjudged. Then he remembered the revealed insinuation, the grasping offer: the man was a paradox, seemed to want to be civilized yet needed to have his savagery known.

He came forward directly now and without pausing pulled across the stool from the dressing table and sat down on it, leaning forward with his hands clasped before him in the standard posture of the hospital visitor.

"How do you feel?"

"Bad."

"Your skull is not fractured."

"The doctor said not."

"How did it happen?"

"How did you know it had happened?"

"Reception."
Then nothing. Sodek was not going to initiate any conversation. He did not want any conversation. He wanted the man to go away.

"I called last night to see you. You remember I said I would call. They told me then. I waited until this morning."

"I still do not know what you want."

He did know.

"You do know. I told you. Half."

"There is nothing."

"There was nothing yesterday. Except a very solid rock, it seems. But you will go again."

"No."

"You will go again."

"Go yourself."

"I might. Or rather someone might go for me. But then I would be in the position you are in now."

"What do you mean?"

"You would know. You would know what I had, or might have. That would leave me vulnerable instead of you."

"You think I would tell."

"I know you would. What you have found, what you might find, you feel is yours. If I took it, you would hate me. You would tell."

"So?"
"My offer still stands. Half. Either you go or I will find somebody else. And that would not be so good. They would know too. Yes," a hand held up, white cuff, gold links, brown wrist, "I know there may be nothing there. But when I was on the bluff I sensed what you sensed: I was on the bluff but I was also with you in the water, I swam with you into the cave. Whatever is yours is mine too, whatever is there is ours. You need my help. Let me help you."

Sodek had long shared the common revulsion for creatures that lived off other, weaker creatures. His feelings about them drew power from his feelings about people who lived off other, weaker people. Not the pimps and blackmailers but the paragons, the models, the ideal mothers of handicapaped children, the humane employers of destitutes, the social workers who sucked out their satisfactions from the gaunt carcasses of their clients. He knew it as irrationality and could explain it only in terms of his inability to accept his own weakness when he was weak. He felt for the powerless of the world. He had once found a large grouper swimming slowly around in circles, repeatedly tipping over on its side, taken off balance again and again by a small lamprey attached to its side just behind the gill opening. The grouper had been so exhausted that he had been able to pull it into shallow water near the reef and rip the lamprey off. He had been aghast at the raw and bloody hole that the lamprey had rasped in the fish's side. So that was parasitism.
And now here was this man, this smooth-faced brown stranger, trying to find a purchase so that he could grind a hole in his side with all the bland and patronizing mannerisms of someone who really wanted to promote his welfare. But he was weak.

"The cave goes too far in. It isn't a cave, it's a labyrinth. There are too many passages. I got lost."

"But you will go again."

Silence. He would go again, he knew. Perhaps.

"When you do go, let me help you. I can get a small boat. That will make it easier."

Sodek was tired, wanted only to close his eyes again: the throbbing in his head was demanding more and more of his attention, and room and visitor were moving away from him, back down a corridor, shrinking smaller and smaller. The voice, too, became distant.

"I will leave my telephone number here at your bedside. You will call me when you are ready to go again. You will call me."

There must have been something that he missed, some lost time, for the last statement--command?--was followed immediately by the sound of the door closing.

It was late afternoon when he woke again. He had no way of telling how long he had slept, since he had no idea what time his caller had disturbed him. He had a vague memory of
the door opening and closing again at least once—perhaps someone from the hotel checking that he was not dead. He remembered blood, too, from the night before: the timid girl at reception was perhaps home today sick as well. She had screamed.

They were surprised to see him in the dining room, and he was surprised by how hungry he felt. He had not finished the meal, however, before a thumping at the back of his head drove him out of the dining room. He was not yet ready for sleep, and decided to empty the car, which stood askew near the main entrance where it had jerked to a halt twenty-four or more hours before. The gear was still wet and sandy when he dragged it from the tank. He left the tank—that would have to wait—and took the rest of the stuff back to his room to rinse it off.

The piece of rock was still jammed between the handle of the torch and the switch, and he had to work it back and forth to get it out. A piece broke off as it came free and there was something glistening underneath, and he could not believe his eyes. He picked more of the crust off with his fingernail, and then with a nail file, and there was more gold. It was an ornament, a brooch, and it was beautiful and his hands shook.
Angler fish live in the deep down dark. There are many different kinds, all nightmarish. Some have branched and glowing barbels hanging beneath their chins, others long lures with luminescent baubles on the end dangling from their foreheads and out in front of their enormous spiked mouths. Both types of appendage are designed to attract prey in the form of other smaller fish for whom light in the depths should mean food, but in reality will bring death.

All the females are large, most of the males small. This one was one hundredth the size of his mate. She was all head, had the great brow, wide cruel mouth and bad-tempered eye of Alice's queen, with a dumpy body and short fat fins which made her waddle through the water. He was undeveloped, had had his growth checked by his attachment to her, for he was literally attached. A long time ago he had found her in the darkness and, fearful of losing her, had dug into her side with his teeth, resigning himself thereby to a loss of half his life, many of his functions. Over the months his mouth had fused with her flesh, his bloodstream had become one with hers, and his eyes and digestive system atrophied. He would never again need to see, swim, eat. But he must produce sperm, for that was why he was there, to help create other queens and other spent males.
He took the extra tank and torch he should have had the first time. The tank had its own regulator already attached, and he left it on the inside of the big rock. He took both torches with him, one clipped to the weight belt he had also added this time.

The way in seemed shorter: in no time he was at the first fork, then the second, and he had used no more than four hundred pounds of air by the time he reached the chamber itself. It was only when he arrived there that he realized just how unready he was for this further venture. His body had taken an awful beating over the last few days and was beginning to play tricks on him—letting him believe that he was missing projections then banging into them, bending into not extreme shapes and then refusing to wholly straighten out again, misreading distances, fighting currents rather than working with them. His head would not lift as far backwards as it should have and he was forced to look downward at the terrain over which he was swimming instead of at immediate goals and obstructions, and he was perpetually fearful for his skull. This time he had brought the backpack with him, wriggling it through above the big rock and refitting it so that he was able to wear the tank rather than carry it. So he was able to hold the torch well out ahead of him with one
hand as a safeguard against collision, and pull with the other.

Once in the chamber he had to rest, in spite of his growing jubilance. He had been excited since he had awakened and found himself sufficiently recovered to consider entering the tunnel again by the afternoon. The morning he had spent resting, and thinking. He had overridden the words of warning muttered both by the pained part of his brain and by the dive shop assistant who, after looking at his bandaged head, seemed to be thinking of refusing to issue him fresh tanks.

He had not made any telephone calls. The card lying on the bedside table had read, simply, "Mostyn 93629." Mostyn--the man's name? He had left it there. Mostyn would not be expecting him to dive today. He had time to find before he had to think of sharing.

He was able as he rested to examine the chamber for the first time. It was apparently a closed one, apart from the hole he had come in by--which, when he turned and looked, was more of a horizontal gap under a shelf. There was another such shelf on the far side with darkness beneath; otherwise the walls were comparatively smooth as if the sea's clenched fist on the end of its long arm, having pummelled its way into the cliff, had opened up and scoured the chamber round and round. The floor was mainly sandy, the sediment of
thousands of years of sea-wash in this hole which had never before held light and now held it tentatively, gently, as if afraid of crushing it out, so that all was mellow, with no sharp shadows and no reflections, just a golden suffusion which made the rock seem softer and the sand harder than they were. For the sand was loose, not packed tightly as he had expected. He could push his hand down into it past the wrist with no effort. It must be that the sea had never let the floor of this ultimate recess settle for long but was always stirring, stirring so that memories of the past swirled around in perpetual patternings telling over old stories of creatures that had lived here. And men who had been. But no men could have been, could they? This was the flaw in his whole scheme of imaginings. The line of coins pointed clearly enough at the cave... and there was the brooch; but if a cache had been made there it could not have been far inside. A diver without tanks could have penetrated to a distance of... well, local free-divers went down further than a hundred feet. Translating the vertical into the horizontal would mean that they could have gotten past the first obstruction, but not far past. Perhaps the rock had not been there then. He had noted the fact that the top of the rock was sharp enough in contour to suggest that the sea had not had much time to rub over it and smooth its spikiness; and there was little growth or encrustation on the
upper surface. That perhaps solved the problem of how the coins could have spilled out of the cave, if they had ever been there in the first place: they had escaped before the great portcullis of rock had rumbled shut, if not during the recent storm then certainly within the last few years. They must have drifted up and down the channel since then, now buried, now lying on the surface of the sand, according to the sea's whim.

He had wanted to believe that there was more gold in the cave. That was the right place for it: it was a part of his dream. Yes, there could have been a shipwreck, the coins could have been scattered from the hold of some treasure ship split against the bluff, and not hoarded in that hole by some cautious and unlucky freebooter. But the images of gold had come from the crevices of his mind, and the gold itself should come from the crevices of the rock.

He began working his way around the walls, reaching down in the gentle sand, pulling it away from the rock, piling it towards the middle of the chamber so that he was excavating a shallow trench around the cave's perimeter. Finding nothing, he gave up on the peripheral excavation about halfway around, and began to dig straight across the center of the cave. There was no danger that he would forget the areas he had covered, since the movement of the water was slight and the piles of sand stayed where he put them, with a little swirl of sediment hanging above them briefly, then dissolving.
The first thing he found was a hinge, or so he thought: a flat, twisted and encrusted piece of metal which looked as if it had once been capable of bending and was now locked solid. He pulled out the nylon net bag which was tucked under his weight belt and dropped the hinge in. This was the place.

The treasure was in a pile under the sand, not evenly scattered. In one corner he found a jumble of goblets entangled in a long, heavy chain; near the middle of the chamber he dug up a small wooden chest which was already split along one side and rotten so that when he lifted it the side collapsed and the sediment of the ages which had seeped in poured out, bringing with it a tumble of golden objects gleaming only dully in the light of his torch but not at all encrusted—brooches, pins, pendants, chains, crucifixes, candle sticks, unidentifiable things. Gold, all gold—no jewels that he could see, no silver. Just gold.

He knelt there looking at it all, the inverted cascade of his bubbles rolling past his head up to the roof, making the water in front of him shimmer so that the pile of golden things wavered as if it were about to fade and vanish. He put both hands on top of the pile to steady it, to fix it, to proclaim it his; and a warmth spread up through his palms, a power, up along his arms to his chest, where it widened and diffused itself through his upper body, exciting the tissues,
making his heart beat faster, his lungs draw more deeply, his shoulder and pectoral muscles tense as if they were about to undertake some massive lifting.

It did take some effort to lift his hands from the pile. He had kept them there a long time.

Seven hundred pounds left. Already. Where had all the air gone? Upward, it seemed: the roof of the cave was covered with mirror surfaces gleaming down with the glory of his discoveries. The bubbles themselves were triumphant, pouring upwards like silver balloons to hang in the dark sky, shining down.

The rhythm of his breathing gradually slowed. He became more aware of surroundings. The hiss, hubbub, hiss, hubbub of inward and outward-moving air reminded him that he was not in his own environment, that he was living on borrowed capabilities and would soon have to move back towards his own world. He was tempted strangely to leave the hoard where it was: he feared that if he wrenched it from its resting place it would on exposure to the air break into crumbs and fall back into the sea. It was all too unreal. But hiss, hubbub, hiss, hubbub told him that it was real, and the objects felt solid enough as he began scooping them into the bag.

Then hiss, hubbub became hiss, hubbub hubbub. There was an echo to his bubbles, as if their release had triggered off
the release of other bubbles elsewhere. It was impossible to judge the direction of sounds underwater, sound waves travelling as they did much faster through water than through air and striking both eardrums almost simultaneously, without the time lag which allowed the submerged auditory system to place sounds accurately. If there were more bubbles, their sound must be coming from the tunnel by which he had arrived; and they must be someone else's. Nothing but scuba exhaust could produce that soft, liquid rattle. He must have been followed. Mostyn.

He switched off his light. There was a light in the tunnel. He stopped breathing until he could pick up the rhythm of the other diver's exhalations and join in with them so that he could deny this newcomer the advantage of the warning he had had.

Soon a flickering light began to show more clearly from the side of the chamber where the entrance was, a turbulent glow which could only be torchlight passing through water disturbed by bubbles and thrashing arms.

Sodek had felt no fear of creatures of the deep, could have faced with some equanimity most of the monsters the ocean might have hurled at him from its dark corners; but a man in the water, that was different. Men were ingenious beings, long practiced in the art of making life difficult
for each other, or making it stop. He had no wish to become
embroiled with this fellow creature, this intruder into his
new world. He let go of the bag, moved slowly to one side of
the tunnel, taking care to keep his breathing in step with
that of the other, then he waited. He waited above and
slightly to the right until a hand holding a torch came
wavering in through the gap, then an arm, a head. Suddenly
he grabbed at the lamp with his free hand, twisted around,
planted both feet on the rock wall above the tunnel, pulled
hard, and the other body shot freely into the chamber. As it
want past he yanked on the lamp, bending his hand under and
around so that he tore it from the other's grasp. As soon as
he had it free he switched it off. The other's momentum had
carried him clear of the tunnel, he knew, and he ducked down
to where he knew it to be, worked his head and shoulders in
and began to move forward, holding his breath not so much to
avoid creating noise as to keep from disturbing the plankton
into marking his passage with their twinkle. He pulled with
his arms rather than finned until he was well into the
tunnel, and his pulling was made difficult by the extra torch
he now carried. The other would have the same difficulty in
finding the tunnel that he had had, unless he had been lucky
enough to retain some orientation: more than likely by the
time he had gotten over his shock and turned around he would
not know where he was.
There was no sound of pursuit, just a general confusion of noise from behind him as he gathered speed. He felt no qualms. He had not wanted to be caught in the chamber, had not wanted anyone else to see what was there, and he had solved both problems, hopefully without harm to anyone. The stranger would be an experienced diver, would probably have assistance outside.

He had no fear of losing his way this time, he was a needle following the groove of his last experience in the cave, gouged as it was in his memory. Every twist and turn, every change of contour, every lift and fall, made his brain hum with recognition. He was soon past the second fork, and around a corner where he felt he could safely switch on his lamp and make even swifter progress. Then he turned down and into the mouth of the last stretch, and put out the lamp again. He did not know why he put it out: his pursuer could not have caught up with him, might still be spinning around frantically in the chamber. Not only that, he held his breath, finning along silently, keeping the tank away from the side. He knew what he was going to find.

The silhouette of the big rock began to make itself clear, and beyond it another silhouette, framed in rising bubbles. There was another diver on the far side of the rock.
He could not hold his breath for long: this would have to be a quick reconnoitre, then he would have to withdraw, perhaps to the first intersection, and hide there. Could he reach the fork without having to take another breath? Already his chest was tight.

First things first. He lifted his head over the rock.

The other diver was kneeling, leaning back against the rock, looking out towards the tunnel entrance, swaying slightly backwards and forwards. His tank was in position on his back: he was making no preparations to follow his friend. It must be that having discovered from the first intersection that there was more than one tunnel they had decided to guard the exit.

He knew what to do, had to do it quickly, but gently. He hoisted himself up onto the top of the rock, rolling slightly sideways. Then he carefully reached forward to the valve at the top of the tank in front of him. It was on the right-hand side and he was holding both torches in his right hand so he had to grip it with the soft outside of his left palm. Which way? He tried to work it out, failed, turned gently, so gently, one way, changed his mind, turned the other way, seemed to have to turn and turn forever, only a little at a time because of the angle of his hand. His breath was just about finished, the blood was tight in his temples. He could not hold his arm rigid, had to let it give with the movement
of the water: the diver must feel no resistance, no pull. At last the tap tightened. He withdrew his hand.

The bubbles beyond the rock stopped. A pause. Then an explosion. The figure reared up, arms flailing, blocking the light. It was like a massive figure of Kali, arms and tubes writhing snakelike in silhouette. The valve could not be reached while the tank was in position, he knew—he had tried with his own equipment. The figure bucked and then jerked forward, filling the whole tunnel, seeming first to swell and then to shrink in a confusion of fins and arms as it receded rapidly towards the entrance, leaving the water swirling behind it. Sodek felt the pressure waves wash over him, realized he was still holding his breath and becoming dizzy, and breathed out as the black swimming spider disappeared out into the blue aquarium.

He did not have much time. With luck, his most recent victim would not realize what had happened to him, would diagnose equipment malfunction and would swim back to shore without checking the valve. Otherwise he could be back in the cave within minutes. The other diver might be close behind by now. He held his breath, and listened. Nothing. But he could not stay there.

Two hundred pounds. Enough to get him clear of the tunnel at least. He took off his tank, separated tank and
pack and fed them through the gap ahead of him. There was no time to refit them. He swam to the mouth and hung there, looking out, looking up. There was the diver, his frog-like legs dangling down, struggling to unshoulder the harness. But there was something wrong: he was not having to thrash his legs to stay afloat, he was too steady hanging there. Then Sodek realized there was a boat, a light-hulled boat which had not at first been obvious, and that the diver was hanging onto the side. That could mean trouble, if there was someone standing in the boat watching the water. His bubbles would be apparent as they broke surface.

He twisted sideways out of the tunnel, along to the right, keeping as close to the cliff face as he could, hoping that his bubbles would be lost in the general melee of rock and wave. There was no point in going left, where the bluff dropped down to the sandy bay and he would be forced to lumber ashore. Right, the bluff continued for some distance, and he was sure there were breaks in it, small canyons dug out by the sea. He also angled his swim downwards so that his dark shape would be less easily seen from the surface. The hanging diver might look down at any moment.

The air was harder to draw now. He pushed strongly with his fins, skimming the cliff face, weaving through the fronds of purple and green gorgonians, dodging around the outhangs,
bending through the hollows, following the contours as closely as the peacock flounder he had pursued on the first day. He rounded a massive shoulder of rock sloping down like the weathered buttress of a gaunt cathedral, and found himself in a gully turning in to shore. He immediately came up to the surface: his air was finished. His head broke free, and he found himself in a cauldron of waves. The whole force of the sea along the bluff seemed to be focussed in on this point so that there was a violent surging back and forward, with waves and counter-waves slapping and pushing their way through each other. He grabbed a rock at the side of the gully, was pulled free, grabbed again, missed, was spun around and pushed into the rock. He could not fend it off since that was the side on which he was carrying the tank, and he took a heavy blow on the point of his shoulder which numbed his whole arm and caused the tank to slip, so that he had to grab for the hose with his free hand. There it dangled below him, pulling him down into the waves which were already breaking over his head. He had to let go, and he watched the yellow tank bang and slither in slow motion down the incline, trailing its black tantacles behind it like a maimed squid.

Hanging onto the rock wall with both hands, he rested as far as the sea would allow. His head was singing a dull monotone of pain, and his right arm was still tingling and
weak. After a while he thought to use his snorkel: if the boat came past, all he could do would be to submerge and breathe through the tube until it had gone. If they were looking for him, their task would not be difficult. He stayed there a long time, every now and then washed away from the rock by a large or unexpected wave. He was cold, even in the warm water: the side of the inlet he was on was in shadow now that the sun had dropped in the sky--it must be late afternoon.

Then he heard an engine start, putt-putter for awhile, then rev up. He waited for it to come towards him, ready to push himself under the surface. The waves would fill up his snorkel and he would have to keep blowing it clear: he would have to do that without raising a telltale spout of spray. Perhaps he would be able to swallow the water.

But the boat did not come closer. It was going away. He dropped back from the side and swam slowly to the end of the sheltering rock and, keeping low in the water, looked out. There were two figures in the boat and it was speeding away past the beach, making for the low headland which would take it around to the small settlement a mile or so down the coast. So there had been no one watching. The first diver had had to get himself and his gear into the boat, then wait for his companion. It had taken a long time. They would surely not come back. They could not imagine that he was
still in there; and if they did not have spare tanks with them or near at hand they would not be able to re-equip themselves before dark.

They would be back tomorrow, however, might well be waiting for him when he got back to the hotel that night. Whatever had to be done, had to be done now. Unless they had found it and taken it with them, his extra tank was inside the cave where he could just about reach it. If it were not there, and he had to turn in that narrow confine and swim out again on that one breath.... He was cold, tired and weakened. He would have to be careful. But he was driven on by the memory of Mostyn's face as he had leaned over the bed after standing up. That man intended.

He hung on the surface a long time before heaving a last deep breath and pulling himself down to the cave mouth. He merely touched the top edge of the hole and shot back up. He was not ready. More resting. More deep breaths—not too many. This time or not at all. A plunge, a lifting of the legs, a long pull of the stretched arms, and he was almost there, the impetus of his dive seeming to carry him right into the cave without further effort. So easy. He was using the second lamp since the first one had begun to weaken, and its direct gaze soon picked out the rock behind which his tank lay, must lie. He would have to go through the gap to find it—but at least there was more room to turn on the far
side. His practiced body worked through with an acquired wriggle, and there was the tank, lying on its side. Perhaps the others had not even noticed it—neither had left the cave in leisurely fashion. Mouthpiece in, turn on the air, and he was breathing again without having felt any desperate need to be.

He was soon past the first junction, was passing the second. The very edge of the circle of light from his lamp caught something black inside the left-hand tunnel as he took the right, drew it into his field of vision. It looked like rubber tubing, a hose. Without changing direction, pausing merely, he reached out and caught it between finger and thumb, pulled... and there drifted forward into the yellow spotlight, which seemed to widen in shock and horror, first the arm, then the head and body of a diver, the diver, the other. The body's forward drift brought it close to him, and it rolled over, its wide and sightless eyes behind the mask passing close to his face, looking for some hope which was not there, moving down the length of his body as the corpse continued its search for what it had lost. It wanted a way back in, was outside now and wanted to return. The mouth was half-open, and a thin dribble of beaded bubbles broke intermittently from the further corner. Some quirkish muscular spasm was making the mouth purse, close, open, fish-like, and Sodek knew that the word was, "Where... Where?" He
grabbed for the waist strap and heaved the body back from whence it had come. It rolled away from him, protesting, its arms swinging in loose despair as he pushed again so that it swept out of sight, leaving a long bubble spiralling slowly up to the roof.

Was it murder? . . . he had not intended. But Mostyn had intended . . . what? If this was Mostyn's man, he was now in double grip, for a hole could be gnawed right through him. The boat would certainly be back, with another boat, a police boat.

He swam on. There was nothing else to do.

As far as he could tell, the chamber was as he had left it. There were the goblets, piled in wonderful confusion in the corner, a thin settling of silt already softening their outline and dulling their gleam; and here, in front of him, the casual pyramids of priceless things which he had not even had time to examine. There must be more, much more, under the sand. He would never put his hands on it, he knew. What he could take now was all he would ever have. Was it enough? For what? To free him? Not now: to hide him, hide him from the knowledge that he had allowed death to leak in through the fabric of life. He panicked, had to get out of the tunnel before the leak became a rent whose inpourings would engulf him and drown his light forever. Death was in the cave, was somewhere searching for him. He must be gone.
He covered over what he could not take. The bag was full, and it held only one goblet. There were many other things for which there was no room. He went back twice to make sure that he had buried them well. What he had left was the sea's; what he had taken was his, not Mostyn's, no, not Mostyn's.

The bag was bulging and angular and difficult to carry—he dragged it more than anything else, the nylon net snagging on rough rock, the total burden jamming in the last gap so that he had to work at individual objects through the mesh to get them to settle down into a more compact mass which would allow him to draw the whole thing through. He had not looked at the first side tunnel as he had passed it. He would try never to look at it again, never to look through what he carried in his arms to the black behind the gold. For this is what the gold was becoming for him—a defense against the darkness, a gleaming barricade through which he would not look, past which he could not see. The filigree of the brooch he had spent an hour turning over and over in the hotel room two nights before, that had drawn all his vision just as the first coin had done, and the delicacy of the brooch had blocked his sight as surely as the blunt solidity of the coin. The gold had become not a means toward or a release from, but a completion. Yet it did not end there. The search itself had become an objective, but the
achievement of that had released another objective, springing up behind the first—possession; perhaps possession if it came would free yet a further objective, and so on through time, so that no sooner did he feel that he had than he would realize that he had not. Perhaps that was mankind's greatest curse and greatest blessing, never to be finished. "It is finished." No, never finished. Even that poor dead diver was not finished: he would have to go forward, could not come back through the chink, nor could drift in the waters forever.

For the moment, possession was all he could see ahead of him.

When he broke free of the cave and bent upwards he felt the weight of the gold for the first time. He gave up all thought of swimming on the surface; he had plenty of air, and gold—why should he struggle for the last rays of sunlight too? Instead he let himself be carried down to the sea floor and swam over it, occasionally pushing off upwards when he was in danger of being entangled in coral. He had only to follow the line of the bluff to arrive back at the shallows of the bay.

So it was that the boat passed overhead. He knew it was coming long before he saw it, the whining sawblade of the engine cutting through the water and his ears. As far as he could judge it went past the cave, turned, came back, headed
in towards the cliff; then the engine died, and he thought he heard the splash of an anchor. He could not now make his normal exit across the beach. He moved in about ten feet of water across the bay, hoping that the trail of bubbles would be lost in the surf. Just beyond the bay was a small outcrop of rock, by no means a cliff—it stood perhaps six or seven feet above beach level and came out a few yards into the water. He would find some shelter behind that provided the boat stayed where it was and that another one did not arrive from the same direction.

His swimming was now a tired plod. For the last hundred yards he could not maintain enough headway to keep the bag off the bottom and he progressed in a series of short jerks, yanking the bag upwards to free it so that he could move forward a few more feet each time. Eventually he could see the dark shape of the rock to his left, and he turned around behind it, rolling over onto his back in the shallower water there so that he could sit up and look around. There was no sign of a boat in the water and nothing moving behind him on land. He could not see the bluff itself. He dragged himself and his burdens further up out of the water and lay face downwards, breathing deeply, while the light waves played with his feet and legs, bending him first to one side then the other. An occasional larger wave ran up under his whole
body, lifting it, trying gently to draw it back into the water, but the weight of the bag ahead of him on the sand, into which his fingers were hooked, held him in place so that the wave was forced to set him down with a sigh and withdraw.

He did not know how he had gotten where he was. He was lying on a beach on a Caribbean island with a bag of gold which to all intents and purposes he was trying to steal. And he had just killed a man. He had been unfolding the story to himself as he went along, and now the story itself had taken over, had changed into something different. Events were spinning themselves around in his head so that he could no longer see clearly, and the threads were gossamer gold, a shimmering haze between him and the horizon, but without pattern or form.

He rolled over, sat up, pulled off his fins, stood slowly and unsteadily up, holding onto the rock over whose rough surface he could now look. The sun was low in the sky and the boat, with two figures in it, was in silhouette. The men were motionless, standing looking towards the bluff. They could have been fishermen, and the scene of which they were a part was as from a picture postcard, with a broad path of molten and trickling brightness beneath them and tremendous towers of rolling clouds above, blue-gray lined with silver and pink, and a held burst of startling light behind. But they were so still. He hated their stillness: it told him
they were waiting for the one he had left, the one who was looking, the sightless one.

Now was the time to move. Fortunately his car was well back from the beach, parked in the sea grape shade where it could probably not be spotted from the sea. He gathered up his equipment. It was difficult--tank under one arm, fins in one hand, bag under the other arm hurting his side, lamp in the other hand; but he did not want to make more than one trip across the open area between the rock and the scrub. He did not look to his left as he stalked low, frightened that his gaze would draw theirs. He was panting by the time he reached the car. Uncertain as to how far sound would carry over the water he chose to load everything onto the back seat rather than into the trunk, half-clicking the door and leaning back against it to bump it shut. The greater the mystery he left behind him the better, and he waited, in a daze, for some fifteen minutes until he heard the boat engine rev up before starting the car and reversing bumpily onto the road.

He could not go back to the hotel. Somebody would be waiting for him. He was not sure who. The happenings began to loom over him as he drove, hunched forward over the wheel. All things were in jeopardy--his gold, yes; his freedom, maybe; his person, perhaps; his job, certainly: and only that last brought a lightening. That was finished. So
that the other might begin. If he were careful. Or there
would be no other, no other that he wanted. He did not want
the other that he had left in the cave, not that. How
ruthless was Mostyn? He wished he knew more about him. He
could take no chances. Police or Mostyn, both threatened.
And he was on an island. He felt like going to the police,
in fact; but that would mean losing all, and he was gripped,
held so that he could not open. He could not hope for
anonymity. There was the tank at the bottom of the bluff,
with a number on it. There was Mostyn, and his accomplices.
There was Elbert, who knew.

Elbert . . . how far could he rely on Elbert? He might
have to rely on him a great deal. There was no one else. He
would go there now, talk to him, ask his advice, rest awhile.

He saw no one on the road who showed any interest in
him. No cars stopped, no heads turned. It was dusk. It was
dark by the time he pulled up in front of Elbert's house. The
old man was in the hammock again, teeth, eyes and palms
shining at him in the dark, all three gesticulating him
forward.

"Come, come, Mr. Sundeck. Elbert he home. Elbert! Mr.
Sundeck here. You come now."

By the time Sodek was on the verandah, Elbert was in the
doorway, wearing a white singlet and boxer shorts and holding
a newspaper loosely in one hand.
"Come in, Mr. Sodek, come in. I tried to reach you at the hotel today."

He stood aside.

"They told me you'd gone diving. They told me you'd had an accident."

Sodek's headache had been there all the time, but behind closed curtains. Elbert's words pulled back the curtains and the headache began to caper around on the stage of his skull with heavy wooden clogs.

He sank down into the chair Elbert had indicated, let his head fall back and his eyes close momentarily before answering.

"Yes. An accident. I'll tell you about it."

He told Elbert about it, his voice low through weariness rather than caution. He told Elbert just about everything, and found his eyes pricking with tears at times as he spoke. He realized he was speaking not only about the gold but about why the gold meant so much to him, about his need for freedom, desire for rebirth. He held Elbert with the tight passion of the Ancient Mariner and had to tell his own tale of desecration, stagnation and drought. He sought the lifting of the curse, but it seemed there was more suffering to pass through first, even that Death could win him back from Life-in-Death.
Elbert sat forward in his own chair, head bowed, elbows on knees, hands clasped. How much he understood Sodek did not know: he could not remember afterwards just what he had said. At the end, Elbert sat up and looked at him directly without apparent feeling, wide-eyed and still. Nothing was said for some time. Sodek was aware of a low vocalization from outside. The old man was humming or singing softly to himself . . . singing: a word half-formed here and there on the surface of the slow drift of sound. the croaking of the tree-frogs hung in the air above the old man's tuneless musing. Time held.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Sodek?"

Eventually.

"Nothing. I must. . . ."

He did not know what he must do.

"You must do nothing. Nothing unusual. Go back to your hotel. No one will be waiting. Mostyn will not be waiting. He will have had a surprise this afternoon. He is not what you think, not a ruthless man, more an opportunist. You were an opportunity; and now he knows you will fight. He has many connections, yes, in ganja, some bad friends, and if he brings them in . . . but not yet. He will not be waiting. The police will not be waiting. He will not have told them. He will be hoping that you will remain an opportunity a little longer. He will have told them about a diving accident, perhaps. That is all."
"Maybe." Maybe to all of that. Please, God, to all of that.

"If you like I will go to the hotel first, see what is happening."

Sodek drove the car into the forecourt of the hotel next to his and Elbert walked quietly through the line of palm trees separating the two. He was soon back.

"Nothing. I asked for you at the desk. They did not know where you were. They knew nothing. I checked your room. Nothing, again. No one has been to the hotel. They would have been, by now."

It was eight-thirty. They would have been by now. Perhaps there was hope after all. He needed to sleep. Food did not matter. The bag he did not think about. It was an idea in his head, which he had put away.

He did not let the hotel know he was back; and he slept in the room next to his own. He parked the car with its equipment still in it around the side of the hotel behind a screen of shrub. The bag he carried around the back to the beach entrance and moving through the shadows he tried the door of the room on the seaward side of his. It had been empty since he arrived. It was still empty, and unlocked. He would if necessary tell the management some story in the morning. Sleep now. Elbert had said he would sit in the foyer for awhile, then outside the entrance, until he was
sure nothing was going to develop. Sodek locked the door, dragged an armchair over in front of it, laid the bulging bag on the floor of the shower, refused to allow his fingers to untie the knotted cord, averted his eyes from the gleam through the mesh, undressed clumsily, rubbed himself down with a towel, fell face down on top of the bed without pulling back the covers, and slept, the weakly discarded towel draped around one leg.
A small S-shape drifted among the weed as if looking for a word to join. Closer, the top half of its pink body developed an amazingly horse-like form, the chest rearing up and forward proudly, the neck arched, the long head and flared nostrils suggesting equine wisdom and disdain, the wide round eye a delicate passion. The lower half of the body was drawn out into a curled reptilian tail, was ribbed around like foreshortened bamboo in measured segments so that it had an appearance both planned and finished, almost mechanical, an effect increased by the small fin behind the shoulders which vibrated and propelled the sea horse forward for all the world like a key turning at the back of a clockwork toy.

This was a pregnant male, pregnant with the offspring which the female had entrusted to him for fertilization and gestation and which he had carried around for ten days in the pouch at the front of his swollen stomach. The young were about to be born.

The sea horse finned and rocked forward, and when it reached a clear and upright stalk of weed, wrapped its tail around it. Almost immediately the convulsions of birth began. The very first tightening of the tail squeezed from the pouch a minute and perfectly formed sea horse which drifted away with the slow current; another tightening, another miniature, and so on until twenty or more had been
smoothly delivered and they were all floating away in a line through the water like bubbles from a pipe floating on the breeze, rainbow bubbles which might travel forever if they did not touch anything and burst.
CHAPTER IX

Elbert had been discharged from the hospital right away. In the States he would have been kept in for several days. He could hardly walk and had to be helped into bed, where long after the ambulance attendants had left, the blood continued to seep through some of his dressings and gash the white towels on which he lay so that sickening scarlet flowers burst through as if from beneath.

Sodek had been pried out of the solid sleep into which he had been set by a tapping on the window, a whispered, "Mr. Sodek, sah," a child's voice anxious with the burden of responsibility. Only Elbert could have sent such a messenger.

The opened door revealed a frightened, fascinated young face, a wide-eyed boy who rattled out his message quickly, twice, unprompted the second time, assuming it seemed that this white man would have difficulty in understanding.

"Elbert he say come his house, come quick, come careful. I must bring you."

Sodek did not ask any questions. Care he had intended to take whatever he did, and he would probably have headed for Elbert's anyway. He could not stay where he was.

He cautiously pulled the curtain away from the window frame so that he could look out. It was still very early, the sun glancing over the top of the young palm trees which
stood between his hotel wing and the beach. The boy stood silently while he gathered his scattered and sodden belongings and moved quickly and watchfully into his own room. No one else seemed to be stirring.

He did not know when he would be back, if he would be back, he knew nothing, was waiting for the story itself to unfold further. Elbert must know something, must have a plan.

Most of his clothes he left in the closet and the drawers, cramming basic items only into his backpack. He might not be travelling anywhere; if he did it would be either swiftly and secretly, in which case he would have to travel light, or ponderously and publicly, with plenty of time to come back and clear things up both in and with the hotel.

He went around the back of the wing to the small grove where his car lurked, then made a return trip to collect the mesh bag from the shower. He had not looked at it until then, hardly looked at it now. It was a weight on his arm and his life, one which he was at the moment more than ready to share but which he gripped tightly nevertheless.

The man he was hoping to share it with was in no fit state to help him. He found Elbert propped on his bed of scarlet flowers, his forehead bandaged and adhesive plaster holding in place a wad of padding on his left cheek which did not completely cover a pink-lipped gash with caked carmine blood at the corners. His hands were heavily wrapped.
He had been grabbed as he walked the last hundred yards or so to his home the night before, having hitched a ride through town. The men were connected with Mostyn, he thought, but did not work for him. It might well be that the business had been passed on by Mostyn's group to another, a piece of underworld bartering. These men had been hard, determined, had wanted to know what Sodek had found and where he was. Their venom might have been explained by whatever kind of feeling they had for the dead man; it found full enough expression in the ready violence they offered to Elbert when he professed ignorance on both counts. They had dragged him off the road into the sparse bush which fought to survive among the gray volcanic peaks of what was still called ironshore although it was well inland. Their method had been brutal and simple—they had hurled Elbert face-down on the rock, one man had grabbed each ankle, and they had dragged him forwards, themselves stumbling and jerking to break the hold of his clutching hands as he fought to arrest the inexorable ploughing of his flesh by the jagged lava tines. The gashes were deep enough to cause heavy bleeding, mainly from the chest and arms, and several needed stitches. An early crack on the head had mercifully brought unconsciousness and defeated whatever further interrogative purpose the men might have had.
He had been lucky enough to be found almost immediately by a home-going reveller in a crumpled blue pick-up truck who had just been sober enough to bundle him into the back of his vehicle and take him to the small hospital. The brief, bouncy journey had been agonizing for Elbert in spite of his semi-conscious state, but the doctor on duty had administered the necessary stitches and patches promptly if not with complete precision, neatness or gentleness, and had accepted unquestioningly Elbert's demand to be taken straight home. There were no injuries which would not heal in a short time provided they were kept clean, and as far as the doctor was concerned the more empty beds there were in the hospital the better.

There was a fire burning in Elbert which Sodek had not seen before, a sharpness of the eyes against the dusky pallor of a skin which seemed to have dulled under the many insults it had suffered.

"We are going to beat them, Mr. Sodek."

Elbert's first words after the silence into which the final words of his narrative fell.

"How, Elbert, how? We're both half-battered to death."

"We need to get off the island soon. We must get to Main Island. I have friends there. I can get a boat. I have been thinking. There is not much time. It was lucky they were not watching the hotel this morning. I am surprised they are not here now. They may come soon."
Sodek's young guide had made him turn onto a side road before Elbert's, park the car there and follow him on foot along a narrow track to the clearing behind Elbert's house. The boy had then gone ahead to make sure that the final approach was safe.

They were handling the thing so badly, but they were amateurs in a game where the rules, if there were any, had not been explained to them and whose penalties were by the moment becoming more horrific. The only certain thing was the prize which Sodek still held tightly under one arm. This was the most unsuitable of all unsuitable moments to examine it, but that is what they did, huddled together over Elbert's bed as piece by piece they extricated the items of treasure from the golden jumble in the bag and laid them on the cotton bed cover. They said nothing throughout the ten or fifteen minutes it took to allow each object to declare itself fully in the light. Eyes and hands, hands and eyes were all, the hands serving the eyes, offering the objects to them in high ceremony. It was sometimes difficult to judge whose hands were giving which object to whose eyes: the two men were inseparably involved in a ritual acknowledgement of crafted beauty. What the treasure might mean in terms of future liberation or future suffering had become for the moment an irrelevance. There was just the rotating filigree orb which they shaped and turned between them and which left only
impressions of its fused parts as they passed—the goblet; a worked casket; an endless chain; a scrolled knife and a bare, essential fork; a perfect uneven platter; a great buckle; a squat, thick-necked candle holder; a serving tray with a beaten barrier around its edge; a jug with a rounded shape and dark depths; a massy flattened bar; a scoop of coins; an outspread hooded falcon tight on its perch with fixed claws. And more. Gold, all gold. The treasure was back in its bag on the bed between them, each item wrapped this time in a clear plastic bag, but its glow still hung in the air and bound them together in a complicity of aspiration. There was no competitive possessiveness in the relationship: the gold was Sodek's, but that did not matter either.

Elbert insisted on immediate action, felt well enough, he said, to put into operation the only plan he thought would allow them to keep the treasure and their bodies out of the hands of whoever sought them so vehemently. He had a friend with a large power boat, used normally for tourist fishing and diving trips, fast enough to take them to Main Island in about four hours. The friends there could hide them and if necessary help Sodek to get to Miami. Payment was not discussed, did not seem to need to be.

It all happened very quickly. Elbert stopped at a house near where the car was parked and made a telephone call. He carried himself stiffly and with some caution but could walk
swiftly enough--his legs had been scraped rather than gashed. They would have to handle the boat themselves, he told Sodek when he joined him in the car, and his hands might be a problem, but they'd manage. The weather, it seemed, promised well, and the boat would be waiting for them in the harbor. Just what their pursuers might be doing now, why this hiatus in the chase, they did not know and did not speculate about. They themselves had no alternative open to them anyway other than complete surrender either to the gang or to the police. There was between them an unspoken refusal to accept either as a possibility.

The transfer from car to boat was uneventful, as was their departure from the harbor--formalities for local boat users were by and large waived.

It was with a sense of unreality that Sodek watched the jetty and customs building shrink in the churning of their white wake. It never occurred to him to doubt Elbert's ability to take the boat across ninety miles of open sea. He himself had done the physical work involved in embarkation and casting off. Elbert seemed to have no trouble in handling the boat--the twin fifty-five horse power motors had started easily and engaged smoothly, the steering was light. The horizon seemed strangely close. Beyond it he did not look--the future was a further reality beyond the present one, a mist behind the haze hanging around him now on the
sunlit water. He relaxed into the immediate, let the stamping bounce of boat on wave shiver through his body, opened his face to the fine spray drifting onto it and his arms to the occasional heavier splashes which dotted his tee shirt with cooling dark blotches.

The island disappeared over the horizon in about forty-five minutes by which time it had been replaced by a small cay ahead of them, one of several bare shoulders of rock breaking the sea's surface within a distance of twenty miles of the island, sitting along a ridge caused by the crunched overlap of two tectonic plates. On either side of the ridge the sea floor dropped away to the unplummable depths of the Great Trench--ten thousand feet, he thought he remembered. They must be beyond the dropoff now, judging by the darkness of the water, the solid, smooth, clear but impenetrable blue-black of a midnight crystal ball. The upthrust of rock would be uninhabited, was less than a quarter of a mile long, was not in direct line between their point of departure and their destination, and Elbert admitted to having made a slight error in his compass setting so that they had angled slightly away from the main boating lane. Their journey would take an extra half hour or so, that was all.

They did not talk much. Elbert was braced at the wheel, his injuries no doubt grieving at every thwack of the boat. He did say something about the possibilities which he hoped
lay ahead of them. Main Island customs could be avoided, he said—they could land at any one of several small jetties where he was known. Sodek's flight to Miami should present no more difficulty: there were always island means of side-stepping authority's approaches. If he did not want to risk carrying the treasure with him, it could be exported under trade label, although there would be risks inherent in third-party involvement.

It all sounded so simple now when it had been impossible fifteen hours before. Sodek was impressed by Elbert's direct vigor, his candid and unhesitating willingness to help a man he hardly knew out of a mess of his own creation, with no noticeable assumption of reward. Sodek himself felt like a man who had been sweeping smoothly around in the oily coils of a whirlpool which threatened to suck him effortlessly down into its even smoother, oilier depths, and who had been thrown a line which was even now pulling him through the outer rings of swirling water so that the spiral was unwinding and he was taking a new direction out and away from the center. The following wake of the boat was the line uncoiling behind him. He watched it stretching back towards the horizon and found that in its turn it was drawing something along, another figure, fleck, dot, speck, boat. The cord had uncoiled all right, but he at the head was joined by the cord itself to someone at the tail, and the straight line was taut
between them with the expectation of further contention. They were being followed. He could not tell yet whether the other boat was faster than theirs—Elbert opened up the engines as soon as Sodek laid a warning hand on his shoulder and nodded over the stern—but in his imagination the man in the other boat was hauling himself closer hand over hand, relentlessly, and his face leered. It was not Mostyn's face, but like it, darker, heavier, wooden, with a high gloss, and large, becoming larger.

The other boat would have taken a long time to catch them if one of their engines had not given trouble, not stopping but dropping a note, settling up again, eventually surging up and down across four tones of sound. Their drop in speed was not immediately noticeable, but Elbert was finding it more difficult to keep them on a straight course, and the sideways undulation of their wake told them that they could not hope to maintain the distance between themselves and their pursuers even before that distance perceptively narrowed, which it did with alarming speed so that in no time they could make out three, no four figures in the cockpit of what was obviously a very fast craft.

At this moment more than any other Sodek felt he was taking part in a film. How many technicolor scenes had he watched in which one motorboat was overtaken by another with an ensuing grappling, punch-up, shoot-out? And now he was in
such a scene, and contact would be made, it seemed, in about fifteen minutes. The hard seriousness of their situation was further softened and distanced in his present perception by a hint of Boy Scoutishness about the whole thing—they had a "treasure" which the other side had to "capture"; and they had been outrun. They had lost.

But the possessiveness which Elbert and he had successfully kept from between them now hardened around them and they conferred behind it. If the treasure were found on board, it would be taken. If both Elbert and Sodek were found on board, then the treasure would be known to be with them—nothing so simple as suspending the net bag underneath the boat would help. If, on the other hand, only Elbert were on board when the pursuing craft came alongside, could he carry through the bluff that he had never had Sodek with him, was in fact a decoy? There was diving equipment aboard....

If their pursuers had not already seen two figures in the boat it was important that they did not. Sodek ducked down and crawled to the aft locker where the gear was stored. He dragged out onto the carpeted floor of the cockpit what he would need—just mask, fins, a twin set of tanks, regulator, weight belt. No, perhaps he would fully equip himself—he did not know exactly what he was undertaking: so he added snorkel and life jacket. All the equipment looked new. There was even a depth gauge clipped onto the pressure gauge hose.
He fumbled with the regulator far too long before managing to fit it correctly—the first time the air escaped from the connection with a desperate and derisory hiss, and he found he had nipped the rubber "O" ring out of position; having corrected that, he then found that he had fitted the whole thing upside down, so that the mouthpiece would have been inverted in his mouth. He was not sure what difference that would have made, but set about changing it. Time must be running out, and his fingers trembled more and more as he struggled into the life jacket and tank harness, fitted weight belt, fins, mask and snorkel and crawled forward heavily to the front of the boat. About the diving itself he felt no fear, but had no hopes of it either. The others must have seen him earlier, must in any case see him as he entered the water. All they had to do was wait for him to run out of air and surface, then they would pick him up and do to him what they might already have done to Elbert. He risked a lift of the head sufficient to enable him to be surprised at how far off the other boat still was. Their own engines had returned to a constant if not a fully confident roar.

"Stay down, Mr. Sodek. What I will do, I will bring the boat around so that she shows them her side. I will keep going. You must jump over the side away from them, when you are ready. I will carry on, to take them away from you. I will remember where you are, and will not be too far away when
I let them catch me. We must hope they will let me go when they do not find anything they want. I will pick you up when they have left."

It sounded so easy--might just be easy if they did not see, or guess, what he was doing. He checked his air supply once again, made sure there was no air in the life jacket--he would have to go straight down--pulled his face mask down and wriggled it into position, and then finally took hold of the cord of the nylon net bag which, the heart of all present matters, the magnetic core of circling events, lay pulsing under a forward seat, and wrapped it around his wrist.

"Ready."

"Right, Mr. Sodek. Good luck."

As soon as Sodek felt the boat swing to the right, he pushed himself until he was crouched against the left-hand side of the boat. He was relieved that Elbert had the sense to turn fairly slowly, otherwise the side over which he was to leap would have banked high in the air and been all too clearly visible. As it was he could see over the right-hand gunwale to where a low patch of green broke the horizon. Good. The cay. It would look as if Elbert were going to make a break for that: He would not have to explain his change of course.

He already had the mouthpiece in position, and his voice was gagged.

"Tell me when."
"Now." Almost immediately.

He pushed hard with his legs against the weight of equipment holding him down, squirmed up the side without fully standing, and continued to push himself until he toppled over in an awkward bundle and hit the water back first with a solid smack. He went straight under, but felt he would bob back up again unless he fought to stay down, which he did, still on his back looking up at the churning surface a few feet above him, threshing with his arms and legs.

He stayed down, pushing with his hands, while the surface settled and the whine of Elbert's engines moved away; and he thought he heard, as he rolled over into a normal swimming position, the sound of another engine now coming closer but passing at some distance, but he could not tell in which direction.

Now the boats were returning, their metallic mosquito singing closing in from above, below, left, right, before, behind. Soon, looking up, he could see the lines of their approach off to the side, the darkness of their hulls. Elbert did not bring them too close before his boat pulled sharply around sideways and slowed, stopped, suddenly. The other hull was quickly alongside, and the two rocked against each other in deceptively friendly rhythm. He wanted desperately to know what exchanges were taking place, had no
way of telling, could only hang there helplessly and wait. He felt inevitably drawn towards the two boats: that was where his future was being decided, and he pinioned down here by the great weight of water and furtiveness. It was a shock to notice how small the boats were, how far above him. He fumbled with the depth gauge at the end of the loose hose. Ninety feet: he had been sinking all the time, was still sinking. There was no need for him to go so deep. He had been down quite a few minutes anyway: something must have happened by now. There was no stopping his sinking, however. The weight of the gold was too much, and his first attempts to fin upwards took him no nearer the surface. He finned harder, straining upwards, but achieved only breathlessness. If he stopped finning he would sink again, forever. He would have to make himself more buoyant by putting air into his life jacket. That he could only do by taking out his regulator and blowing into the corrugated hose on the jacket. He did not like the idea: his teeth clenched more tightly on the regulator; but he had to do it. He took the regulator out once, replaced it to reassure himself that the air supply could be reactivated after a break, fumbled for the jacket hose, took a deep breath, swapped regulator for inflator, and blew tentatively. He did not want to empty his lungs and rely on the purge button. Four or five small exhalations, and he felt the sinking slow, stop, and he even began to move gently upwards. It had worked.
He began to fin upwards and inevitably forwards, moving towards the twinned craft as if on the end of a fishing line being slowly wound in. He offered no resistance to the steady pull. Eighty, seventy . . . fifty feet. Pause. Wait. Wait. But he could not wait. The pull from the surface was stronger as the compressed air in the jacket expanded with the lessening of the water pressure. He lifted the jacket hose and pressed the button in the end to let the air bubble out. The pull ceased, and he had to begin pushing with his fins again.

One of the boats was coming down to meet him. How could it? He watched unbelieving as the pointed end of one of the dark shapes dipped downwards and the whole hull began to twist round, following its own nose as it slowly spiralled away from the shimmering tension between two elements.

The deeper it sank, the wider became its spirals, and it seemed as it came down on him from above that it would encompass him and take him down with it: it swung around and past him so that the cockpit, towards the inside of the spiral, was opened to him. And suddenly he was on some macabre merry-go-round, turning with the platform while the world around stood still, or rather he was in fixed relation to the contraption at the heart of which he hung while the whole world spun around them both— he was the pinned center of the universe, and yoked to him, turning with him, set up
directly in front of him so that he could not look around it, was the image of Elbert, looking at him with open, dead eyes. They were not accusing, not mournful, not anguished; they were nothing, and that was the more awful. Elbert was gone. The same bubbles drifted up from his mouth as had drifted up from the mouth of that other, the dead diver; but no words formed. Elbert had no questions to ask, had just accepted. His body was strapped across the steering wheel backwards, with divers' weight belts, Sodek now saw, so that if there had been any semblance of life in the corpse it would have appeared to be wrestling absurdly with its shoulders to control the downward spin of the boat, to bring it out of its dive as if it were a plunging aircraft. But there was no such semblance as Sodek and Elbert faced each other in their waltz of death. Dead as he was, Sodek realized, Elbert was taking him downwards too, holding him with his void gaze while the water around them grew darker and colder. He must break the spell, the grip of those cold eyes: it was their very emptiness which had taken hold of him, and he was searching in them for a sign, anything, as he allowed himself to be drawn deeper, deeper. No man as alive as Elbert had been could be as dead as this.

He pulled his eyes away from the body's and looked at his depth gauge. There was import in that eye, at least. One
hundred and ten feet. Too deep. He broke the skeins binding
his legs and pushed with his fins again, breaking also his
downward drift so that Elbert sank away beneath him, now
turning independently of him in his funeral boat. He saw for
the first time how black the water was beyond, as the white
shape grayed and grayed, smudged and swirled, and was gone
forever. As far as mankind was concerned, there was no
bottom. Elbert, no longer mankind, would find it, but would
not know. Sodek had been tempted for one tortured moment to
link hands with his friend and go down with him--better than
going alone, if he had to go soon anyway.

He looked up. It was much lighter up there. The water
appeared thinner. There was the boat, the other boat, still
hanging. Soon it would move off, and he would be alone.
Then what would he do? He might as well have gone down with
Elbert. Should he surface now, surrender? Betray Elbert?
Elbert knew nothing.

He found himself moving upwards, involuntarily, as he had
the first time, when there were still two boats; and once
again he was met by something coming down. A splash, two
splashes. Two swimmers on the surface, looking down--no, two
divers, below the boat, swimming down towards him, trailing
their strings of bubbles up behind them like lifelines to the
surface. So they had known. Either they had broken Elbert--
not difficult to break a man with so many fresh wounds letting them straight into the reaches of his nerves—or they had reasoned things out from the locker of diving gear. They had killed Elbert and sunk the boat, then, not in blind fury at finding nothing but as a warning to him below, a message telling him that all was lost, that he must give up.

They were coming down fast. He had to decide.

The gold decided. As soon as he stopped finning upwards and spread his limbs in limp indecision the downward pull of the bag of treasure took him back where he had come from, back after Elbert, just about as quickly as the other two were descending—the distance between them did not decrease as he allowed himself to sink, still looking up through the jet of his own bubbles at the spread-eagled sky diving figures following him down.

He scrabbled through his memory for what he could remember about diving to depth. There were two problems, he thought, both to do with nitrogen. Too much nitrogen in deep water made you feel drunk and likely to do silly things like offer your regulator to a passing shark, or swim straight downwards into unconsciousness. The other problem had to do with nitrogen dissolving in the blood, which it did under pressure, and then being released too suddenly as you rose to the surface, so that bubbles formed in dangerous places, pressing on nerves or interfering with blood supplies, at its
most drastic the effect being that of soda pop frothing in a bottle opened too quickly. Just how deep he would have to go, or for how long, before these effects might occur, he did not know.

One thing was certain. The men above him could not know less about diving than he did. Once they stopped following him, he was beyond the safety line: he would then have to decide for himself how long he wanted to stay beyond it.

He had no idea how long his air would last, either. Longer than theirs, he assumed: they appeared to have only single tanks. It didn't really matter; all they had to do when they ran out of air, or time, was return to the surface and wait for him.

For the moment, however, they seemed intent on pursuit, and they were coming down faster and he had to turn away from them and actually swim downwards, watching his depth gauge with an occasional turn of the whole body, necessitated by the restrictions of his face mask, to see what was happening above him. One hundred and fifty feet, seventy, ninety, two hundred. He kept on going, and the light became dimmer, less constant, so that it increased and decreased in a pulsing rhythm which matched, he found, his own heartbeat. He felt the beginnings of dizziness, and a stealing euphoria which numbed his physical senses but liberated his imagination so that he began to hallucinate sunshine, not above but below
him, and felt that all he needed to do was keep on driving downwards and he would burst through to the other side. He felt to be swimming horizontally, not vertically. The best way out is always through. He would go through, where they could not follow him. He turned to offer them a coarse gesture, the bubble of a giggle forming in his throat, and saw that they had stopped swimming and were hovering, still some fifty feet above him, watching him. He looked at his depth gauge. The numbers were blurred, but eventually focussed when he screwed his eyes down to them and held the dial tightly in both hands to stop it from waving from side to side and turning into a sunflower. Two hundred and thirty feet. So what? It had been easy, and he felt fine. He would show them. He showed them by turning a somersault. There was nothing to take his bearings by, and he did not know when to stop, but when he finished he felt less dizzy than he had when he started, although just as happy. He eventually located upwards and turned over onto his back. There they were, those two horizontal puppets without strings, dangling from nothing, holding hands now and spinning around in their own kaleidoscopic plan, two cutout paper men, reflections of each other, in a frivolous dance of exultation at his imminent upfall. Not yet! He tried to drop the treasure bag up to them, intending to catch it before it fully escaped his reach and jerk it back,
tantalizing them; but it would not leave his chest, and he had to hold it out to them, bring it back, and then offer the abusive single finger he had meant to up them with when he had first stopped swimming downwards. They did not react. Perhaps they could not see him, up here in the darkness: he was too high . . . low—low, and the whole sphere of his vision turned topsy-turvy again so that he began to remember where he was, and what he was doing. They were up, and he was down, they were waiting for him to come up so that they could kill him. He would not let them. If they could not see him now, he could maybe go sideways, out from under them. It would make sense to try and aim for the cay: if he could hit the dropoff, then there would at least be some cover if they came looking for him—although what a dropoff was like he had no idea. He was thinking clearly again now, but laboriously. The only bearing he could take would be from the boat. He was fairly certain that Elbert had stopped on the side away from the cay, so he had to swim back the way he had come, but horizontally this time, not towards the hunters, not downwards, no, not downwards, not back down to madness.

They would be able to see his bubbles. He himself might be lost in the blackness beneath them, but those noisy silver spheres would be dancing their way up through two hundred feet of water, and on their way would sing their tremulo song of life to the watchers.
He would have to hold his breath as he swam away. At worst, they would have difficulty tracking him; if he were very lucky, if they failed to find him, they might just decide that the cessation of bubbles meant the cessation of life, that they had lost as well as he.

His pressure gauge registered fourteen hundred pounds. He did not like to think about how long he had been down, or what might be happening inside his body, or rather what might happen when he went up.

He did not take a practice breath, wanted to give them no warning. One full, hissing expansion of the chest and off he went away from the boat and the men above, towards what he hoped would be the undersea cliff which would give him refuge. He pushed steadily, not frantically, with his fins--there must be an optimum speed which would allow him to cover the maximum distance in one breath. The tightness in his chest started almost immediately, but he decided that that must be caused by the overexpansion of his lungs. He must take great care to rise no more than a very few feet-- he had not forgotten the danger of burst lungs--and he watched his depth gauge closely, keeping the needle on two hundred and twenty feet. He counted his fin strokes as he went--any exercise in measurement was a reassurance, however meaningless. What were twenty fin strokes anyway? Twenty blows for freedom, maybe; and that naive, over-romantic
thought sustained him beyond the point where he first of all felt the pressure to give up and renew his breath. Every stroke took him—what, another foot, two feet?—away from the hawks, no, the vultures, in the sky, every one was worth making, every extra one increased still further his chances of escape.

It was with eagerness and some joy, then, that he pushed his way into the gloom ahead of him: some of the narcotics-induced optimism still swam in his veins, but the hallucinations had gone and he could see clearly in the unclear water which was a cloud to hide him from the scavengers.

He had swum fifty strokes already, set a target of another ten, managed ten beyond that, then one, two, three, four, five, his final target, and one last triumphant thrust before he let the air explode from his chest and took a great single suck at the mouthpiece, holding his breath once more. They might not even have missed his bubbles yet; if they had, they might have done nothing, or might have begun looking for him in the wrong direction. In any case, they would be unlikely to spot the single burst he had just sent up to the surface. He knew he would not be able to hold this breath as long as the first one, however—his oxygen debt was building up and would soon have to be repaid in full by an inflow of fresh funds, a relaxation of effort and a long series of deep breaths.
His fourth breath, lasting much, much shorter than the first, brought him in sight of what could only be the dropoff. It came at him suddenly out of the haze, was a darkness which solidified, drew together in front of him like black curtains, smoothly. It was indeed a cliff, but such a cliff—straight up, straight down, as far as the enmasked eye could see. It was a cliff like the one Hebridean folk swung down at the end of thin ropes in order to collect birds' eggs—but no, not a cliff out of some calm television documentary, a precipice rather from a dream, or from the mind of a writer of fantasy, from the black side of faerie. The distance above, great enough, was multiplied two hundred fold beneath. It could not be vertical all the way, no creator could have sliced the earth so deeply and so surely, except in great rage.

Now was the time to turn upwards, as he approached the great wall, and he felt like a cliff-nesting bird swinging up towards home after a dangerous flight across open meadows: he searched the rock face for a cranny which would hide him. He knew what he needed—a hollow, a cave, with a solid, domed roof which would collect his bubbles and hold them away from preying, prying eyes above. He would have to go well up—most of the cliff face was smooth, with no more than slight indentations and little growth of any kind.

Two hundred feet, one-fifty, one hundred: the dropoff
seemed to start about fifty feet below the surface, the top of the cliff washed with a line of what might be sunlight; and the line was broken where here and there a small canyon or chimney cut back in towards the shore, as if the massive guillotining which had sheered away the cliff to begin with had been followed by the decorative chopping of a great knife which had serrated the edge of the dropoff. He swam into the first canyon ahead of him, and felt to be passing through a great gateway, with pillars of deep-pink platecoral forming a portico. There was no protective welcome inside, however--the walls of the canyon were smooth and tapered up into a chimney which would happily have drawn up his bubbles and spewed them out into the bright upper water for all to see. Rather than follow the chimney up onto the shoulder of the dropoff, he turned back and swam out through the gateway, around the left-hand pillar and along the face for a short distance before turning down into the next gully--not so imposing, but with a reassuring gloominess which suggested a greater potential for refuge. Sure enough, as the gully drew around to the right, he saw the blackness of a cave offering itself to him. He swam into it unhesitatingly, and was delighted to find that he could turn upwards as soon as he was inside--it was the right shape at least, although the roof might be porous enough to allow his air to trickle through. He could not tell from inside.
He had some time before abandoned all attempts to hold his breath—that increasingly painful contrivance had brought him as far as the cliff, no further, and now he hung under the black canopy breathing deeply in doubly prodigal celebration—wasteful, yes, and his gauge showed nine hundred pounds; and jubilant, too, at his return towards, if not to, a continuing existence. He panted in his hole like some warm furry animal which, having escaped its pursuers, looked out with dark defiant eyes as it heaved new life into its depleted body.

There was no sign of them. The boat itself was well beyond the limits of his vision, hanging away over there in the silvery-blue, thinly-clouded sky. No splashes, no wakes, no bubbles seeking his own which he now hoarded above him, a great mushroom-shaped disc of quicksilver, an inverted basin of molten glass which shimmered and rippled and grew each time a fresh increment was poured up into it. So certain was he that they had not yet followed him that once his breathing had steadied he felt he could seek to reassure himself that he was giving off no more homing signals. He took a deep breath, swam out of the cave and up fifteen feet or so to the head of the gully, on top of the dropoff itself. There were no bubbles escaping up through the rock—or maybe the odd little bright blip wriggling its way to freedom, perhaps not his at all but the exhalation of some submarine growth, at
any rate not substantial enough to attract any attention. Satisfied, he swam back down to his lair with plenty of air in reserve in his lungs.

Not, however, in his tank. He was down to six hundred pounds, and guessed that that would last about twenty minutes at this depth. He had a choice. Either he could wait out the full twenty minutes or so, until the needle had dropped to the bottom of the red zone and he was having to pull each last lungful of air, and then surface directly upwards hoping that the boat would have gone; or at some point soon he could set off for the shore, hoping to get in close enough to be within reach of some surface cover when he finally had to raise his head through the surface.

He decided to wait. To show himself on the surface anywhere between here and the shore would be hardly any safer than doing so right here: and even if he set off right now, he had no guarantee that he would be able to reach the shore underwater, nor that there would be anything for him to hide behind once he got there. Time was the crucial factor. Either the boat would have left by the time he had to surface, in which case it did not matter where he was, or it would not have done, and he would certainly be spotted, again no matter where.

The needle had been at its lowest point for some time before the drag in his regulator told him in a different and
more pre-emptory way that it was time to go up. He ducked out of the cave, hung onto its upper lip with one hand while, through instinct still holding his breath, he swept the circle of the surface with the beam of his eyes from within their rubber hood. There was no sign. It was just as well, for the next breath he managed to draw was barely a half-breath, not enough to take him to the surface towards which he now threshed with the first stirrings of panic inside him. To have come thus far and to die for the sake of two lungsful of air would be an ignominious and ironic tragedy instead of the more momentous, if more unsubtle, one he had fought so hard to avoid; it would have a nice cruelty about it, but a cruelty nevertheless.

As he rose, however, he found breathing a little easier, perhaps an effect of the decrease in external pressure—and managed to draw in three adequate breaths on his way up.

At the surface he hesitated, hovered, allowing the weight of the bag to hold him just under the swaying, billowing cellophane: it was as if the gold were reluctant to allow him to expose himself, did not want him to be hauled from the water by the scruff of his neck to lie jumping in the well of the boat like a gaffed sturgeon while the gold was torn from his grasp as if it were roe being scraped from his side so that, gutted, he could then be thrown back to die. The gold did not want to leave the water at all, had never wanted to
leave it, which was why it had pulled and pulled him down all
the time from the moment he had first lifted it in the cave, that cave.

Now was the time. He pushed his head through slowly, still breathing from the regulator, so that he cleared the water no further than his eyes, which, as he wafted around with his free hand, told him that he had won. They had gone. There was no boat anywhere. As far as they were concerned, he was dead, had filled with water and sunk down into the darkness like an old beer bottle.
A coral bush stood clear of the rest of the underwater garden, on a peninsula of cemented coral blocks. It was as different from those blocks as a shrub is from the rocks in a rockery, for it was soft, and swayed. It had the upward reach of a tree, but without a tree's rigidity, the water doing for it what air could not do for wood, and leaf. The fawn-colored branches swayed back and forward as if the whole growth were being wafted from its base by a rhythmic shifting of the earth. The outline of each branch was blurred by the thousands of tiny polyps which made up the surface like minute blossoms around a central stalk.

One branch was an illusion. It was upright, well enough, and in position with its neighbors should have been attached to the trunk of the colony; but the junction had been erased by the swipe of some unseen eraser so that there was a gap of inches. Nevertheless the branch hung there, refusing to admit its separation. It was a magician's trick, a simulated levitation. It must have been done with mirrors.

But it was not. Nor was it a coral branch. It was a fish, a long, thin, straight, eel-like fish, hanging head-downwards. Now that your eye had picked it out you could see ways in which it was different. It had markings, for instance, squared lines which broke up the smoothness into a coarse and middle-aged tweed. It was not in any case a streamlined fish, despite its elongation. The downward-
pointing snout belled out like a blunderbuss, pouting snootily. At the upper end, short fins like dart flights and a stubby flame-shaped tail made it top-heavy; but it was those which, rippling almost imperceptibly, held it upright. A trumpet fish.

It was a contented fish, content to hide, to appear to be what it was not, to stay out of trouble. It would eat, but only what passed beneath it: it was a darter downward after morsels, but cast no eyes.

It was not the miracle it had seemed to be, the denial of natural law, rather an affirmation of it, but a miracle all the same.
CHAPTER X

His left eye opened. His right would not, crumpled closed as it was under the weight of his head. His head would not lift, either: his neck was set rigid. He was Gulliver, held down by the tight threads of cramp which deep sleep and a cold night had thrown over him. He had dreamed that the boys, his sons, were sitting on him, not in a child-ish romp but, encouraged by their mother standing somewhere behind them, behind them where he could not see because he could not rise and turn, so that he would miss the airplane he had booked seats on. The boys did not know he meant to take them with him; but she knew. So she wanted him held down so that he would not take them from her; and they, in ignorant love, held him down so that he would not leave them. He could not speak his love for them: his jaw was set in a defiance of her which enveloped them, her minions: he could not tell them and they would not let him show them, would not let him pry his right arm loose from its sculptured position under his body so that he could reach down to his coat pocket and take out the airplane tickets which could free all three of them.

His left eye was free, though, and moving it and focussing it he saw not the long coarse pile of the white carpet he thought he was lying on but the trickling,
glistening grains of sand stirring with the morning sunlight an inch or two away from his eyeball. Each grain as it rolled downwards into the hollow made by his cheekbone was part of an effect in some disaster movie, a rolling plastic rock which thundered noiselessly down a hillside in illusory cataclysm, awaiting the dubbing of tremendous sound. Until the sound was added he had nothing to fear; and the only thing he could hear at the moment was the broken and unenthusiastic singing of a bird which did not hope for much, somewhere ahead of him.

He broke the stick of his neck, and his head scraped forward so that he could see past the white lumps of sand, down through the overhang of his left shoulder to the cool line of the sea; and that glimpse showed him also the stretch of events behind him, and he knew where he was. His own boulder had tumbled with neither sound nor breakage to the foot of the precipice which had threatened to smash it; he had escaped silently; but he now lay as lifeless as a rock at the end of its run, a spent thing which would move again only if it were moved.

How nastily accurate that figurative expression of the helplessness of his situation was came right through to him when he eventually tried to rise from what he really did assume to be the cramp of inertia; the spiritual powerlessness which he was drowning in was matched by a fluidity in
his lower limbs which made him feel as if he were lying half in and half out of a warm pool of water: from the waist upwards he was solid, and potent, if somewhat stiff; but his legs had dissolved in the fluid and were only a hazy outline, a smoky drift in the water which would spread and disappear if the pool were disturbed. He could not move his legs. He pushed himself up on his hands and looked backwards over his shoulder, would not have been very surprised to see only sand where his legs should be; but they were there, at least to his eyes; and they were there to the hand which he sent down to squeeze them, slap them, prod them, anything to wake them up.

He began to know what that might mean, and the knowledge shocked his upper body into convulsive rigors: he jerked, threw himself over onto his back with a heaving gasp, pushed himself up into a sitting position supported by his locked arms, tried to lift his body further, but the push downwards he gave with his legs met no resistance, as if the legs had gone straight down through the sand and were now dangling uselessly below him. They had not moved, lay there like the thick, limp, sand-encrusted tentacles of a beached octopus.

Paralysis without pain. Pain would have been better, would have given him some hope. He could not believe he had survived the sea and his fellow men to die whimpering on a beach.
He fell back on the sand, both eyes turned upwards, open, wide to the wide blue sky far above him, not yet sinking with the heavy heat of the day. Perhaps if he waited, maybe even slept again... but sleep was impossible, and waiting a torture. Somewhere inside him, somewhere down his backbone near its melting point, a bubble had grown from nothing, had risen and swelled like the moon as he had risen in the water, and had jammed in his tissues as he was now jammed in the tube of events along which he had so far been forced by the pressure of pursuit behind the vacuum of acquisition ahead. Pressure and vacuum had both failed, and he was now left to drag himself forwards as best he could; but he knew the inside of the tube was smooth, withoutpurchase for his fingernails however frantic. The end of the tube, too, curved away out of sight—there was no way of knowing where any effort he might now be able to put out might take him. He had sought to escape the funnelling of his life but was now fast. The freedom he had sought had been a metaphysical will o’ the wisp dancing always and by definition beyond his reach, belonging as it did to the world of ideas while he was chained here in this world of things. Life was physical. All important concepts were in the end reduced to rearrangements of matter. Justice was finally the policeman’s hand on the shoulder, the cool hard bar of the prison cell against the pensive cheek; peace was the sour lump of shrapnel which
would be hurled through your guts if you were unpeaceful; love, a slow hand on the door of an empty room; and freedom, the freedom he had pursued, a mere space between cold walls.

He tried again, this time pushing himself backwards with his hands, drawing his legs after him. They dribbled over the sand in his wake, and he beat his thighs with his fist in despair, pounding the semblance of a reflex out of, but no feeling into, them.

He wept, the tears blurring the line of the horizon which was now no longer quite straight. A small buzzing began somewhere in the back of his mind.
Many many fathoms down, in darkness, lights moved. A row of lights, blue-green, faint, sliding forward. An ocean-going liner, lost from the surface, still making way, its feting passengers oblivious to the mile of water above them.

No, this was no ship, could not be, nor any submarine craft. It was no more than six inches long, and it had eyes, underscored by more luminescence, fins squared-off and ribbed like dragons' wings, a long tubular body with loose wrinkled belly and a face more like a snake's than a fish's—jutting underjaw, curved glass fangs: a reptile of a fish... and its utter coldness matched the coldness of the water it swam in. Its name? Black swallower. Just that. For that was all there was to it: it was black, and it swallowed. It swallowed anything, regardless of size.

The glowing dots along its midline drew inquisitive creatures within range of its snapping mouth and icicle teeth; the phosphorescence under its eyes gave it some light by which to move, and see, and grab.

The fish that it could see now was big, almost twice as big as the swallower itself. It did not belong here, at this depth. It was a young ocean perch, a balanced fish whose silvery-gray sheen amplified the bilious light from the swallower. It must be a sick fish, to have drifted down so far.
It was not attracted to the glow from the gaunt threat which moved in on its flank, but, held in the web of its own weakness, neither could it swim away.

The swallower overtook it, turned to face it with inquisitor's eyes—it was as if this meeting were expected—and without waiting for an answer opened its mouth to pronounce sentence... opened, and opened, and opened; for the upper head tilted back like a vizor so that the eyes looked back down toward the tail and the lower jaw moved out like a bottom drawer full of upright knives until the blades located the perch's throat and snapped upwards through the skin, the short upper teeth catching just beyond the perch's nostrils. The perch, gripped, did not struggle, but looked wildly sideways with its round black eyes, like a frightened horse.

The swallower jerked and bit, jerked and bit, working its way up to the perch's head. The screaming eyes disappeared. The swallower's whole head seemed to move forward from its body, its gills dropped down like a loading ramp, and the whole heart cavity slid out of the way—yes, the fish moved its heart so that it could eat.

Inch by inch the perch was worked in, teeth in the swallower's throat taking over from the trapping teeth, at the front, moving the bulk into a space too small but becoming big enough as the belly began to distend and the
perch slid slowly down into the darkness within the
darkness. Soon the outer teeth clenched only on a tailfin;
the row of lights dulled; and the sleek liner of a short
while before had become a bloated airship bellying sluggishly
in no particular direction, but drifting slowly downwards.
A dark shadow was rising through the water, faster, faster, racing up towards the surface at a steep angle which suddenly in its last few feet swept up into a vertical line so that the shadow cleared the water in a rush of spray following the great shape into the air, trails, gobbets of sparkling water strung together into a trembling diamond necklace which hung against the sky for a long moment.

The manta ray, too, hung in the air as the film of its flight slowed down, stopped, held. While the ray was stilled upright fifteen feet above the water the bulk of its body darkened against the light and you could see why it had the name devil-fish: its two horns pointed up like antennae sensitized to the vibrations of evil, its cloaked arms were spread wide to embrace all sinners, its long thin tail hung down ready to whip and whip the ensnared.

Yet there was no harm in this one-ton slab of cartilaginous flesh. The back was black, certainly, but the underside was a pure white; the head seen close, too, was unaggressive: shapeless, flattened, curved forward at the front into the soft lines of the lobes which from a distance seemed to be spikes, lobes like pendulous dachshund's ears whose job it was to funnel water into the wide glum mouth where its minute life could be sieved.

There was no telling why it jumped. Perhaps it was being pursued by some creature larger and more terrifying than
itself. It could have been ridding itself of parasites. You could have read into the leap a passion to change elements. But there was a certain joy in the soar and curve of its flight which might have been enough.

The film started up again, and the curve dipped: the heavy cloak spread out flat and level and pancaked solidly down on the water with a grand smash which shook the reef and reverberated through the coral heads.
CHAPTER XI

When was it that he returned to sanity? He did not know how many hours or madnesses lay behind him. He found the goblet lying half-buried in the sand many yards away, where he must have hurled it. He was wearing the gold chain around his neck. He did not try to understand.

He just hoped the bubble had stuck where it was. He had lost the use of his legs, but from the waist upwards he was still whole, as long as his mind stayed whole. He did not know what chance there was of the bubble moving, jamming some more vital functions. For how many days could he stay alive like this? Long enough, he hoped, for chance to brush past and dislodge him from this rock.

He had survived again. When you left the central path and broke off into the bush, it seemed, life lost its guarantees and you could be overtaken by absurdity as easily as by tragedy; and the greatest absurdity, and tragedy, might be that no one knew what had happened so that you could not even become a cautionary tale. His story was being written in sand, and that thought terrified him. He wanted it to be known, wanted the spark of his life to be glimpsed at least as it fell to the cold earth.

It would be glimpsed. In the afternoon the boat came. The island was going to release its grip on him. A part of
him had known the boat would come. He had expected the
Mostyn boat, however, not this faded green open aluminum
skiff with its buzzing outboard. The man in it was old, and
black, and wore a stained straw hat and steered the boat with
a skinny arm.

"Yes, sah!"

Shouted from ten yards out. The old man steered the boat
into the shore where Sodek sat, as if he were making a pre-
arranged taxi pickup. He lifted the outboard and the boat
drove up onto the beach. Then he sat in the boat and Sodek
sat on the sand, and they talked.

"Yes, sah!"

The second an expression of a willingness to listen, to
help, this time after the boat had slid to its hissing halt
among the wavelets.

"I thought I'd have to wait much longer. I've been here
two, maybe three days."

"Your boat she sink?"

"Yes, out there."

Where Elbert was.

"I had an accident. Diving. I've lost the use of my legs."

He slapped his right thigh.

"Your legs won't work?"

"They won't work."

"What you goin' to do?"

"Where are you from? Where do you come from?"
"Main Island."

"Are you going back there now?"

"Mebbe. I come to set my fish traps. I done finish."

The boat held a couple of plastic milk containers, one full of water, two lengths of rope, three red gas tanks, an anchor, a machete, a square wooden box with a glass bottom, and a sack with indeterminate contents.

"How long will it take?"

"Four, mebbe five hours. I done plan to stay down here two, three days in my shack; but I guess you needs to go now."

"I'll pay you."

"You already paid your price, man."

"Is there a hospital on Main Island?"

"Hospital, yes. but diving accidents, dey goes to a diffen' place. Place dey calls chamber."

Chamber. Diving chamber. Recompression chamber. He needed that. The bubble needed to be squeezed, forced back into solution in the bloodstream, and then the nitrogen must be released slowly, slowly, so that the bubble did not reform.

"I need to get there . . . as soon as possible."

"I got to get my cat firs'. Den we leave. You got things?"

"Yes. Where's your cat?"

"At my shack. Roun' de point. Wrong way."

"You go now. Pick me up on the way back. Can you leave your sack?"
"Yes. Mebbe, See here."

He rummaged in the sack, brought out a well-worn, sharp looking knife, its blade partly wrapped in leather, two Chlorox bottles with fishline wound around them, a smaller canvas bag, a tobacco tin, a piece of mirror. He laid them out on the forward seat.

"You get your things together. You can do it all right? I be back soon."

He rose in the boat, a long spindly man with clouded eyes and gray stubble, gangled his way over the side onto the sand, gave Sodek the sack, and then pushed the boat down into the water. Soon the buzzing motor had taken him out of sight around the point some half mile down the beach, and its wake had subsided into gentle choppiness.

Their arrival on Main Island was very public. There were many loafers on the dock just waiting for an event such as this to stir their sluggish day, and they all wanted to help lift Sodek from the boat and up the steps. The green taxi which also seemed to be waiting for him took him silkily to the hospital, where they had all decided he would need to go for examination before being passed on to the chamber. He sensed an air of mystique and pride about the recompression unit: it was something beyond the ken of the locals but which worked a sort of magic on divers who surfaced with problems. It was one of the things which attracted dive-tourists to
Main Island, a ready facility for clearing up any mess they might get themselves into. The taxi driver talked all the way. No one else had gotten into the taxi with him, although fifteen people looked as if they wanted to.

The doctor who examined him seemed to think that speed was important, although Sodek could hardly see why, since he had already been in his present state for days. It was as if when he was carried in through the banging doors of the emergency room of the small hospital he triggered off a smoothly articulated process of which he was the raw material. It was the crispest operation he had encountered anywhere in the West Indies, and also the most impersonal. He did not know whether the chamber was government-owned or run by the dive operations on the island. It was some distance from the hospital, and he travelled by ambulance on his back with his head low and his feet raised. The first doctor had wanted to know nothing of the circumstances surrounding the accident. A second doctor with an untidy moustache travelled with him, and all he was interested in was depth and time.

"How far did you go down? How long were you there? I need to know," he insisted. Sodek had not answered immediately. The doctor was brusque when he spoke again, after another pause. Sodek did not answer because he did not know the answers and did not know how to explain the fact that he did not know the answers.
"Look friend. People have diving accidents. Most of them say that they don't know how it happened, at first. Nobody wants us to know how dumb they've been. All right, some of them dive without a depth gauge, or without a watch, or they have them but all they can do with them is tell the time, and sometimes not even that. They can't help us: we have to guess. But the others, they know the rules and they break them. A few are honest. Even fewer are just very, very unlucky. Which kind are you?"

"I'm honest. And I'm dumb. And I'm not sure how deep but it was more than two hundred and thirty feet and I don't know how long but it was more than twenty minutes."

"What about decompression stops?"

"That's how dumb I am."

"You came straight up."

He made the statement flatly, to see if he could make himself believe it that way.

"No. I came up to about fifty feet and stayed there . . . well . . . fifteen minutes."

"O.K."

He was relieved that he did not have to believe in the other.

"That's better than nothing. That bubble in your spine, you'd have had a thousand of those if you'd come straight up. Your blood would have been like cherry soda. One's bad
enough: if that one had moved up to your heart or your brain you wouldn't have been as comical as the Tin Man or the Lion: there aren't any real wizards here either. A machine's the best we have to offer, too. How did you get here? You were on another island, weren't you?"

"Yes . . . in the bottom of a boat."

"How, in the bottom of a boat?"

"Like this, on my back with my legs over a seat."

"Who told you to do that?"

"How else would a paralyzed man ride in a small boat?"

"If you did things wrong to begin with, you did them not bad later. You're still dumb. But lucky with it."

He was not so aggressive now. Sodek had offered his throat: but he sensed an unspoken "so far" at the end of the doctor's last sentence.

He became a piece of meat again when they arrived at the square one-storey building which whined like an airplane on a runway. He was surrounded by tee shirts and belt buckles as he was lifted on his stretcher and carried inside the whine, then fed in through the hatch of what looked even upside down like a big boiler and shuffled sideways onto a narrow bunk. A doctor came in with him and stayed while the hatch was clanged shut and screwed down. They would have been able to see out through the porthole in the top half of the chamber had it not been for the faces that took turns to peer in at
them—the faces which belonged to the tee shirts and belt buckles and at which the doctor had talked, doubly over his head, as they entered.

More medical checks—heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, breathing rate, reflexes. Oxygen from the mask dangling down from the roof—the sucking sound like a scuba regulator frightened him for the first time. Hissing in the background, growing louder. Pressure in his ears: he was told to clear them as if he were diving. He was diving, the doctor told him, down to a hundred and sixty feet. That might not be enough, and they would have to go deeper, then up very, very slowly.

"This may take a long time."

He was not really interested, he found, was content to leave it all in their hands. The doctor had given him a sedative he did not really need, and he passed into a twilight time of hissings and knockings and echoes, voices squeezed small down a telephone cable, sweet oxygen from bitter rubber, heat, trickling sweat and a sodden mattress underneath him—a roundabout of sounds and sensations on which he slowly spun, passing once every turn a bright light which shone into his eyes. . . . The doctor's torch. At one time he was revolving with Elbert again in that waltz of death, at another it was a black genii's face which snarled down through the porthole.
Shortly after that he was awake, and alone. There had been two or three changes of attendant, he thought, but he hadn't been left alone till now. When he moved his head around and looked up at the porthole the eyes that looked down at him were unlike the other eyes he remembered in that circular frame: these ones watched without moving--there was none of the turning away and back which had been the pattern up till now, none of the checking of controls and communication with other operators which he had imagined taking place outside so that he had felt to be in the center of things, the queen ant, the baby in the incubator, the creature kept alive because it was the job of the other creatures to keep it alive.

Things were still hazy. Only the eyes were steady, and clear. Then the telephone handset fixed above his head buzzed, twice, then once again, and he lifted it. The voice came from many miles away. There was no one looking through the porthole now.

"Mr. Sodek."

"Yes. Hello. How?"

The thin wire voice sliced through his reply.

"Listen. Listen carefully. I am going to tell you three things, then you are going to tell me one thing.

"You are almost better."

"We can make you worse again."

"We want the treasure."
"Now you."

The eyes were back again, and he knew whose eyes.

"Let me speak to the doctor."

"There is no doctor."

They must have been on Main Island when he arrived. Or maybe these were not the same ones. He felt very vulnerable, and weak.

"You are almost better." What did that mean? He tried gingerly to move his leg ... and it responded. Not fully, he could not get it off the mattress; but at least it moved, moved sideways, twisted slightly, and he felt it. He felt it. And his other leg: he could lift that, at least at the knee. He had forced himself up on his elbows to watch this miracle, and now he fell back, gasping and sweating.

"Yes, Mr. Sodek, you are almost better."

The eyes were back.

"A little more rest, a further decrease in pressure-- you are now at sixty feet--and you will be a tired but a fit man. If, however, you were to go back down deep, say to two hundred feet, and come up again quickly, oh so quickly, what do you think would happen?"

"What would happen?"

Trying to stay cold.

"You would burst open in all sorts of strange places inside your body. If your brain or your heart went first, you would be lucky."
"Who are you?"

"I am just a man of these islands who thinks that the precious things of these islands belong here, to the people here."

"To you."

"To me. And to my friends. Where is it? Did you give it to someone here? Is it at the hospital? We asked, but they said they did not know. You left a sack with the old man. He went straight away. Was that the treasure? Was it?"

"Maybe."

"Where did he go?"

"How should I know?"

Stalling from a gangster movie.

"Mr. Sodek. You can not see my right hand, but it is on a lever which opens a valve which allows high-pressure air into the chamber. If I open it--so--you will hear the air. You will feel the increase in pressure. Yes? Already you are at sixty-five feet, sixty-six, sixty-seven. You see how easy it is? Just above this lever is another one. It is marked "Emergency Exhaust." If I lift it all the air will rush out of the chamber. It will be as if you have shot to the surface from whatever depth you are at--it is now seventy-five feet in there--and your previous trouble will be as nothing. You have already been down a long, long time. Tell us where the old man went. Did you give him the treasure?"
"Yes. I gave him the treasure. But I do not know where he went."

"How were you going to get it back from him?"

"I do not know. I asked him to look after a bag of things for me, fastened up tight with fishing line. He might not open it. He said I would be able to find him."

"His name?"

It was hard to believe that they did not already know it. Any of the onlookers in the harbor could have told them. If they had the resources to take over this unit, they could find out that simple thing. Were they just testing his willingness to tell them anything they asked?

"I think he said Joseph. 'Ask for Joseph.'"

"What did you tell him to do with the bag?"

"Nothing. Just keep it for me."

"Mr. Sodek. Forget the treasure. We will find Joseph. The treasure will be ours. Forget you ever had it. Be thankful you have your legs."

The telephone clicked dead. The face went from the window. The hissing stopped. Time passed. Then faces started appearing at the window again, wide-eyed faces. The telephone twanged tight questions at him--Was he all right? Could he move his legs? How was his breathing? Did he have any pain? Someone would be in with him in a moment. There had been a problem outside. They were sorry.
All they knew was that the doctor and the two operators had been clubbed down, each in turn, the doctor having been first lured out into the outer chamber, the airlock. They could not begin to understand it. Why would anyone do such a thing? Had he seen anything, heard anything?

"No. I was asleep a long time. Was it dangerous for me?"

"If someone had altered the controls you could easily have been killed. Whoever it was, whatever they wanted, they left you sitting at sixty feet. You were there just a bit longer than you would have been if nothing had happened. We can bring you the rest of the way up now, slowly. It will take about two hours."

All this from the doctor who had first of all examined him, and who had come in through the hatch soon after things had started to happen again.

Sodek said no more, either to him or to the police who were outside the chamber when he was eventually carried out, blinking, into the neon-lit room. He could move his legs, but did not want to. He wanted only to sleep, and was happy to be manhandled through the business of transportation back to the hospital and installation into the crackling white bed. They left the light on in the room, but it made no difference.
A slow brown ribbon snaked its way across the white sea floor sixty feet below the bright surface. It was big, thirty or forty feet long, a fearful serpent of a thing which might at any time spot you hanging in the water and spiral upwards in snapping coils to take you down. When the sea steadied for a moment you could see that it had countless legs along its length, and what looked like bristles sticking out from its side.

Only through half that depth of dimming sea could the true nature of the creature be perceived. It was a long column of lobsters, spiny lobsters, clawless lobsters, langoustes, in what for lobsters was marching order, one behind the other, each gripping with its front legs the tail of the lobster in front, reaching out with its feelers every now and then to tap its precursor's back, then signalling in semaphore to the lobster behind. They wound surely over the sand, and the movement of each was more a dance than a march, a jigging, prancing thrust on delicate pointed legs; and they never let go of one another, a column of blind on pilgrimage to some healing place, waving their sticks out to either side, touching and checking.

Those last two, now, what were they doing? They had broken free, had turned to face back over the lines scratched in the sand by their passage. A shadow had appeared over the end of the column, and these two had turned to fight a rear-
guard action if necessary—little though they had to fight with. It would have been more a sacrifice; but the shadow was only that of a spotted eagle ray, flapping peacefully across the column and twenty feet above it. The two reprieved lobster danced after the column, and stuck themselves on the end again. Before long the ribbon had snaked off into cloudiness, leaving only the trail in the sand.
CHAPTER XII

They made him get up early the next day, and walk around. If he were fully cured, it was important that his body be made to work immediately: if he was not, they wanted the further symptoms to declare themselves. They also wanted him to remain at the hospital for at least a week. He crept out later that morning, wearing the slacks and shirt they had brought him for daytime use.

He felt cured, felt to have regained all the power he would need to do what he had to do. There was not much time.

He had not given the treasure to the old man, who was not called Joseph. It would not take his persecutors long, however, to discover both of those facts. Then they would know what he had done, would even have an advantage over him—if they found the old man he would tell them which cay it was, and Sodek did not know that. He had never thought to ask, and now it was too late. He would be able to recognize his own stretch of sand, would be able to judge where he had buried the treasure under the sea grape after dragging it painfully as far along the beach as he could during the old man's absence. He had covered less than half the return journey when the little boat puttered onto the beach and he half levered himself, half fell over its side. It was the old man who had gone ashore to collect the items of diving
gear and put them in the sack. Sodek had said he could keep them, sell them as payment for his help. The old man had not argued. Perhaps he, too, would have to pay a price now.

Sodek was still caught in the coils of an adventure not of his seeking, and was still amazed by how closely it followed the conventions. He almost felt to be the butt of an enormous joke; but Elbert's death was not funny, nor had his paralysis been. Now that his body was free again, however, he could move swiftly in the external world, could swim with the current of hard events or across it as it pleased him, and his time on the beach, when he had swung between sharp focus on precise and minute reality and hallucinatory transvision into the nature of Man's inheritance, that was behind him. He was back on the rails, and must obey the rules. That meant claiming the treasure. There was nothing else to be done.

The next step was forced upon him, too. He had no money. He would be wanted by the police, or at least by immigration officials, for further questioning. He needed a boat, could not buy or hire one, would have to steal one. He needed a map, and even then would have difficulty finding his island. His knowledge of navigation was rudimentary, as was his knowledge of boats; in fact, the simplest way would have been to find 'Joseph' himself and take him along. But that course would lead him across the tracks of those others, and
they might well double back on him. He needed in any case to get to the island before them, and not only to it, from it.

He was gambling with his life again, he knew, the life he had just won back for the third--fourth--time. He could return to Center Island, couldn't he, and wriggle back through the knots of the last two weeks to where he had begun? But the thought of going back made him feel as sick as the thought of going on, and it was a different kind of sickness.

He stole a bicycle first of all. He had not stolen since he was a child. Dishonesty, like those other principles, became in the end a rearrangement of matter, too. A rearrangement of time in his favor. A missing bicycle would not cause as great or as immediate a fuss as a missing car, and this one was leaning against a flower-laden bush far enough away from the hospital to make it unlikely that anyone would immediately connect its disappearance with him.

The boat would need to be fast, well-equipped, fuelled, and docked where he would be able to check its equipment and fuel without being seen. The thought did not appall him: the risk he was taking in stealing the boat seemed so slight compared to the risk he would take in using it.

He ignored a solitary twin-engined speedboat moored in a little bay short of the harbor. A figure swimming out to it
and clambering over it uncertainly would be too noticeable there. He made instead for the small jetty beyond the harbor, where a dozen or so boats were moored. At that time of day, late morning, the boats that were out, were out, and those that were in, were in, with nobody tending them: the early risers would not be back till lunchtime, the late sleepers would be waiting till the afternoon before taking to the water. He hoped. His getaway had to be clean, and he walked down to the end of the jetty, where a small cabin cruiser with a big engine rubbed gently against its neighbor, a large, open, diesel-driven craft. The motor cruiser had an awning, lockers, fishing rig, and looked well-kept. He walked up to it boldly and stepped down without hesitating: the secret was to appear to the casual eye as if he owned the boat, or was familiar with it. So as he moved around, checking things, he tried to make it seem like a routine.

The key first of all. Yes. Who would want to steal a boat here anyway? Compass. Yes. Charts. Yes, in a varnished wooden locker under the control panel. He did not examine them: that would have to come later. This must not take long. Fuel. There were two large built-in tanks in the stern, one registering full, one half-empty. Enough? He had no idea, but felt uneasy: the engine was a hundred and fifteen horsepower, and would gulp its way through large amounts. One problem. No others that he could see.

Fuel, then. From another boat. Not the diesel. He
pulled himself up onto the jetty, staggering forward a little—his legs were not sturdy yet, did not respond quickly, did not lock reliably at times. Three boats towards the shore he found two red portable tanks tucked away under the central seat. One was full, the other had a small amount of gas in it. He took them both. No one was looking, and he went back for more, this time bringing back two full tanks, one from a boat which might have been the one that brought him here. That had to be enough.

There was no boat which looked like Mostyn's.

He went back again for something he had seen in one of the boats—an ice chest, with no ice but with two bottles of beer and a plastic container of what looked like fruit punch. This was from the only boat moored on the other side of the jetty, and as he was carrying it across he saw a figure strolling down from the quay, taking no interest in him as yet, looking casually at the boats. Things had to go right now; and no more plundering.

His boat was tight alongside the jetty, pointing into the shore. The way behind was clear; but he had to figure out reverse before he started the engine. The whole operation must be smooth, if he were not to excite suspicion. The gear and speed lever looked simple enough—the lift-out-of-gear, push-down-to-engage type, with a locking switch on the side. Starting . . . a key-operated switch, a choke switch. He was
determined not to panic into turning the key until everything else was as ready as he could make it. The onlooker was halfway down the jetty now, alternately looking down at the boats and then out to sea.

The right order of events--he remembered bits: check that fuel was available to the engine. He stepped back and squeezed the black rubber bulb fitted to the fuel line until he felt resistance. The line was now primed. The engine had to be started before any ropes were loosened: if he drifted away from the jetty towards the rocks and the engine failed him, it could be more than embarrassing. Choke switch down, turn the key. The engine whirred, fired briefly, stopped. He tried again. It did not even fire this time. By now the man on the jetty, fat and black, was standing looking down at him. He was the most interesting thing in the whole landscape, almost the only moving thing, certainly the only noisy one.

Once again whirr, fire, die. Whirr, fire, die.

"Mebbe she don't need no choke."
White teeth in a helpful grin.

"Maybe."

He had to appear to know this engine better than a passerby: he used the choke again. Whirr, fire, die.
He could not, now, transfer his goods to another boat. The man had squatted down, was going to see this thing through. Another man had arrived and was working on a boat further up the jetty—he thought for a moment that it was one from which he had taken fuel, but it was not.

Should he take the engine cover off, tinker? He did not have time. The man might before he knew it be down pulling parts off the engine which would take hours to put back on again: he would have to bow quietly out and pedal off, leaving the man, perhaps, to be found by an owner dismayed to find his engine in pieces in the bottom of the boat. That was the kind of man this onlooker seemed to be.

Fortunately there was plenty of life in the battery. He could afford to keep trying. The next time but one the engine caught; in his anxiety he over-revved it so that it screamed and the man in the other boat looked up and watched. He watched longer than the noise justified—did he know the owner?

He let the engine speed drop to idle, made sure it was not going to die, then moved to the bow line.

"Okay, okay, I set you free. Stern line first, though, don't you want?"

Sodek shrugged, all he could do since he did not know. He soon saw—the back of the boat drifted out away from the jetty as soon as it was untied, and he was free to reverse straight out into open water when the bow line was cast off.
Then he noticed that the man from the other boat was no longer at it, but was on the jetty, walking toward them. The bow line was taking time to undo—a clove hitch which had jammed with the tugging of the boat. He willed his helper's hands to pull more fiercely, his fingers to dig into the turns of the rope—but there was no urgency in them. The other man was nearer. He was helpless. His mind searched for lies to tell. Then the line was coming free; but it was held, and his helper turned to the newcomer, a tall man, light-skinned and level-eyed.

"You's a deckhand now or what?"

"Yes, man, I'se deckhanetest man aroun' dese parts—I'se sending off my frien' here. He goin' on de wide sea. Where you goin', frien'?"

He still held the bow line, would let it go only if his question were correctly answered.

"Just round the island, trying out the boat. She's been giving trouble."

"Won't get no trouble from shortage of gas—you got plenty dat."

The floor of the boat was cluttered with tanks. As Sodek looked automatically and self-consciously down, the rope came snaking down from the jetty. They had let him go.

Carefully, now. Rev the engine, then pull the stick back to the center, push down, pull back, wait for the click as
the engine engages. . . . More of a jerk than a click, and the boat moved backwards slowly.

"Thank you."

He hoped that that would dismiss the men and that they would turn away; but they continued to watch as he turned the boat then, his heart beating solidly, changed gear and moved forward. That first, minimally forward flow was beautiful: they could not stop him now. There was the open sea. He pushed the throttle forward, and the boat reared terrifyingly up on end like a horse and roared off. He did not care what they thought, those figures already small and black behind him on the shrinking jetty. They were a part of his past, and his life was all future. He truly felt to be a man with nothing to lose, a man purged, almost erased, by his deaths, a translucent and indefinite figure seeking solidification through engagement with other solid figures in a struggle over hard objects. He had feared the men on the jetty because they had the power to stop him going forward, to hold him in his unfinished state forever.

Once around the point of the harbor he cut the engine to idle and let the boat rock and drift while he worked out which way to go. There were only two charts. The one he needed showed the whole of Main Island and the southernmost tip of Center Island, with numerous small cays scattered between them like pieces of a torn-up letter: a puff of wind
could blow them around into different patterns. All he knew about his island was that it was off to the north of the straight line between the two larger islands, and that was true of most of the cays. As they had left his refuge he had tried to estimate its size, and had supposed it to be less than a mile long. There had been no way of telling its width, and that in itself was a clue—they had travelled down his side in what seemed a straight line for Main Island. Not much later they had passed another, smaller cay, set back a little way to the right of their course. That course would have had to be a general southwesterly one so he was looking for a cay whose southeasterly side was a straightish mile and which was adjoined to the west by a small neighbor.

There were two such configurations, the first slightly further west than the other, on a course from his present position of northwest by north. Did he have to do any more than follow the compass in a straight line as dictated by the chart? There were large compass circles on the chart which had to do, it seemed, with magnetic variation, but, not at all understanding them, he had to believe that a simple bearing would take him in sight of his target. He could be wrong.

Steering the course seemed easy. He set the throttle about three-quarters open, after trying it at half, and then
full, and finding that the buffeting was too great in both cases: three-quarters took him from the top of one wave to the next without crashing into their faces too often.

Four to five hours, the old man had told him their journey would take. He remembered that time only vaguely; the numbness from the thumping of his back as he lay on the floor of the boat had soon spread up to his head, and the ache from his head spread down, it seemed, to his dead feet so that instead of a half-and-half body he had a whole one dazed throughout with pain.

This boat was faster, and now he was impatient, not knowing what he would find or what he could do whatever he did find. The best that he could hope for was that he got there first, so that was all he allowed himself to think about. He was hurling himself at the situation with enough boldness he hoped to break through. It all depended on the resistance.

The first cay was the wrong one. He found it easily enough after little more than two hours— or at least he thought it was the cay he was aiming for on the chart. It looked about the right shape and was in about the right place, and since it wasn't the one with the treasure, it didn't much matter whether or not it was the one on the map. Or so he thought, until he had to adjust his course slightly to the west to bring him to the second pair of islands. If
he wasn't where he thought he was, he might now be heading off into open water. There was a lot of that on the map.

The second pair of islands was not so easy to find. He estimated it would take him less than half an hour to get there; at forty-five minutes he slowed the engine and swung around in a tight circle with no land in sight. He did not know whether he had turned too far to the west or not far enough. He started drawing lines on the map--there was no pen so he used the split end of a matchstick to inscribe and the edge of a spanner for the straight lines. He marked off the spanner from the scale at the foot of the chart to give him some idea of distance.

Assuming the first island was the one called "Salt Pond Cay" on the map, from that he had travelled about twice as far as he thought he should have done. If he had gone to the left of Flat Cay, his second target, he would now need to steer due south to get there; if he had passed to the right, his course would have to be northeast. Approximately. There was as much guessing involved as there had been in that black cave, and ultimately perhaps as much at stake. He felt the same panic, too, beginning to well up inside. *Hysterico passio*. A cusp had come. He had no way of telling. He turned south.

He did not think it was the island when he saw it, even as he drew closer. He was glad, however, to be in touch with
land again. He had had too much water around him. Then as he moved along the eastern side of what had seemed a flat disc in the sea, it lengthened, straightened, stretched out ahead, and he knew where he was.

It took him a long time to find a way in through the reef: it was closed against him. It took him even longer to choose a place to anchor. He could not be sure from the boat where he had been stranded, and had to guess from a pattern of the reef which seemed less unfamiliar than the rest. He dropped anchor in four feet of water, dared not go in any further in this boat. Wading ashore gave him pleasure: he had returned, whole, to reclaim. He felt no relief that the place was deserted: he had not dared imagine the alternative—there was no picture of another boat anchored here to be whisked away and replaced by this empty landscape.

It was evening. The western horizon was smoothly overcast with no break promising an heraldic sunset; nor were there fanfares either internal or external as he walked along the beach to where he was sure he would find what he had returned for. It was all very matter-of-fact: he dug up the treasure and shook the sand from the bag as if he were unearthing a clutch of potatoes. His decision to stay the night was just as straightforward. It would have been foolish to set out to sea again with less than an hour's daylight left.
He did not light a fire. He sat on the beach looking out at the reef until it was too dark to see past the curling white lips of the waves rolling up the sand towards his outstretched feet.
A flotilla drifted on the waves. Each vessel was a smooth and shining swelling of the surface, a low dome with a fluted crest like a centurion's helmet. Portuguese Men-Of-War.

Beneath each dome hung a downward burst of tentacles: an outside protective fringe of short slippery fingers like human appendices, surrounding bunches of budded stalks given over to reproduction, which in turn held in their midst a loose, pendant mouth, an inverted and open sac. From among all this long, long strings dangled down twenty, thirty feet through the water, each with the power in its stinging cells to kill a good-sized fish.

What could not be apparent, however, was the way this creature was put together; for it was not one creature at all. It was more than a thousand different animals, each with a highly specialized function. Some made up the floating dome, some the baneful tentacles; others reproduced, and the remainder digested. It was a total community, demanding complete commitment from each member; and no one member could survive alone, all were held fast in this taut system devoted to self-perpetuation.

Only one creature was detached, had never really belonged. A small fish hung among the stinging tentacles like a bauble, a shining rounded black-and-silver fish with a deep fringed fin beneath its belly. Nomeus gronovii, the Man-Of-War fish, with the community but not of it, contributing
little, taking a little more in the way of a crunching nibble from a tentacle, tolerated by the stinging polyps or at least impervious to them, or maybe just skilled in avoiding them. It kept its own counsel, told its own story to itself as it spun on its thread of life among the threads of death.

Once in a while the glass wall surrounding Nomeus shattered, the stingers reached in and took it, and it was hoisted up to the ragged mouth above. Then the hanging tresses were empty and ghosted.
He had to go on to Center Island. He had enough fuel to return to Main Island, but his enemies were there, and had been added to by the theft of the boat. He would rather pin his hopes on a surreptitious return to the island where it had all started, where at least he knew his way around, where the boat might not be recognized immediately. It was not possible for him to break free of the group of islands—the boat did not have that kind of range, he was sure.

He was under way by sunrise. His pursuers might well be raising their anchor as he raised his. He had tried in the half-light before dawn to erase the marks of his stay by brushing the sand with a sea grape branch, but was not satisfied with the result and wished he had not even tried: if they found this spot now with the fisherman's help they would know from his inadequate attempt at concealment that he had been a second time, and they would bounce after him from this island as if they were all banging their way around a pinball machine.

He was fairly confident that he would be able to find Center Island. This hiding place of his must be Flat Cay. To reach it he had had to come down and away from Center Island and would now have to steer northeast to get there. It was such an extensive stretch of land on the map compared
with this little floating piece of greenery that he knew he could not miss it.

In fact, he was within sight of it much sooner than he expected, before he had really formulated any plans about how and when to arrive. For the last hour or so he had locked his mind onto the forward surge of the boat so that he was one with its movement, its bow an extension of his nose ploughing through the bright water, his spirit propelled by a lust to conclude.

The theft of the boat might well, he now decided, have been reported automatically and immediately to the police on Center Island; he would be spotted and arrested as soon as he got there. He could not afford to take the boat into shore except in a desolate place; then he would have the problem of transport to George Town, where he needed to be. He would find it much easier to remain unnoticed among the tourists in the capital than exposed to the sharp eyes of the communities scattered along the coast; and he had to begin working towards a final escape, using perhaps one of the sea-freight lines whose workings were fairly well known to him and where he had some contacts. He no longer had Elbert to help him. There was one other man, however...

In the meanwhile, getting ashore was the problem. He decided he would have to face the necessity of travelling some distance after he landed. There was little point in
making for George Town or its environs if he was going to find himself stepping from a rocking boat into a sturdy and solid police van.

Then he noticed the speck on the map, and he knew what it was. It was the smallest of the small islands off the north coast: he had seen it from the bluff that first prospective afternoon, a few hundred yards off shore and further along from where he stood—a tiny clump of sand and vegetation with two or three coconut palms leaning tiredly upwards at odd angles. It had looked no more than twenty yards across, a drowning tangle of scrub struggling to stay afloat. On the map it lurked in the shadows of the letters which spelled out its name... Sand Cay. He could land there and swim ashore. The boat? Sink it. He would not need it again. It was only wood and metal. One such had already been sacrificed, that, and more. His own life was at stake now. So sink it.

He did so, behind the islet and partly screened by it from the island itself. He had driven the boat up on the coarse sandy beach over which the three palm trees tottered, unloaded it of pretty well everything through an instinct for hoarding against unexpected eventualities, then pushed it off, drove it out to dark water and pulled the plug. He then swam back to the cay and sat on the tiny beach to watch it go. It would not. It seemed after half an hour to be lower
in the water, that was all. In the end he swam back out and
helped it on its way by forcing the stern down that last few
inches to where the greedy water could lap its way in and
drown it. Then he backed off, wafting himself away with his
arms so as not to be caught in the swirl of descending
water. He felt only relief. He was on his own again now,
just him, his body, the treasure. That was how it had been
at the beginning. There was no track to this place.

It was no more than late morning. He buried the treasure
again. The pile of things he had salvaged from the boat—few
of them apart from the fruit punch and beer of any obvious
use: a tool kit, waterproof jacket, mask, fins, two snorkels,
life jacket, two long cushions, a length of rope—he hid as
best he could in the sparse undergrowth, mainly low sea
grape. The clothes in which he had walked out of the
hospital he had taken off before going out to sink the boat:
he now rolled them into a bundle and wrapped them in the
waterproof jacket, using the rope to secure the bundle.

The swim to shore took only about fifteen minutes, and he
was soon crouched in a gully between two shoulders of iron-
shore, wiping the water off his body with his flat palms and
then waiting until the sun had with steady power almost com-
pletely dried him before putting on the creased clothes. He
hoped that the remaining dampness of his body and the high
humidity of the air would work with the sun to soften and
smooth out the worst of the wrinkles. He would have been better off in shorts and tee shirt than this more formal attire of long-sleeved shirt and checked slacks which, fortunately, fitted him none too badly. He had managed to shave in the hospital, so his stubble was not too bad. He was going to have to hitch a ride to George Town and he would have enough trouble as it was explaining his lack of transport without having to account also for too bedraggled an appearance.

"I've been fishing. They dropped me from the boat and a friend was going to pick me up in his car. That was an hour ago, he hasn't come."

It was too elaborate a story, but was accepted without comment by the driver of the small, ramshackle truck, a big, slow, rounded man with rolling eyes in a very dark face and ketchup stains down his shirt. The ways of whites were beyond him.

"You bin fishenin' where?"

"Off East."

"Catch much?"

"No. A few bonito. One barracuda."

"Good you back. Weather she goin' to turn bad. Dat hurricane she turn in her tracks y'now. She mebbe headin' up dis way. You see d'sky?"
Sodek had not noticed the sky; in fact it looked fairly normal to him, although he knew he could if he wanted imagine a haziness towards the east, a thickening of the light.

"We's gwin' to get a bad storm, at d'least."

"How soon?"

"Mebbe late today. Mebbe tomorrow."

As they got close to the town and the houses became more frequent, Sodek sensed a tension untypical of West Indian towns, expressed not so much in movement as in the tightness of little groups of people standing around talking.

"Dem people, dey knows sumpn', mebbe sumpn' I doesn't know. Hey Devlan!"

He had pulled up the truck alongside two tall men face to face outside a yellow shack.

"How she goin', man?"

"She ain't goin', she comin'. Dat Hurricane Connie she bearin' down on us still, she packin' real heavy now. I'se glad I went Church Sunday."

"If she come, boy, she come for you an' me together. Where your boat? I'se glad I don' own no boat. My house, she solid, an' dis ole truck--she hardly go places even when de engine runnin' ain't no wind gonna push her anywheres."

"Tell you, don' joke, man: people's gettin' scaried roun' dese parts. Dey reckon d'birds all done lef' already."
The talk went on. Sodek listened with his left side while the right side of him, the side away from the man and nearest the open window of the cab through which the humid air pulsed, opened itself to the implications of this new possibility. It was too far away on the horizon for him to be able to see them in any detail, but he knew they included movement in two directions, either towards or away from his objective. If the weather turned very bad, if indeed a hurricane spun the island in dizzy circles, the resulting confusion would give him cover; on the other hand, he did need to get away, and any disruption of air or sea traffic would make that impossible. There was a terrible circle of whirling air somewhere to the east and it had the power to carry him and set him down in a safe place or to hurl him broken on the ironshore.

He chose to believe that the hurricane would not come. He had already decided that the only way to get off the island was by ship—as a stowaway, since he would not have dared use his passport even if he still had it. He did need money, however: if his hiding place on whatever ship he managed to creep onto were discovered, he wanted to be in a position to buy leniency and to avoid being thrust into some deeper recess in the hold to await arrest. There was a small amount of cash at the shop, he knew, but he wanted more, and to get it he would have to risk a visit to the bank where the
firm had its account. They knew him there, and would probably allow him to have a moderate sum if his present position had not become public. He had no way of telling what might have happened in his absence—to what extent the police had been involved; whether they were looking for him; whether they had connected his disappearance with that of Elbert and the first boat, or with the diver's death. The hotel knew of his business connections and would not have reported him as a defaulting tourist, might not for a while at least make any approach to Head Office to have their account paid. The general slowness of official Caribbean machinery gave him hope for a respite. He had most to fear from the motes of rumors which he knew would float around in the evening air and which might be gathered, elaborated until they touched, adhered, and began to make an intelligible whole which someone in authority might take an interest in. Two boats missing, three people gone: the local imagination would strive to make a pattern out of the pieces.

The sooner he organized his resources and ducked back to the cay the better. He had the man drop him outside the bank and let the momentum of his little leap from the cab take him in through the heavy glass door. He had to carry this through with some boldness and could not afford to lurk in corners devising tentative approaches and running the risk of freezing up.
In any event, there were no problems. It was lunchtime, the bank was well filled with customers and predictably short of staff; he chose a teller he knew, a heavy, bored woman who listened inscrutable to his apologetic request, made one telephone call, and went through the necessary paperwork as if he were not there, placing the small pile of notes on the counter between them and waiting, it seemed, for a wind to whisk them away. By no means did she seem to be giving him anything.

A thousand dollars should be enough. He had not dared ask for more.

The first two car rental firms he tried were not letting any cars out because of the impending storm. The third would not let him have a car without seeing his driving license. The fourth made him pay what he thought was double for a visitor's license, but he left in an open yellow jeep—all they had, and he felt very exposed as he drove along the road. His first purchase was a pair of sunglasses. He also felt very hungry, and his second was a meal, in the darkest corner of a hamburger place.

If the storm were coming, he would have to ride it out. The cay was not a good place, but he would be safe from investigation there. All small boats would be hauled out of the water, big ones would be pulled into the mangrove swamps and lashed down among the roots. What would he need to
survive a bad storm, perhaps a hurricane, on a flimsy patch of sand and scrub three feet above sea level? The problem was that if his foothold on dry earth were washed away from beneath him, it would already by then be too late to make it safely back to shore. He had to have a reliable way of staying afloat in the worst imaginable seas, in case he was washed away not only from the cay but from the island. He had an idea for that, but it needed more consideration.

He could not assess how long he might have to hide out there—certainly until the freighters were able to take to sea again. That might be two or three days at least. He shopped at random in the first supermarket he came to, drifting around in as unhurried a manner as his nervousness would allow him. He kept his sunglasses on, and they caused one nasty moment when he rammed a pile of cans and they tottered cartoon-like before settling back into a crooked tower which he rattled quickly away from. By the time he had wound his way around every shelf he had quite a few items in the cart—canned meat, fruit, bread, chocolate, bottled water, cheese, crackers, a kitchen knife, a flashlight. He selected two large plastic food storage boxes to make it easier to get the food items to the cay unsoaked.

As he walked around he concentrated on the shelves so as to avoid any meeting of eyes, steering carefully around other shoppers as if their shopping carts were electrified, not
looking up. He paused longer than necessary in some spots to let others pass him. There were quite a few people scattered around the island who would recognize him, apart from those who might be actively searching.

Clothes were necessary—tee shirt and shorts to make him less conspicuous, tennis shoes which would be better for scrambling over rocks than the loose sandals he had been given on the other island.

His next purchase was a major one—an inflatable dinghy—not full size, a sort of play-dinghy not designed to take an engine but of robust material and big enough to hold a man. That he would use to get his store to the island, and it could be deflated and hidden easily. He might need it again. He could have bought an inflator pump, but chose instead to persuade the proprietor of an untidy dive shop to let him have a scuba tank and regulator. A garage sold him an adjustable wrench. If he detached the second stage, the mouthpiece unit, from the hose, he could use the tank to inflate the dinghy quickly.

That was all. He had spent a long time gathering things, his confidence increasing only marginally as he did so. He was relieved to be able to climb into the jeep for the last time and head back to his refuge.
The jeep was a problem. He had hired it for a week but would not need it for the next few days. It was far too conspicuous. After he had unloaded his gear and carried it down to the take-off point for the cay he drove the jeep inland along a dike road which led well into the swamp. Every time the road forked he chose the narrower and more crumbling branch until after a rocking mile he found himself in a small enclave in the bush where the marl surface trickled to a halt in soft earth and the heat pressed down like a lid.

The walk back to the sea was a heavy one: he realized as he plodded and stumbled along the uneven track how much strain he had already undergone, how his spirit and body were being dried up by the heat of conflict: he hoped drying would mean toughening without cracking. Only the smooth and fragrant oil of hope could keep him pliant enough to bend into new shapes to hold new pressures; and he had little of that. He had ceased to visualize possible outcomes and was working step by step, just as he was plodding along this dirt road, with each footfall its own justification and futility, its own punishment and reward.

A boat passed close in to shore as he was inflating the dinghy. The occupant gave no sign of having noticed him.

The sea was calm, with a dull luster to its surface which made it seem denser than water, heavy and slow like
molasses. The sky was clear in that there were no clouds, but it too was heavy, heavier than air, thick and fogged: moving through it took on some of the qualities of swimming; and wading through the slow water was like climbing up a steep hill. He towed the dinghy behind him as if he were rescuing it.

Only the occasional mosquito whined in his ears as he sat huddled up within himself after dark. The moon hung sulking in the sky and the sea slid. The waiting was going to be difficult.
Sharks are machines for killing. They have no interest other than that. If they don't get you one way, they'll get you another. No, they can't see too well; but well enough, once they get in close. They shut their eyes anyway as they strike.

They can get close without much trouble. Drop a tablespoonful of blood in the sea, they'll pick up the trace a quarter of a mile away, swim back and forward across it until they have a direction, then go straight. If there's no blood, there may be spashing from an injured fish's tail, a frightened (or playful) swimmer's legs. The shark's lateral line, a series of pressure-sensitive organs running down its sides, will alert the shark and guide it in. Then there are the ampullae of Lorenzini, simpler than they sound, small sunken pits in the shark's forehead which record weak electrical impulses—again, such as a fish gives out when in trouble, or you, or I.

If the water is cloudy, the shark will go fast in to its target without stopping to find out what it is. It has nothing much to fear. If it can see, it may circle a few times, drawing closer each time, and then come in with a rush at the end. It doesn't much matter how, does it?

The teeth aren't really for slicing clearly: the shark grips and tears, twisting and rolling its body until chunks of whatever rip off. And they don't easily let go, those
teeth, with a jaw pressure of twenty tons to the square inch behind them.

Not only the teeth are sharp. The shark's scales aren't scales, they're teeth too--denticles, spiked, thorny, so that the skin is like an inquisitor's instrument, capable of stripping your skin from your flesh, peeling you like a mango ready for the other teeth. Think of the blood in the water once a shark had brushed against you, think of its effect on the shark, and of its power to draw other sharks.

Think, too, of the things that have been found in sharks' stomachs, and don't console yourself with the thought that you'd be safe if you pretended to be something other than you are, a turtle, or a dolphin maybe. You could try to be an old tin can lying on the bottom and that wouldn't make any difference--plenty of those have been found in sharks' stomachs. So have lumps of wood, dogs, bottles, boat propellors, parts of an alligator, bits of junk cars and junk people. Sharks are said to have attacked a maddened elephant which had run into the water.

They attack each other, too. There is no camaraderie of killers here. Catch a shark on a line, and by the time you've hauled it in it may be half a shark. A big shark may lie dying on the deck of your boat, not because you've hooked it, but because on its way in its middle section had been chomped out by a much bigger shark.
Nor are they kind to themselves: it's as if their jaws can't stop working--sharks have been caught, clubbed, gutted and thrown back in, only to attack and devour their own entrails, thrown in alongside them.

So there is nothing subtle about sharks. They're simple, and honest, and terrible. The one reassuring thing about them as far as man is concerned is that they live in the sea, and people on land.
CHAPTER XIV

The sea woke him before first light. It was not rough, but there was an insistence in its little rush and retreat which tore a way in to him through his hazy dreams: it was a dog tugging at his trouser legs, reminding him.

He should have bought a radio. He had no way of telling what the weather was going to do: it seemed hardly any less settled today than yesterday, but the heavy tautness could be in his imagination only.

He ate half a can of corned beef and a slice of bread, and felt sick, nothing to do with the food now but with the gentle heave of the sea all around; it felt as if the cay were moving steadily up and down.

The flattened dinghy and the other things he had pushed out of sight in the undergrowth, covering the edges with sand and piling branches and debris over. He now set about hollowing out of the pile a nook into which he could crawl if he needed to. Anybody landing on the cay would step on him, but he was fairly certain that no passing boat would be arrested in its passing by any visible sign of his presence.

He felt secure but what was security? He needed escape, not refuge. He should have made a move to the harbor straight away, perhaps, and tried to find a hiding place on one of the freighters. But dock security was fairly tight--
although he would have to penetrate it sooner or later—and several days spent in a black hole would be worse than this. Maybe one of the freighters would have put to sea anyway, hoping to outrun the storm: he could have taken that chance. But in a curious way he was glad to be here, on this outcrop, symbol of his willed detachment from a society he had left at one point and would reenter at another. On this thin cay were all that he had of life: his desire and his means. He could never return. The old life was no more. His spirit had been burned white in the incandescent struggle and could never blend again with the garishness of middle-class American life. That previous and endless labor to maintain color in existence had shown itself futile: those artificial pigments could not survive the passion of sunlight, and what had never lived, died. Continually.

He wanted to rescue his boys before they became too heavily lacquered over with lusterless coatings of convention. The varnish might be scraped off at some later time, but the stains on their flesh would remain, unless they were scorched as he had been, and he could not wish that on them. He would have willed this little cay which held him to move across the waters like an ark and take them from the flood.

Free from the grabbing life he could hate it and all who tore at and sucked on other people. Better this drift than that solidity, this doubt than that certainty, this softness
through which he could dig to cleansing water than those clash-
ing rocks which could only grind a man down to dust beneath.

A few, a very few, of his acquaintances had succeeded in
staying out from between the rocks, in the sunshine. An
uncle back in England, with a silver watch chain: a scarred
priest who died old; a girl he once knew; Elbert. Elbert was
free, but had been crushed. He had known Elbert to be one of
the few as soon as he met him, and had envied him as he had
envied and loved the others. But Elbert had been crushed;
and he had led him between the rocks. He had not considered
Elbert's death since the event, had fastened the memory to
the funeral boat and allowed them to sink together into the
blackness. But Elbert was down there now looking up at him
with his empty eyes. The boat had come to rest two miles
down and Elbert was still crucified on the wheel, with the
fishes of the deep paying his softened flesh the homage of
the sharp tooth. He had stood on Elbert's shoulders to climb
over the prison wall, and Elbert had been chopped to the
ground from beneath his scrambling feet. He hated the men
who had done that, he now found, with an intensity at his
core which hurt. Images of destruction and wrath rolled in
thunder across his mind, the sharp focus of all his feelings
about greed and the persecution of beauty. He had never been
able to take the further step into compassion for the lost
who sought themselves through domination. He understood too
well the madmen who barricaded themselves on rooftops and in towers and shot with high-powered rifles into hurrying crowds: they were the high priests of the religion of failure. Their assumption must be that those who were successful were also dishonest and therefore deserved to die. He now, from his tower, this cay, could look on and perceive the cruel sickness of Mostyn, Mostyn's men, the crucifiers. They should die. He wanted to kill them. He faced that fact coldly.

So he was ready for the boat when it came, later in the day. It passed between the cay and the island, slowly. They were looking for something along the shoreline. It was the same boat, the big launch which had pursued them to Main Island. It cruised back and forth twice. He had crawled into his hideout as soon as he heard the engines, and peered out now with dark eyes at the three men in it.

They must be looking for him. He had been seen as he loaded the dinghy, or the fat truck driver had talked, or someone had watched him sinking the boat—but if that were the case, they would be looking for him on the cay, and they were not.

The urge there and then to swim out to the boat and tear and tear was so strong that he trembled and the branches covering him shook. He did not know he had so much hate in him. And the surging inside seemed one with the surging of
the sea: the waves were mounting, had sharper crests, flicked white every so often, and the boat on its second run seemed to have to fight harder against the slap of water. Mostyn was at the wheel: the bald head and varnished face made him a wooden figurehead staring straight forward into the onrush of waves. The other two men were looking in to shore still.

Then he knew what they were thinking. If he had been seen in the area, they must assume that he had returned for whatever treasure was left in the cave. If they knew that he had hired scuba gear, their assumption would have been reinforced. They had come to stop his taking more, to wrest from him what he already had, to make him pay for his resistance. Bubbles of fear rose through his hatred of them. They would have no mercy on him. He must have no mercy on them.

After the second run they went on as far as the bluff some four hundred yards down the run of the sea. There they anchored. He crawled out of his hole to watch them. Two of the men—not Mostyn—were putting on diving gear. They were taking no chances; he would not be allowed to mock them a second time. As well, the threat of a hurricane might be spurring them to retrieve what they could from the fortress in case the storm should be fierce enough to crash the gate closed forever.
He knew what he must do. By the time they had donned all their gear, he had put on most of his. Inflating the dinghy had used a negligible amount of air; he could swim down the waves for quite a way before he needed to submerge—Mostyn would not be looking for a man in the water behind the boat. He would have enough air. He stuck the kitchen knife through his weight belt, and waited until the divers had gone over.

He came up under the boat, and holding his breath so as not to send bubbles up around the hull he pulled himself along hand over hand to the stern. The boat was already rocking sharply so he had no fear of alerting Mostyn in that way. The splash of waves against the bow covered his breaking of the surface between the two outboard engines. He gently pulled himself up on their brackets. Mostyn was coiling a rope in the front of the boat, facing the stern but with his head down. He sank back in the water, and thought. He could not clamber into the boat in his gear other than very ponderously and at great disadvantage. There could be nothing tentative from here on.

He allowed the water to lap him down the side of the boat to the bow so that he was behind Mostyn. The bow was high, but luckily had no guard rail. Treading water and keeping well under the bow but taking care not to be caught in its downward smack he unfastened his weight belt. One two-pound weight he slid off and dropped down through the water. The
other two he slid to the middle of the belt so that when he held the two ends he had a loose-swinging bludgeon. The lead hung about two feet below his hand. He would have liked to swing it once or twice to get the feel of it and judge its reach; but that was impossible. He would have only one chance. He pushed back his face mask so that he would be able to see his target clearly—a brief glimpse was all he would have anyway. He grasped the bow with his left hand, laid his right arm straight out behind him, waited until the bow dipped down into the water, and in one movement hauled himself as high out of the waves as he could, thrusting down with his fins, and as soon as his eyes cleared the varnished trim on the bow and he could see Mostyn's lowered head he brought his arm over in a wide arc so that the lead swung high, around and down in a smooth circle and thumped dully on the bowed skull. Already as the blow landed he himself was falling back down in the water so that he could not see the immediate effect. The next thing he knew Mostyn was rising up, towering up above him, his back still turned. He could not believe it: the blow had been solid. Then Mostyn lurched sideways, and he knew he had won. He quickly swung on his hands along the side of the boat so that when Mostyn lurched towards him again he could reach up, another tremendous pull out of the water, and grab his broad leather belt. Mostyn did not know where he was, and gave easily when Sodek pulled,
lurched sideways again, toppling smoothly when the gunwale caught him at the side of the knees. Sodek ducked inside the downward swing of the big body, hugging the side of the boat until after the splash. Then he pulled his mask down, bit on the regulator, turned and grabbed again, climbing up onto the sodden back, forcing it down into the water with his knees, treading it down, then diving down on top of it, forcing it further, further until he could pull it sideways under the hull. He felt no horror as he held it there, smothering the slight threshing with no difficulty. This was how crocodiles killed their prey, he knew, clamping onto them with their jaws and taking them down among the tree roots to drown them. Soon Mostyn too was drowned. Sodek knew death by now. He released the body and let it drift away; it rolled sideways and down, slowly, its arms hanging loose. He did not look at the face.

He surfaced again, and hung onto the side of the boat. Then, again using the dip of the waves, he pulled himself up and reached in, groping for something which had been caught in the snapshot of his glimpse into the boat. On the third attempt his fingers touched it, grasped it: a speargun, propped up against the side. He lifted it clear and took it into the water with him as he fell back, his arms aching. It was a powerful gun, fired by two rubber slings, and its barbed tip glistened. He loaded it, straining to get the
rubbers back so that the tempered steel wishbones clicked into their notches, the handle hard in his stomach. Once the gun slipped suddenly sideways and banged into his hipbone, bruising and skinning it both. He accepted the pain.

Mostyn should go with him, he decided, not as a protection against discovery but as a satisfaction. There he was, that shadow swinging on the bottom. He dived down and grabbed the shadow's hand. Within its shadowiness it was coarse and solid.

He led Mostyn along the seabed towards the dark cliff as if he were taking him to show him something. He finned slowly. He wanted the others to be well into the cave.

He had no light, but that did not worry him. His memory, etched by the acid of terror, would serve him. What he had seen he could never forget; what he had never seen, but only felt, he could now see. His senses had fused in the flash of that experience. He knew the cave in every way.

He had to struggle to pull Mostyn past the first boulder, after he himself had wriggled through and put his tank back on: the body seemed unwilling to follow, its limbs developing an awkward and angular independence as if they were fighting his efforts in the gangling, uncoordinated manner of an imbecile. The glazed eyes and open mouth of the half-lit face he was pulling towards him over the rock added to the impression, so that he found himself cursing the stupid flesh. Once past that obstacle, he paused to let his breath-
ing steady. There was no hint of light up ahead. They must be well past the first junction by now. That was what he wanted.

Half swimming, half crawling on his side, his fins pushing along against the shifting bottom, he hauled the body behind him, occasionally levering himself up over smaller obstacles with the butt of the speargun; he had death in each hand, the positive and the negative, a giver and a taker, and he was leading them both into the darkness to serve him.

Soon he was working by feel only, and by what his sightless eyes told him was there. He knew when he was approaching the junction by the increased sandiness beneath him. He laid the speargun down, and pulled and pushed the body until it was sitting up with its back to the rock, looking ahead into the right-hand passage. The hands he laid out to the side in an attitude of final, despairing acceptance, the head tipped slightly back in a contradictory supplication which rang up through the thick rock. All this by feel; but there was no panic, no sense of being enwrapped in the stifling dark, no fear of the rattle of his own breathing, which was the only external apart from the roughness of rock, the coarseness of sand, the smoothness of flesh. This was his place, bought with anguish. No harm could come to him here.
He pulled himself forwards and across to the mouth of the left-hand passage, and settled down on his knees, looking back towards the spot where he knew he had propped the body, although there was nothing to be seen. Somewhere behind him in the tunnel was the other lost one, from whom he had nothing to fear. The returning divers would pass him before they came to Mostyn, but he would be sheltered from their torches by the pillar which had once split open his head. The speargun he held upright. He stilled the swing of his body and of his mind, slowed his breathing. He was a sentinel at the gate of life. None should pass.

He did not know how long it was before he caught a glimpse of light thrown back from a whiteness which could only be Mostyn's white-clothed torso. He knew that, but they could not know it. They would have to get much closer. He stopped breathing: the last of his bubbles wriggled upwards and were still. The lights passed him, each unsteady arc drawn out at its backward apex into the elongated black shape of a diver. The pitiful form ahead of them became clearer, their lights locked onto it, the black shapes bunched up sharply as if they had been touched by an electrode.

It was then that he leaned forward and pushed himself off silently, lowering the speargun, reaching out with it towards the nearer shape as if he were going to tap it on the shoulder with the point. Six feet away he centered the gun
and pulled the trigger. There was nothing other than a rush of steel and water and a heavy thud as the spear drove into the back of the diver's neck, above the pillar valve. There could be no cry, just an arching of the body, a jerking backwards, a reaching of the arms around to tear the sharp rod out of the top of the spine, a convulsion which threw him forward into the other diver so that beams of light and arms and streams of bubbles and hoses became a threshing tangle. Sodek moved in.

The movements of the speared diver became slower. His companion grappled with him, not understanding. A torch fell, went out. Sodek allowed himself one breath, then swam in as wide a circle around the contorting center as the walls of the cave would allow him, avoiding the globe of light which the second diver was spinning around him in his panic. He pulled the speargun with him, keeping the line taut, and he had soon worked his way round the back of the last of the three and up the far side. He held them both in a loop; and drew it tighter. The other helped him by turning in the opposite direction in his struggle to free his companion from whatever grip death had on him. Sodek pulled the line harder around them, and they were drawn together, the living and the dead. The living realized for the first time that a third party was there, and jerked around, flashing out with his torch in an attempt to strike his adversary with the beam at
least, so that he might know who, or what. Sodek stayed behind him, holding onto the pillar valve of his tank so that he spun always out of sight as his final victim turned. With his free hand he pulled the knife from his belt and began sawing at the regulator hose close to the first stage where there was plenty of resistance. A hand reached backward and grasped his, then another, pulling to break his grip on the tank. He drew the knife hard across the back of one set of fingers and then the other, and both hands jerked away, and he went on with his sawing. The twisting of the body became more violent, and he was dragged around and banged against the rock wall; but it did not take long for the knife to work its way through the rubber, and a stream of bubbles burst upwards from beneath the blade. It was over.

He pushed the bodies, only one struggling, away from him, and withdrew to wait. When all was finished he set about untangling the two with all the calm professionalism of an undertaker. He felt nothing, only a sense of imminent completion. He used the second torch, which had not gone out when it fell to the ground, to check his air. He meant to survive. There was enough. He set about hauling the bodies one by one deep into the cave, as far as the inner chamber; there he left them lying on their backs side by side. If there was any treasure there still, it was theirs; and they were the sea's. And the sea was his, the world was his. Not
because he was rich, but because he was free, free of the
civilization he had finally sliced through with knife and
spear, free of the past and his debt to Elbert, free of his
own fear of death. He had become a divine animal, omnipotent
and yet conscious of his own ultimate helplessness: he had
reconciled those two awarenesses in present action, and had
passed through a moment into eternity.

The circle of blue at the end of the tunnel seemed even
brighter than it had done the first time, an azure glory
which burned around him. He had taken three men into hell,
and was returned. The rest was mere housekeeping. He sank
this boat too, having lashed down or stowed away anything
which might float to the surface. He drove it out to the
dropoff behind the cay, near where the other boat had
plunged. They would never be seen again, except by cold
uncomprehending eyes.

The sea was very rough now, and running away from the
cay, away from the island, around, down and along from the
north-eastern tip, across and away out to the horizon. He
had imagined the storm if it came as sweeping in from the
open sea, and felt ambushed, attacked from the rear; the cay
was threatened with separation from the island, might break
off and be carried away southeast. He had great difficulty
getting back to it after he had sunk the launch; already he
knew he would never be able to take the dinghy back to the
mainland: this stiff wind would blow him and it from crest to crest away from the shore, and each crest would by its own rush drive him on his way. Where he was he must stay. If the sea would allow him to—it had hammered its way up to the vegetation line, and when he eventually got close he was carried up and dumped heavily among the sea grape. He had to hang onto two of the stouter branches to stop himself being pulled back for another cast. It was hard for his suddenly weary limbs to pull him forward out of reach, and it took him a long time to work his way out of his dive gear. He used the tank to weight down the flattened boat, and made sure by piling up more sand so that the wind could not get under the edges and lift it away. What rope he had he crisscrossed over the whole pile of branches and equipment, tying the ends to the leaning trees and spinning a rough net between them. He could do no more; but he did not think he had done enough. If this were the precursor of a hurricane, he would have had to drive a massive stake down through the heart of the cay and lash himself to it to avoid being taken: these trees would not last.

He crawled in on top of the dinghy, under the branches and the ropes, more to get out of the stinging spray than anything else. He did not expect to sleep; but he slept, listening all the way through his sleeping to the rush of the
wind, feeling all the way through his dreams its desire to scoop him up and fling him away. It was the reverse of a falling nightmare: he experienced the horror not of plunging from a great building but of being carried up to the sky away from the earth to which he clung. The waves seemed intent on pounding free the very roots of the cay so that he could be pulled away. When he woke it was still dark, and his stiffened fingers were clenched around fistsful of sand which trickled out between them when he moved.
The nudibranch must have known of its own beauty. It moved not to arrive but to move. There was no other conclusion to be drawn from the languor of the shell-less sea snail. It flowed, rippled, rolled—in a straight path off into the dim water. It was water itself: no separate creature struggling through a restrictive element, but a focal incarnation of the brightest of the sea's colors come together to form an image in the water which was still water and which moved through itself with complete ease. Its overall movement had the calm inexorability of a cloud's, and in this open water, with no point of reference, was as startling: you did not expect it to get anywhere, and suddenly it had done. But you knew it did not care much.

In structure it was a broad, flat strip of white tissue with the beginnings of translucency at its fluted edges and the overall sheen of purest lard. At the front end the strip reached forward in two protuberances, also flat, which formed a concavity of welcome to its own future. Above that arc two ringed and pointed horns inquired. Down the center of the strip, along the animal's back, was a vivid yellow stripe, pointed at front and back, its sharpness made declarative by a black edging drawn in printer's ink with a broad-nibbed pen.

On this dais a great array of vivid hothouse growths was displayed—plumed purple and red tentacles bunching upwards to their incandescent white tips, a crisp frill of orange
gill-blossom near the tail. The whole was like an incredible orchid with many stamens trumpeting from the curved horn of its petals. And it all moved, each part in its own way and in its own perfection—the flat white body rippled along its edges; the two arms yearned forwards; the horns pointed in turn; the tentacles washed in waves like a colored cornfield; the gills swung back and forward like the petticoats of a swaying Spanish dancer. The nudibranch slowly danced its way through the sea to its own internal andante rhythms: it was singing to itself in movement, several songs at once, with a rolling bourdon which caused it every now and again to bunch up and sigh over in a scrolled somersault.

Nothing would attack this creature. It was impervious in its very vulnerability: no teeth could meet in it: it was a projection of vibrating color and silent sound onto the sea's molecules. How can you eat a song?
CHAPTER XV

The sea did not seem to be very much higher: in the glow of a far dawn he could see the flicker of waves out on the reef, and their thumping slugged his head like sandbags; but their later rush was angled down from the cay by the push of the wind, and their black outreach brushed through the sea grape a few yards from his cocoon with no apparent intention of overwhelming him. It was only as it grew lighter that he saw the truth, how thankful he should be for the reef: the waves it was tripping up were monstrous, rearing up six feet above their troughs, curling forward like great green, white-hooded birds of prey swooping down towards him smooth and silent till they crashed, then pushing forwards to reach the cay in a confident sweep. Already, since he woke, the water had come closer and was now slavering round the edge of his shelter. The sea in the cave had been his; but not this sea—the sea in the cave had been his; but not this sea—this sea wanted him.

He had difficulty in seeing all of this clearly because of the wind, which was at the moment a great threat. He had felt how it had strengthened even before he could see its effect; the creaking and rubbing of the boughs overhead, the constant flick and flap of the broad grape tree leaves; then when he rose, the weight of air like a wall leaning on him. When he faced into the wind with his eyes closed, it was like
standing blindfold on the pillion of a speeding motorbike, and he had as much difficulty in keeping his balance; when he turned sideways to look out to sea the wind seared across his eyeballs and made him wince. He had to hang onto the wrinkled gray trunk of a coconut palm, which in its turn seemed to be pressing against him as it rocked on its heels, the leg of a drunken elephant swaying in time to a circus band. And all the sounds were there—the roar of the motorbike, the clash of cymbals, the roll of drums, the fanfares of climax. That was all outside. Inside was silence and expectancy. The worst was yet behind. He must make preparation.

Either the wind was going to increase in strength until it pushed him, trees, ropes, dinghy and all into the sea; or the sea was going to rise up until it need rise no more. Whichever of the elements took him first, he was going to end up in the water. Once that happened he would have no control. Wind and water both were rushing out and away to the horizon: he would be swept down the length of that pent line of towering and thundering waves and out through the channel where no waves broke but where he could see even from here there was a swift current boiling out to sea. He now knew how wrong he had been to trust the weather, to trust the sea. He was betrayed, and the consummation would come soon.
He untied one length of rope, battling in the lashing wind to untangle it from the bough it had held down. The storm, sensing his struggle and suspicious of his intentions, beat about him with angry wings, tearing the rope from his grasp with its beak, battering his arms with bruising branches, blinding him with bitter spray. He had to crouch down in the sea grape to complete his task. He tied one end of the rope to one of the dinghy's rowlocks, then threaded onto it the plastic water bottle, the plastic carrier of provisions, and finally the net bag. He could not leave the treasure buried on the cay. There might be no cay when he returned. He dug it up, and the wind shook the sand off for him, spinning and buffeting the bag in belligerent inspection like a mistrustful border guard. "What 'ya got there. Eh?" Nothing, he had nothing there, nothing that would help him stay alive--the wind need not worry.

He passed the free end of the rope through the other rowlock, pulling it tight so that when the dinghy was inflated the three containers would be held inboard but would be free to slide from side to side. Next, cowering from the beating he was taking, he unscrewed the second stage of the regulator from the hose and used the tank to inflate one by one the buoyancy compartments of the dinghy, and the floor. The main compartment he would have to leave: if he blew it up prematurely the wind would surely find a way of flipping the
whole thing up over the trees into the water. He pulled away
the branches one by one, and rearranged the ropes so that
they were holding the dinghy down yet were free enough to
allow inflation and easy release. When he went he would have
to go quickly and smoothly: he must get the dinghy into the
water upright. He placed mask, fins and snorkel and the
adjustable wrench next to him, curled up, and waited for the
moment, which did not come for hours.

It came when the water suddenly gushed up under him,
lifting not only him but the dinghy, the ropes, even the
trees it seemed, as if a giant hand had passed palm upwards
beneath them all. Then he knew it was time. He turned the
tap on the tank and the dinghy swelled beneath its ropes.
Immediately the wind started tugging at it, bouncing it up
and down. He had to lie on it while he fumblingly reas-
sembled the regulator and fought his way into the dive gear.
He could not see clearly: the mask protected his eyes from
the hard pellets of water, but they burst on the glass and
wept downwards. He pried the ropes over the live bulbousness
of the dinghy as it struggled to be free. Before removing
the last rope he tied a short length between his wrist and
the rowlock. If the wind snatched the dinghy out of his reach
he would never catch it again. While he was tying the knot
the dinghy wriggled out of its last tether and spun up into
the air, jerking him sideways so that he fell onto the sea grape. At that moment the sea rose again beneath him, lifting the loose branches in which he was tangled and tipping the whole bundle sideways, rolling it off the cay, with the dinghy leading the way, bobbing and ducking on the end of its string like a child's balloon, half in the air, half in the water. The pull on his arm was frightening, and the rope cut into his wrist. He was hopelessly entangled in branches, and when all was in the water he could not free himself to stay on the surface. He was dragged down, the great waves rolling over his head. In no time he was gasping for breath, but could not breathe: his head scarcely broke surface, no matter how hard he kicked with his fins. The branches were caught in the rope, the rope was tangled around his pressure gauge, his regulator was nowhere to be found. He snatched one desperate breath, half air, half water, then he sank, and sinking felt around for the regulator in the snarl, wriggling and twisting to reach behind him. He needed that regulator. It stayed out of his grasp. His fingers closed on branch after branch, no hose. He stretched his head momentarily clear, gulped one more breath, and was dragged down again. He reached over the top of his head, painfully forcing his arm backwards so that his shoulder creaked and stabbed, and found the junction of hose and first stage; then he traced it back through the entanglement, around and down to his hip.
where the mouthpiece was trapped against the side of the tank. He dared not pull too violently to free it. He fought his way back to the surface, gasped one more time, out and in, and sank. He had to work with his fingers, twisting, pulling, bending, and all the time he felt to be sinking further. He would never make it to the surface again. He had drowned so many times maybe this was the last, at last. Then the hose pulled free, and he could jam the regulator in and press the purge button so that air exploded into his mouth.

He hung there for a long time, dangling down at the end of his rope like a limp marionette, his left arm pulled straight upwards; he was festooned with branches and leaves as if for some rustic celebration. And all the while the dinghy bounced a few feet above him on the waves, jerking him so that he danced listlessly. He had the feeling of moving swiftly through the water. His wrist hurt, and so did his shoulder.

He could not stay down indefinitely. His pressure gauge showed only four hundred pounds. The first thing he had to do was get rid of those branches. He started pulling at them, rolling over onto his back to work at the mass above him. Most came free fairly easily; one, almost the last, was very awkward, a spiky, tough thing which had gotten itself well wrapped around. He had to undo the rope from his wrist
and lead it back through the tangle, then tie it on again. He could then surface, fit his snorkel, and hang onto the side of the boat.

He must decide. He could not hope to work the dinghy in to shore: the wind would be dead against him: already he was down past the bluff where the four would be rocking in their sleep, and twice as far from the shore as the cay was: the reef was close, and the gap in it only as far again as he had already been swept. He could leave the dinghy and try to swim ashore underwater with what air he had left. That would mean leaving also what was in the dinghy. The current was too strong even for an unburdened attempt, he was sure, and in any case he could never get ashore safely—the spray was soaring twenty feet into the air as the waves crashed on the ironshore, and he could hear their thunder even through the rush of wind and slap of water around him. The alternative was to commit himself to the open sea. If this was the beginning of a hurricane, then the wind could change direction and having hurled him away from the island could scud him back in again—or to some other place. That was what he must do, then: at least his hoping would remain intact, and what he had fought for would remain with him, to the end.

He needed to be in the dinghy. He was exhausted by his struggles, and hanging onto the side with the weight of the tank dragging his shoulders back everytime he rose on the
waves was draining his arms of their last strength. The tank into the boat first, then. He undid waist and shoulder buckles and swung the tank around. As he began to lever himself up on the side, sliding the tank up with him so that he could topple it in, the whole dinghy swung around suddenly so that the waves which had been coming from behind and helping him to rise in the water were now coming from the other side of the boat. The second one was enough, with most of his weight bearing down on the near side, to tip the dinghy high in the air, high over his head, right over so that it flapped on top of him, upside down. At the same time his grip on the tank slipped, and it was away, downwards, with nothing he could do to stop it. He did not feel he had lost anything of great moment. His time under water was over. He had to do now only with staying up in the open world, and finding solid rock, somewhere. He did not care that it might not be this island—a continuance of the journey his spirit had already made, one odyssey taking over from another. But he already had his golden fleece: he should regard this as a journey home. It was just that he did not know where home was.

He righted the dinghy. It came back over easily, and he had soon wriggled his way into it along its length, underneath the rope on which hung his hoard of gold and food and
water. It was a kind of luxury to lie back and ride the waves. They were not so violent at this point. Raising his head he realized why. He was in the grip of the current; that mass of water perpetually curling over the reef was being fought off by the high shoreline and was pouring out through the channel to regroup for another assault. It was not storming away in sharp and angry peaks, as it had arrived, but swirling intently off in a broad and level track which ran out to sea for a quarter of a mile and then curved around, widened, and was lost in the turmoil of great waves gathering themselves for the next rush. The sea seemed to be going in all directions, but in an organized way, not wildly. Only the wind was constant, combining now with the current to push him at amazing speed out past the reef, out and further out, so that the thunder of the breakers diminished behind him; and it was strong enough at the last to take him clear of the current as it began to circle round, and push him off into the main seas. Here things were different, different from the current, different from the half-broken, half-tamed seas inside the reef. Here the seas were ten feet from peak to trough, not so steeply sided but enormous in power and rhythm. He rode them up and down, up and down, on his plastic bubble, tipped at sheer and sickening angles, now sideways, now facing downwards over his fins, now thrown backwards and falling forever with the front
end of the dinghy high above him. Sometimes when he was down in a trough the great wave above him would flicker white at its crest as if it were going to smash down on him; but always at the last moment the dinghy curved up and out so that for an instant he seemed to be higher than any of the other waves, higher even than the distant shore, before he swept down into the next deep and smooth hollow. Sometimes too when he reached the crest of a wave it spun him around and he pivoted on air before plunging again. He had soon vomited up what little there was in his stomach, and could only lie there weakly, gripping a rowlock in each hand, praying that the dinghy would not turn over. Before long he even stopped peering back at the island. It was already too far away to be relevant. There was nothing behind him he could cling onto; he was being driven on by the final spasm of his rebirth.

Sheets of spray blowing on the wind swept over the dinghy, adding to the rain which still fell, and he was soon lying in several inches of water. He made feeble attempts to bale some of it out with his face mask, but soon gave up. The dinghy could fill, but would not sink as long as it stayed inflated, and at least it could not now tip over.

After many hours it was indeed full, and he was washing around in it, rocked from side to side as if he were in a
jolting railway car. He noticed that the sides had crept in on him so that the rope between the rowlocks was slack and the water bottle and bags lay loosely on top of him, and he was being gripped firmly by the softness of plastic among which he sagged. He blamed the weight of water for this distortion.

In the end it was dark, not that it had ever been light that day. His sensations of movement were amplified so that each climb was long and every time he fell he fell fifty feet. He wished he could see the stars, partly so that he could judge the extent of his spinning, but partly because he needed to break out of the smother of water, to know that somewhere above him was clear air. But the rain beat down.

As the night went on his feeling of being squeezed by the dinghy increased, too. The whole thing felt softer, more yielding to his exploratory fingers, and he knew it was going down. Its pounding had breached it, not in any dramatic way, but insidiously. He could not inflate it: the nozzles were designed for a pump of some kind, or a hose at least: there was nothing for him to get his lips around. It was after all only a toy; and he was only a toy. Deeper and deeper he sank in the boat, as the hours passed, and lower and lower in the water he knew the boat was dropping, and eventually he felt with his hands that the water in the boat was level with the waves washing around outside, and he was really floating in
the sea wrapped in a plastic shroud, already weighted to take him to the depths and hold him there. He faced all this with the calmness of a man walking up a long valley at whose head he could see more and more clearly and finally a rock face-up which he would not be able to climb; but he had to go on, touch it, perhaps beat upon it, but at least close with it so that it became a real and solid thing and no longer just a pattern of light on his retina. The unyielding things you ran into were the things which told you what you were; and there seemed to be no yielding in this death which lay ahead of him.

At last the waves were washing over his head as he lay swathed, and he knew he must struggle free. The dinghy, far from supporting him now, was holding him under with its dragging weight. In the blackness his tight fingers picked weakly at a knot. After a long time the rope was free at one end. He drank some water. He blew air into his life jacket. He took the treasure to him, holding it on his chest. He unfolded the clinging plastic from around his legs and peeled it back from his upper body. It did not want to leave him, and tried to curl around again as he shouldered his way out. He kicked free, treading the sodden mass downwards, finning away backwards lest it grab him again.
He soon knew that he had not done enough. The weight of the gold was too great, and took him through the side of each wave, no matter how hard he strained upwards, beating on the wall of rock which had halted him and would not let him pass encumbered as he was. He knew too what else was left to do. He untied the neck of the bag and reached in. His fingers closed first on the goblet and he pulled it out, slowly and with ceremony; slowly and with ceremony he extended his arm and opened his fingers. It went, silently. Each piece went silently.

At last there was nothing left. The bag drifted away. He took out his snorkel and relinquished that, dropped his mask, levered off his fins and let them go, then his life jacket, which bobbed away from him; and finally his swimsuit, forced down and kicked away.

Like that he could float; but he did not want to float, he wanted to swim. So he swam, pulling himself forward steadily; and as he swam and rose on the waves, the line of the horizon began to lighten.