

A Whispering Through the Branches



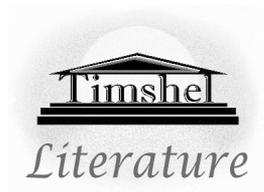
by Justin Katz

A Symphony Without Music: 1

A Symphony Without Music: 1

*A Whispering
Through the Branches*

by Justin Katz



This book is dedicated, with love, to:

My parents, William and Sally,
for bringing me as far as they could despite all my efforts to prevent it

My wife, Kim,
for all of her support as I've tried to grow into the adult world

My friends and family who did not give up on me even when I already
had (to name a few: Steve, Doug, Anthony, Chris, Max, and Evie)

Those from whose craft I've learned mine

and

Everybody who has made my life happy, sad, thrilling, terrifying,
aggravating, comfortable, and (in short) interesting enough to make
me want to communicate my thoughts and feelings to the world.

© 2001 by Justin Katz

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America in 2001

Timshel Literature
P.O. Box 751
Portsmouth, RI 02871
www.timshelarts.com

ISBN 0-9708317-0-6

Library of Congress number: Pending

Preface

It may be necessary for me to tell you, since you probably know very little about me, this being my first book and my having done nothing of note but write it, that I realize that it is traditional for a book's preface to be written *after* the book is finished so that the writer might have the air of one who has *completed* a tremendous task and is looking back on what has been learned. And it is true, I'll admit, that I am, at the time of writing this preface, not even finished with the rough draft of the novel, though nearly. In my defense, however, I'd like to point out that, since you hold the novel in your hands, it must *now* be finished, and that you would have had no idea that I had not finished the novel before writing this preface had I not been so truthful as to tell you. Even this, however, assumes that you trust me, but, being a writer, my motives must always be suspect, so both the novel and its preface could have been written at any time and in any order as far as you, as a reader, should be concerned. For myself as a reader, though, I would more readily believe the author who writes his preface on the Eve of the Millennium and confesses that the book itself is not finished than one who claims to have written both book and preface just in time for his celebratory glass of midnight champagne to be of dual import.

Of course, my emphasis on the date of this preface might be considered premature in future days if our progeny take the line of those stodgy academics who continue to insist that tonight is not really the last of the millennium. Being human, we are all self-servingly fickle and may, a year from now, declare that tonight's global celebrations were premature and that we must all drag ourselves out of our houses for yet another millennial hoopla. I, however, will still contend that the previous year's celebration (i.e., tonight's) was the true and honest night to celebrate because we celebrate not the completion of a large chunk of

time, for that would be a frightening reminder of our brief participation *in* it, but the *passage* of time and our experience *of* it. I, for one, do not care a whit whether I live through some arbitrary measure of time that we, as humans, have decided is large.

I *do* care, however, that tonight I say goodbye to being able to correctly write the *numbers* of that arbitrary time to which all of us alive have grown so accustomed (19xx) and look forward to being able to write new ones of the kind that have been impossible for writers who insisted on being true to their times and places for just under nine-hundred years, in an era when perhaps some lucky ancient logged the time and date as 11:11:11, 11/11/1111. God willing, or medical science permitting, I will one day note the time (and remind you all as I do it) of 22:22:22, 2/22/2222 (in military time, of course).

This is, to be sure, a silly line of thought, and not one that would instill any faith whatsoever in you that whatever philosophy I prove to have laid out through the following pages is of any significant truth or import. On this count, perhaps putting myself in relation to those who've come before and those who will come after me might help. That is to say that it is not just the fact that *I* will be writing new numbers (for that would be a terribly self-absorbed excuse for asking the world to have its millennial celebration tonight), but that future generations of our entire species will now be called upon to write different numbers in reference to me (and *completely* different dates for my birth and death). I realize how this must sound; I really do. How pretentious, how ego-maniacal, of me to attempt to verify my "truth or import" by suggesting that one effect that the change of a millennium, 1,000 years, might have is of significance because future generations will have to write these numbers in reference to me! But, again in my own defense, I can assure you that I am not the slightest bit concerned about future generations or what they may be required to do. What matters to me is that I will now be considered, since I failed to succeed in the 20th century, to be an author of the 21st century. This means that I will be thrown in among who knows what riffraff of writers. We, authors that is, now face the challenge

of defining a new era. We are no longer of the same century as Hemingway or Fitzgerald, not even of Kerouac. What's more, we are two centuries removed from the likes of Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain (and, if I must own him, Emerson).

But back to tonight... I argue that the millennium ends tonight because, if we celebrate at all, we ought to celebrate the fleeting seconds rolling over the momentary minutes, which pass the variable hours into marching days. And on this day, not only are the days inclining the months to turn the year, which is frequent in our lifetimes, not only is this year bringing about a change of decade, which, even at my tender age of twenty-four, I have seen twice over, but the decades have grown so many that they offer us a change in numbers through which many of our grandparents have not lived: a century. But, grandest of all, tonight we will be turning over the largest number that we people have had a reason to invent thus far: the millennium!

This all said, I'll admit frankly that all these changes of numbers in and of themselves mean very little to me or any of us as individuals. Tomorrow I will awake to the same problems and pleasures. A new year, by virtue of its being called, arbitrarily, something different, brings no magic change to our lives. I expect to be no less in debt nor any more successful a writer when I awake in the morning. But I do believe that, if we truly believe in it and if we truly want it, then things *can* change as instantly as a clock passing from 11:59:59 12/31/1999 to 12:00:00 1/1/2000. Very much like the loss of virginity (to which we've given a magnitude that is perhaps excessive for a petty biological interaction and a moment of pleasure that many, although likely more boys, have experienced many times previous), we often *feel* our worlds to be entirely different for our new experience. So, what I am celebrating, here alone with my new wife, is the opportunity to have an excuse to change my mind.

Point being that I've chosen to break with decorum and write my first book's preface before I've finished writing my first book in order to catch the moment. Tonight, though I sit before a computer at a desk

with Schubert's Ninth playing a bit too loudly for me to concentrate on the CD player, I envision myself as standing on a sylvan hill at the beginning of this new millennium, looking into the valley of my future. It is covered with a thick fog through which I am able to glimpse shadows of the conceivable events of my life — here a church, there a hospital, elsewhere a mansion — floating, much like the fog itself, through the air. An occasional shout reaches my ear, though whether of lament or cheer I cannot tell. I can see less obscure patches that I yearn to find and dark areas that send shudders of terror scattering across my skin at the thought of ending up in their midst. But, since I cannot do otherwise than continue on the path as I am able to see it, taking what fork seems most promising at the time, I cannot tell whether the choice of direction can truly be said to be mine. I can only hope that, as I descend into the fog, the path becomes more evident than it is now and that I do not stroll right past life's treasures because, by my own fault or the fog's, I am unable to see them.

Surely all of us have moments that make us wonder, if we are capable of wonder, whether any of our successes or failures are entirely our own doing. Myself, I look at the society that we've created (assuming that we've created it) and could point out the instances, which often seem to be a majority, where luck and placement have had more to do with success and failure than any degree of devotion or in-born talent. This seems to be increasingly the case. Perhaps the fog is thickening.

Even this book, inasmuch as it is written, would prove me liar if I claimed to have done more than excavate it, and it has yet to lay claim to any greater appellation than a "private success." At best, I discerned a handful of fictional moments and stumbled from one to the next. If it all comes together, it is because the imposed restrictions allowed the raw materials to only fit together as they have. Even so, I will not belittle my effort by laying it all off to happenchance. I've made choices, both about the story and about the writing, and pondered various significances and done research, but the actual point at which I made any entirely conscious decisions would be nearly impossible to find.

For example, it was by choice that I've begun my writing career with a complicated novel that is probably doomed to obscurity. But then, I had to write it, this novel, now, for I wanted to capture my own moment as a writer. Even this, though, could be said to be predicated by other circumstances. I've occasionally felt, though it might resonate as an unwise excuse to put it in writing, that should you find my writing to be of a rough and novice nature, if the story itself seems shaky, I may be justified in stating that, having discovered these faults, you have stumbled exactly upon my meaning because I have chosen to write a novel that is far too complicated for my amateur ability exactly for the statement that that makes, whatever that might be. Thus is my choice of timing really based on a contrivance that makes my weaknesses my strengths.

Without following this trail of casuistry entirely through its course, it is still questionable whether I have been the conscious actor even in my contrivances because they, in turn, are based upon a perceived reality. I have been told that, historically, one must establish him or her self as, at the very least (and little more), *capable* before daring to attempt what might be called *brilliant*. So, the intention to utilize, guerrilla-like, my shortcomings, without which intention my exact creation would have been rendered impossible, boils down to merely a desire to be renowned and a reaction to a procedure of gaining fame that has been perennial. In short, *if* this had been my way of thinking heretofore, a complicated, easily botched project would increase my chances of seeming to have only a *promise* of brilliance.

Another option in our modern society is, of course, to be brilliant as a will-o'-the-wisp is brilliant — burning by means of an over-anxious imagination in the viewer (the reader) that attributes what little true glow there is to stagnant ideas that, were they unearthed, could be easily, though squeamishly, embraced. Thus has merit become attached to attrition, and success erroneously placed on those who are meretricious. But it has seemed to me that, increasingly, as we've neared our present time, we are simultaneously too apt to pronounce genius as gibberish and see nonsense as the purest example, because unattainable, of truth.

As a result of our inability to recognize genius unless it bites us on the ear after the death of its author, we pass our judgment on a living person's genius well before we've gathered any evidence but the opinions of others.

So, if it is true that men and women will find what merit they originally sought (based largely on the claims of third parties), allow me to disassociate myself from myself for long enough to assure you that I am a genius and that this book that you may still be willing to read is the truest gospel that humanity has yet conceived during this new millennium. I have done all that I am able to ensure that this statement rings true. This is said, however, with the hopes that it will take no less than a handful of generations of readers to figure out whether I have, in the least, been telling the truth at all thus far. As for the rest of the book, it cannot help but become better *or* more honest. I promise.

Be this all as it may, my first book is nearly finished, and I face the task, over the course of this new year, of disseminating it, which, if the painfully slow circulation of my lesser manuscripts can be taken as evidence, may be nearly impossible. But, even as I write this premature preface, I take a naïve, and perhaps silly, comfort in the idea that if these words are being read, if *you* are reading them, then I have already succeeded to some degree. Thus, as I look into an unsure future, where even my existence as a writer is uncertain, I take solace in the fact that it will not be the present and pray that it will prove no worse than the past.

Well... Happy New Year, and best of luck. For myself, it is nearly midnight and I've a life to attend to: my own.

Justin Katz

Fall River, MA

Friday, December 31, 1999

*A Whispering
Through the Branches*

Prelude

Shall we open with the trees? Would that we could all branch outward from such serenity. To be so well centered. To be so balanced by our roots! O to have the faith in the ground on which we stand to dig as deeply inward as we reach out grasping toward the heavens! And to have such little care concerning those with whom we mix our leaves in our aspirations! The sweetly dominating Maple linking arms with the stout Oak and the molting Birch; and the Pines, all yearning to shed their innocent coats, as their cousins have, and show their naked wrinkles to the world.

Yes, let's open with the trees, because the Spring is looming lustily over every field. Let us take shelter under those arms as they are slowly renewed with each bursting bud until the sky is but a memory to the ground. Let us lie upon the carpeting of leaves and needles, patterned by the wind. We will create our own patterns, each of us pushing our own imprint into the soft comfort — deeper and deeper, and deeper still, until the wind, jealous of our forms, blows to dust all of our endeavors.

But for now we spread ourselves atop our plots and the wind can do no more than caress us. So will we open, each with a tree at our heads, and breathe our bodies up through the branches. Let us close our eyes to sleep and sleep until these new leaves turn old and weigh on us as memories and sleep until the weight of those fallen leaves presses us deep into the ground and sleep as the wind scatters the memories and sleep with a tree at each of our heads and sleep.

And listen for the one song we've yet to hear.

Past the birds with their endless chatter. We have heard every tune they have to offer. Do not separate them now. Take them all as one gliding wave of a lullaby and the breathing silence of one as filled by

the hum of another. Taken as a drone they are easy to ignore. Listen past their eternal chirp and past the panting pounded out in unison by their wings.

Below the bitter old brook, grumbling her journey from high beginnings to the low swirl of the anonymous ocean. Hers is a melancholy ballad: bubbling and weeping as she is dragged over the stones. With the return of her heaven-banished children, falling into her bosom as rain, her bed will not contain her lament and she will lash out, ripping trees from their uneasy stance at her side. But our ground is removed enough that we no longer need to fear the flood. And sad soft songs are the most lulling of all.

Listen. What is this new noise that blends its cries with her mumblings? Why, those are human whimpers. Shh, shh, quiet. Let us listen closely. Here is a sound of depth. A sweeping rhythm of echoes. Are those tears that we hear dropping carelessly into the stream? Yes, yes, and then a sigh. O what a sigh! A call to arms, that sigh. What power in that thrusting of air! An endless source of sorrow. So much have they to regret, and it is all there in that one sigh. We can hear in that sigh the cries of every child left uncoddled and cold. In that sigh the broken dreams of countless ages, each alike in nothing but their differences. Each sadly aware of how little they matter. And yet so many asking for aid. An exasperated sigh. A sigh begged for and cherished by every injustice. A sigher spread too thinly in her attempt to cover so many in her warm embrace. Here is your champion all ye humbled poor! Curled up by the water's edge, here is one who dashes her tears upon the stones for all of ye pariahs. But wait, she speaks:

“Who will save me?”

A cry for help? For what could such a savior need assistance? For what such desperate phrasing? Perhaps we were mistaken. No, perhaps we were correct before we started speaking, and there is no hope for the downcast. Perhaps there are none truly worth saving, anyway.

But such lovely tones of sorrow we cannot resist. Come, have we not been wooed by this voice? Come, can we deny the seduction of so

heart-torn an aria? Let us all rise up and offer consolation. Come now, come.

Ah, but we are too slow to our purpose. We are beaten to it: another approaches. Well then, we will postpone our slumbers and watch for a while. Perchance to pick up the pieces. Perchance a chance for one last souvenir.

Exposition

Chapter 1

The woman was kneeling penitently on a large stone, which jutted out into the stream, watching her tears collide ripplingly with those that rose upward from her oppositely kneeling reflection in the pool of calm water that was created by the current and its eddy, and she nearly fell in when a voice drifted across to her from a nearby cluster of bushes:

“You must learn to do without those if it is your intention to stay.”

As she turned, startled, to face the speaker of these words, she sat back and, as a reflex, tried to dig her fingers into the rock to secure her position. The fake nail from her left ring finger fluttered into the water and floated down the stream. “Excuse me?” she responded.

“The tears,” replied the man from within his thick silver beard. “You cannot scatter them here.”

He now stood at the edge of rock and earth, where the soil petered off unevenly, looking very much the part of a roaming ascetic in his sorely worn, off-white robe, his thumbs tucked each into a pocket. His long gray hair hung loosely around a deeply wrinkled, gnomish face that seemed to serve only as a contrast to his blue eyes, which had that dull bloodshot glow that is falsely suggestive of depth.

“What?” asked the woman, stalling, gathering options with each sidelong glance.

“Come, remove yourself from your headland, and I’ll relate the entire story,” and with this puzzling promise he extended his hand.

“I think I’ll stay here for now.”

Rising cautiously to her feet, the woman wiped the dirt from her hands and sized up the stranger. She was nearing a resolution that he was, at most, 5:7, when her glance intermingled with his. He lowered his hand and with the slightest of grins said, “Well, I guess you have that right on Sabbath as much as any day.”

At that moment, in the inexplicable fashion of divine whim, her rubber soled hiking boots lost their grip, and she slid into the stream. The water, still icy cold from a Winter not long thawed, seeped its chill fingers into the fibers of her clothing and strove to pull her along on its pilgrimage through the woods. Clawing instinctively at the stone upon which she had so recently been standing, the woman was relieved to find a hand reaching out for hers. She succumbed to its grasp and was raised as though newly baptized from the pool, now missing another nail: this time the right pointer.

The man stripped the jacket from his back and draped it over her shoulders, “We’ll have to get you to some dry clothing. Come, I don’t live far from here.”

“W-w-wait,” she chattered through her shivering lips, “my c-car.”

“Think not twice on it. Things like that have a way of waiting for their owners.”

“N-no, I have clothes.”

“Well, I don’t see the point in removing one set of doused clothing only to saturate another when I’ve a fire burning yet as we speak and a pantry full of food. Just a short jaunt away, really. It can’t be much farther than *ta voiture, n’est-ce pas?*”

“I ap-appreciate it, r-really, but I’d r-rather not.”

Smiling as only old men in the company of younger women can, the man said, “So you’ve found me out. I must admit that I’m not being completely selfless. I haven’t had company these many months, and I’m afraid that I must insist on the pleasure of yours. Come, I’m being as insouciant as I can, so it will be an insult to my veracity if you refuse.”

She paused, perhaps attempting to reconcile a justly imparted fear of strange men in the forest with a poorly taught standard for etiquette, then said blankly, “But I don’t even know who you are.”

“Alas, that is the way it must always begin,” he explained, gesturing toward a path into the trees. “My name is John.”

He was a small man, after all, so what had she, a full grown and independent woman, to fear?

When motion had persuaded her blood to flow and moments had helped to settle her meandering thoughts, the woman halted in her march and leaned back, a sapling as her support, asking, quite appropriately, “Who are you?”

“I’ve told you as much as you’d be apt to listen to for the time being,” replied John in a rehearsedly candid way as he stopped his own advancement and turned toward her, “Don’t worry, you needn’t fear for your safety, my intentions are wholly ingenuous.”

“Be that as it may, I’m not entirely comfortable with the idea of being led off into the wilderness by a complete stranger.”

“Young lady, the only artifice I have is to assist you and to secure for myself some companionship for the afternoon. You may, if you like, depart from my company and make your escape back to the metropolis from which you undoubtedly came, but let me assure you that we are now approaching as civilized a home as you are apt to find in the whole of the modern world. As for my *leading* you, well, I can only opine that you have made it thus far of your own volition and will most likely complete the journey through mere happenstance if left to your own devices. As importunate as our lack of acquaintance may temporarily appear to be, it is an obstacle which can only be overcome by each of us embarking on lengthy discourses, disclosing our chronologies and ideologies: a procedure that would hardly serve to evade any onslaught of influenza that may be impending in your future. So, if it helps, let us consider our cognizance of each other as inherently imparted and merely pending a more opportune moment for aggrandizing.” His speech complete, John resumed his singular procession and muttered to himself, “Leading her into the wilderness, indeed.”

Gripping the stalk of the young tree for a moment longer, the woman considered John, her head tilted like a curious puppy, and, at last, resigned herself to following. He had, after all, implied that he was alone. “Wait!”

John turned his head slightly toward the woman but continued walking. “My name is D...”

Spinning quickly, though not gracefully, with his attempt to cut her off, John spurted, “Utt-utt! That name will not do here. You must

remain anonymous until you find one that better suits you.” And he continued on his way.

Running the distance between herself and John, D. finally slowed to a complementary pace at his side and, after a few moments of consideration, asked, half-jokingly, “Are there very many rules to name-picking in your forest?”

“They are not my rules any more than this is my forest. But it is my firm belief that they are sound rules despite their dubious nature, laid forth, as they are, by one so much greater than I.”

“And who, pray tell, is that?”

“Why, Nathaniel, of course.”

“Is this his land?”

“No, this over-hallowed ground is merely the foundation upon which he builds his cathedral, and these fruitless trees just the fodder for the great fire he incites in all who come to know him. But he makes the most prudent use of this otherwise barren society, so it is only fitting that he impart the regulations.”

To assure herself that John was, in fact, alone, D. stated, reflecting in sarcasm, “Well, I’ll have to look forward to meeting him.”

“You shall. He generally comes to call before the Summer’s quite arrived.”

She chuckled. “That’s a bit longer than I plan to hang around.”

A cool breeze sifted through the branches and trifled John’s hair like so many long blades of grass in a field. The playful gust seemed to be more the cause of his dry chuckle than any precognitive knowledge as he said, “Do as you like.”

“I’d like to get out of these clothes.”

“Again, do as you like,” he said with a wry smile.

D. was glad that she hadn’t decided to change in her car. John was probably the epitome of a dirty old man, neither above nor beneath hiding in the bushes to watch a pretty woman undress. Still, as is the case with many dirty old men, there was something in John’s manner that persuaded D. that he was harmless.

Stumbled by a protruding root, D. steadied herself on John’s arm

and regained her poise. “So do you stay out here by yourself all winter?”

“No, people pass through from time to time. Even when I’m left on my own, I’ve plenty to occupy myself. Plenty of wood to cut. Windows to polish, stray nails to hammer.”

“You sound like quite a handyman.”

“In a way, but I prefer to think of myself as a straightener. I keep things as they ought to be ordered. There’s much that can go awry in an old house like ours when I’m the only one around to fix it.”

“Do you get paid for the work or something?”

“Paid? What need have I for money? I’ve a shelter. I’ve bread enough to eat. The sunrise, sunset, and plenty to read between.”

“Still, it seems a shame that you got stuck here.”

“Miss, I’ve been out there in the real world before, and believe me when I tell you that I am much better off here.”

“So you volunteer to remove yourself from the world.”

“I consider it,” pausing to form the phrase, “one of the detrimental quirks of modern society that none are any longer content to look after the way station. And I suppose you will fault me doubly for keeping it for somebody else rather than myself. But I will relinquish my own causes. They’ve never done me aught but harm, anyway. If I labor for the tranquillity of others, then I am enlarged. If I am the main source of support for the steeple, then am I not greater than the pews? It seems to me an honor to be the voice shouting in the desert rather than the close-mouthed whimpering begging aimlessly for forgiveness.”

D. let the subject drop. She knew what was at issue here. A pity when people are so fooled into another’s dogma that they willingly forsake their own right to self-realization. She wondered if she hadn’t fallen into the hands of some diabolic sect and resolved to escape once her shivers were calmed and her hunger sated. She had had previous encounters with overzealous followers and self-proclaimed oracles and would not consent to being corrupted and so was immune. Her will was strong enough that she would not turn over her personality when she knew in her own heart what was true: that people were, each of them in their own right, both beggar and messiah. Perhaps she would report the

cult to a friend of hers who dealt with deprogramming the brainwashed.

The pair, each considering the other's covenants, wandered wordlessly until they came to the peak of a hill, where the trees sprung up less densely and the sun beat down with as much force as is possible to muster in mid-March. As they began their descent down the other side, it occurred to D. that the work is never done, and can be found even in the middle of nowhere, for a person who would rid the world of deception. Perhaps this disciple could be saved simply, D. supposed, "He must be a great man, this Nathaniel."

"He most definitely is. It is a rare thing, indeed, to have the opportunity to call one so vital a friend."

"How did you come to be his messenger?"

John stopped and looked into the face of this foreign lady who had shown an interest in Nathaniel by expressing curiosity about himself, but his look held a secret that made it seem as though he understood her ulterior motive and had resolved to use it. For a moment, D. wasn't sure whether her question hadn't been stated too sarcastically. He smiled, revealing well-polished teeth that had at some previous time been left to rot beyond a full recovery, and she returned the gesture. Looking up at the sky and taking in the height of the sun, John bent to pick up a fairly thick stick. He looked along its length, plucked from it the remnants of broken twigs, and, slowly peeling the bark from one end to fashion a handle, resumed his stroll at a more conversational pace. Realizing that the bare wood was insufficient for the breadth of his hand, he stopped and extended the flaying. Satisfied, he continued his progress. D. followed and the tale was begun.

"First of all, I'm no longer young enough to be anybody's messenger, even if I were so obsequious." D. looked a little ashamed. "But I think it might have done me good, as a child, to have somebody like Nathaniel to admire, even to serve to a degree. I am much too old now to lament the fact, but mine was not a pleasant childhood. This may be partly attributable to my father's being dumb-stricken when he learned of my conception. I never did hear him utter more than a disapproving grumble.

He had been a priest in the hills of Arizona, and after a scandalous affair with one of his more elderly parishioners was discovered, his position was forever irredeemable. Oh, he married her to prevent my being a bastard, but I'm sure, had he ever broken from his verbal impotence, he would have condemned his virility and my intractable will to be born. But such circumstances come to pass as they might, and he managed to keep the three of us clothed and fed. In my life, I've recounted my youth over-much, so I'll not encumber the relation of my tale with such an irreconcilable sheathing. Suffice to say, through all the drinking and lambasting, with every shattered hope and disappointing embarrassment, taking, sum-total, every indecency of the mind and body through which my younger self was forced to persevere, mine was not a pleasant childhood. True, yes, many the cause, and *right*, have I to lament, but this is not a tale of disaffection. No, you've neither need nor desire, I'm sure, to hear the lugubrious discourses of an old man describing childhood nights awoken by an hellacious hissing. Though many were the nights I lay in bed and shivered at my cowardly inability to interrupt on my mother's behalf, there is one evening in particular that claws at my memories in a manner far more excruciating than all the rest. When I was around sixteen years of age, adolescence flared in me, and I discovered within myself the power of will to charge into my parents' room and, kicking open the door, declare that I would no longer sit idly by while the cacophony of terror reverberated in my ears, ears that my father promptly boxed and set to ringing. Yes, that night I was beaten as my mother's surrogate, but fixing door hinges with three broken fingers, two at the knuckle and one at the larger joint on my right hand," John indicated the appropriate fingers, which apparently had healed quite well as there was no noticeable crookedness, "yes, watching blood seep through my makeshift bandages and drip upon the floor was therapy enough without my describing to you every last horrific detail of the dark stain, in the shape of a crucifix but with a seventeen degree angle at the bottom, that is, to this day — as far as I know — a monument to my first and only battle against the tyranny of my father."

John took a dramatic breath, as if for effect, to compose himself,

then went on, “After graduating from high school, I managed to secure a position in the lower echelons of a local chapter of the IRS, and, over the course of twelve years, managed to work my way to a comfortable, unassuming living. I suppose I was your typical middle-class western miscreant throughout my twenties, doing nothing but passing the time from year to year, but when my third decade of life began, I lost my impetus and the local bars and houses of ill repute lost my patronage. Cleaning my face in the bathroom sink one evening, after another drudgishly lengthened day, with a whisky consolation on the window sill and a suicidal conviction in my soul, I gave up. I just put an extra pair of shoes between two spare bottles of liquor in a bag and walked from my modest efficiency residence into the great wide world.

“Here again I could elaborate on specifics; I could enumerate the stars which shone down on me as I lay stretched out beside the gray and mossy stones of a country wall wondering how much farther I would go, *could* go, on, while six pebbles dug relentlessly into my back no matter how much I tossed and turned; I could measure my progress in footsteps and perform lengthy discourses on every grain which pierced my feet once my soles had worn thin, embedding themselves in the skin until they seemed as boulders and I thought that my limping, almost as if to the beat of an indolent samba, would never allow me to walk otherwise than obliquely again; oh, I could bore you to *tears*, because I have been unable to erase from my mind one single animal that left me scarred with biting and scratching, attacking me for no other reason than that I did not belong, and likely smelled quite badly as well; nor can I forget the jeering faces of every young boy who took my debasement as a right of passage for himself, or one single passer-by who glared at me in disgust when I was forced to walk the highway or through a town; though I must admit that if I ever come across a pale green Cadillac with Pennsylvania plates and a faded yellow bumper sticker that reads ‘Go with God/or take a bus,’ I may lose control and perform some drastic act of contrition because I’m convinced that I have still not completely removed the mud that its squealing tires splattered upon me.” He looked suspiciously at D. as if inspecting her face for a subtle

suggestion that she either knew or did not know of such a car. “*Believe* me when I tell you that I could talk on for hours, for these are demons that refuse to abate their tormenting. But mine is as little a story of pilgrimage and discovery as it is of dysfunctionality, so I’ll not linger on my life as a wandering hermit making dubious progress across the heartland, getting lost on barren roads in Tennessee, and even walking misguidedly westward for two weeks into Ohio, where I was fortuitous enough to stumble upon a fellow wanderer with an extra pair of shoes that nearly fit, though they smelled of cat refuse, but speed forward to my arrival in New York City, to which, for whatever reason, I was drawn. No, the important part of my story, with the entrance of Nathaniel, is yet to come, so I’ll waste no more time in getting to it.”

John paused to pick a pebble from the treads of his boot. He examined every scar that time had etched into it and flung it far into the darkening woods.

“It’s getting late,” said D. “Are we almost there?”

“Yes, the end of our jaunt is just over the next rise. We’ll double our steps and arrive before the sun departs.”

D. was beginning to feel that she had made a mistake that perhaps it was not too late to remedy. “Maybe if you’d just walk me back to my car,” she began.

“Nonsense,” was the quick reply. “We’ve come *this* far already; it makes no sense at all to turn back now.”

Looking around, D. realized that, were she to excuse herself, she would most likely be unable to find her way back to the car. She also thought John might, at the very least, decide to prevent her from walking back tranquilly, if only by insisting, after much complaint, that he lead her back. With an attempt to subtly increase their pace, D. decided that, even though she was already fairly dry despite the lack of heat, a warm meal would be a pleasant respite before she insisted that John lead her back.

When their new rhythm was established, John continued.

“As fortune had it, the towers of the grand metropolis rose from the horizon with time enough for me to learn the routes and turns of homeless

urbanity before the cold crept in. I quickened my step until the mighty Hudson swept the ground from my path. In an urgency to reach my new home, I chose, rather than extend my march any longer on the New Jersey coast, to make the lethargically daring swim into a final trial. I remember, very clearly, the rolling waves which so fiercely attempted to topple me, cresting distant against the sky like a Red Sea cataclysm; I can still feel the clutches of the deep trying to pull me down; the demon flood strove with all its might to swallow me and replace my very breath with its essence; I was tossed, at times, almost entirely above the surface of the water by the famously violent undulations; but my march had made me strong, and my legs were able to propel me, against the monstrous odds of resistance, to safety. I finally pulled myself from the pummeling water, feeling cleansed and sedate as I lay on the stones to dry myself and rest through the calm, mildly breezy Spring afternoon. My future lay ahead, and my plan was clear. The last thing I remember definitively is spending the remainder of my funds on a cheap pair of shoes and a liter bottle of rum.

“The life of the Big Apple Homeless is well enough documented that there is little I could add that would be anything more than repetitive. The Autumn floated by as so many colorful leaves used in a vain attempt at a counterpane after an evening spent trying to discover which dumpsters were particularly auspicious in their yield. The Winter was a blur of shelters and half-filled bottles of nameless alcohol thrown, when divested of their powerful fumigant, into a drum-fire. I sweated so profusely through the Summer, because I was fully clothed for fear of stripping a layer and losing it, that the smell of the urine flowing like rivers all around me as I lay upon the ground hardly caused my nose to quiver.

“Only the Spring was somewhat livable, and I recall that it was a fine May day when I awoke, commonly, behind a dumpster in an alley. The haze over my eyes and the pounding in my head were so eternally a part of my morning ritual that, were it not for the coolness of the air, I could have been five years younger in Tucson. Luckily, this fine morning, I was still armed with ample remnants of my bender and was fully

recovered within half an hour. Not without difficulty, I pulled myself to my feet and resolved to take a walk through the park. Staggering around for a bit, I was woozy enough to feel only moderately ashamed as I sat to rest on a bench by Strawberry Fields. I lost myself for a while in my palms and was watching the amorphously flowing forms of red on my eye-lids as if hypnotized when some unascertainable impulse forced me to belabor my head to rising, and I was caught forthwith in a glaring match with a disheveled young waif who could not have been a day older than sixteen years of age. The lad smiled impishly and skittered into some bushes. In my state I had neither desire nor ability to give chase, and, having never been duped into believing the fable of rainbows and cauldrons, I acquiesced to my morosity and rolled along with the day. By nightfall I had separated myself from that moment with ample wandering and spirits to have completely forgotten not only the child but nearly the existence of Central Park itself as well.

“Some of my compatriots, I use this term because people in that state have neither friend nor acquaintance but all feel an ardent kinship, had managed to encourage some kindling to blaze and a ghoulish glow was cloaking every face and aspect of the alley with a crimson guise and casting long fiendish shadows twenty feet high on every wall, the patrons of our Medieval ball shuffling by like so many dwarves, phantoms, and succubi, as if they danced a satanic jig to celebrate the flaming, crackling warmth, and it was only by the sharp contrast of his azure hue that I distinguished my little leprechaun galloping on an invisible horse to where I lay.

“‘Come,’ he said, ‘I have chosen you as the harbinger of my shibboleth. Come. Sleep.’

“He placed his hand over my eyes, and I was thrust at once into a blessedly dreamless slumber. I awoke by the side of that very same stream in which you were recently immersed, not knowing how long I had slept, where I was, or how I had gotten there. Miraculously, my head and vision were clear. At that moment, I was able to distinguish through the golden sunlight even the fringes of the sparse clouds. My new friend was splashing about in the water and called out to me, ‘Hey,

you're awake. Come in and clean yourself.'

"It seemed the right thing to do, so I stripped myself from the clothes that I had thought to die in and slipped easily into the brook's embrace. Handing me a bar of soap, he waded to a midsized stone and waited for me to finish. If you've never gone over-long without a cleansing, you have no idea the sense of rebirth and atonement which overwhelms you when, having been dragged through the mire of society, you are offered the opportunity to renew your husk. I rinsed with one final submersion, and, upon rising, looked about for the child, but he was not to be seen. Exiting the water, I shivered and, walking a bit from the shore, heard a crystalline voice from behind.

"'Are you not going to assist me?'

"I returned to the water's edge, somewhat perplexed by this mild tom-foolery, and, as I pulled the rapscallion from the water, for no inferable reason said, 'You are my own dear son with whom I am pleased.'

"'No,' he cajolingly corrected, 'no, it is I who am pleased.'

"Something in his tone drew me into an elucidative rumination, and I was still dully considering the price of a revelation when I became aware that my clothes were not where I had left them. Noticing my quandary, the boy told me that his name was Nathaniel and that I would find an entirely new costume were I to make a short excursion.

"I admit that our bareness caused me a little consternation, but as we progressed, his unassuming manner put me at ease, and he entrusted me with his design.

"Quite some time has passed since that fateful day, but, memory lapses notwithstanding, I think I can recite verbatim his explanation." John cleared his throat, "I can feel within a great change arising," he quoted, "'and it was in search of a place in which to nurture my new convictions that I was first drawn to this forest. In my wanderings I had the good fortune to stumble upon an old, abandoned, and neglected estate, and it is there that I intend to repose when the outside world too much inhibits my augmentation.'" He gestured toward the horizon and continued, 'that other realm, the real world, as it is so incredulously dubbed, however, still claims a hold on my allegiances, so I will need a

surrogate to watch after the refuge and persevere in the progress of its renovation in my absence.’

“It was at that moment that we broke through this wall of underbrush up ahead and saw the house, our new tabernacle, and I knew that from then on it would be my home.”

John cleared the way through the evergreen thicket of which he was speaking, and the last traces of daylight seemed to linger just long enough for D. to get a pure glimpse of the large building. And while something indescribable in its design was undeniably engaging, she was too weary from the walking and too dazed by John’s excessive narrative to be appreciative of anything other than the chance for an intermission.

“So here we are at last,” whispered John, and the pair crossed the short yard to complete their journey.

Pausing on the porch, D. perused the line of trees from which she had just emerged. *Just a meal and a rest and I’ll go*, she thought, feeling the weight of the bones in her legs, *or maybe even a short nap to regain my strength. Then I’ll find my way back to the car.* The world seemed to gray around her as she watched. The sun had finished setting, but the world had yet to admit it. *Well, it looks to be awfully dark tonight. Maybe if John has a room with a door that locks I’ll stay until morning. What could happen in one night? Really, just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean that I can’t handle myself. So it’s settled then: I’ll stay the night, and in the morning I’ll assert myself and have John lead me to my car.*

With this reassurance, D. followed John through the doubled width of the front doors, which closed behind them as if doing so at the urging of some ghostly hand.

Twilight has fallen and the owls call out their alluring chant, so different from the birds of the day. So refreshing. A raccoon waddles around the porch and into the woods, his path erased by the breeze. The wind has calmed and now whistles only delicately through the still naked branches — it is cool and strokes our eyes awake. The trees are silent. The lumber of the dark house creaks and groans as it settles.

Quiet, listen closely. Do the sounds of the night blend their phrasings? Does a voice materialize from the seamless nonsense? Sit back on the soft earth, plush with dead grass. Close your eyes, but not to sleep. Close your eyes for there is nothing to see but those minute details that we would surely fail to see were our eyes open. Close your eyes and listen as if you are running your ears like fingers across the cracks and scrapes — the story lines — of the house: here is a story we've yet to hear.

Chapter 2

“Call me what you will. Some would say that I am the spirit of this house. Others would say that I don’t exist at all. Perhaps you will consider me to be only the voice that you give to your own observations or the consciousness behind those random creaks and groans that haunt your ears. Call me what you will. Named, I’ve been, the Pequod, but I am not the house itself, though we twain are inextricable; no more is an echo the mountain face nor the voice. I am the echo of time, of experience, and for myself, I call me Ishmael. Listen closely, for, whomever or whatever I am, I’ve tales as much as any voice.

“Listen and give me voice, for when a man has lost his way; when the world no longer holds for him a single mystery; when stones are merely cold, hard, and rough surfaces for the sitting and walls merely planks for the sheltering; yes, when a man has lost his way, the world seems to him only a stage upon which he performs. He reads as if he himself were the author and lives as if he were God. Grand pity, then, upon that man who will not believe that walls can speak (indeed, do you not see the full extent of the modern man suggested here? Ask yourself: do you believe in me?).

“All sympathy to the man who truly believes that a building’s conveyance of ideas ends with the intent of the architect. Is a work of art ever truly finished? Nay, lest that work be set off behind plates of thick glass (or hiddenly preserved deep within an undiscovered cavern). Or perhaps not even then. Is not a symphony reassessed with each performance? Does not the conductor add to or take from the notation? Does not the listener translate it to his own emotions? Is a novel not expanded with each published criticism? Each pinned upon the dust cover of the previous until six hundred and twenty-five pages are augmented to tens of thousands? Or if not this, then consider the original

text. Does a crisp new paperback tell the same tale as an antiquated leather bound edition? Do not forget the underlines! It must be true that every new crease, fold, or stray mark changes, somewhat, the message.

“Argue if you will that even here it is the influence of outside agents inscribing the wall with character, that marks are placed upon the walls and not derived from within them: a wall merely a slate. Yet what are human beings if not similar tableaux? Who does the marking? Look up. Stare at the wall to your opposite. Perhaps you will someday describe, in writing, the crack which runs its length. Is not the wall then making its own mark upon you? Then you upon the paper? Then that paper upon a reader? And so on. Is not a wall that has been smeared in chocolate by a child making its own smear upon the mother who then relates the story to a friend (perhaps the stain sinks too deeply for bleaching)? Yes, yes, and yes, again! A creation and a person are the same in that they are nothing save the sum of their influences. Every work of art is the inevitable outcome of the experiences of its creator! A wall merely relates the story of all forces which have ever acted upon it, but by relating that story it acts upon the viewer. So verily, any structure can offer its own tale if there be an apt translator. Each has its own identity.

“What of soul?, you may ask. What of the deep bottomless soul that pervades the self-conscious? Don’t thoughts have their value? Can this great fluid body of judgment ever be scarred like so much crumbling plaster? No, you say. Nothing marks a person’s mind with any perpetuity. It is the flow of intuition that cuts a canyon of ingenuity and whittles away at continents of static belief. Ah but within your argument is your own undoing: the moon conducts the tides, the density of the ground influences the river’s path, and those obscure, gliding, beautiful things that elude the senses in deep indiscernibility ripple, though temporarily, the surface. A titanic wave is merely the piled up plungings of unseen phantoms, and thoughts are merely the visible surge thereby caused. A soul is as mutable as puddles in courtyard turf and so, though I’ll not dispute that humans are more fickle than walls or stones, we, material souls, are all either splashed, whittled, or chipped away.

“There are no original thoughts, only new undulations of old ideas, some higher and more powerful. This is why it is the easiest thing in the world for a man to *appear* wise, as if he hides a great secret within him, for the wisest thing to hide is an empty space because the true nature of its contents cannot be divulged if the water holds its stillness. Because people cannot claim their hard formed thoughts as their own, they merely pretend that a nothingness is the fruit of their wisdom and they the only ones able to see that it is of value. However, in a building, nothing can be truly hidden. Pry up the correct boards, and all is there to see.

“For this reason, I declare that a soul is a fifth wheel to a wagon and a structure all the nobler for concluding not to develop one. A building holds its mysteries without inhibitions. Take a look. Make what you will of them, they are all given freely beneath that roof, though shingled with riddles. Look again at the crack in your own wall: it is plainly displayed. Dost thou find it distasteful and so wish to cover it with paper. Perhaps the floor-boards upon which you tread are knotted and so you carpet them. Do so. Then look at your handiwork. Does not the crack show through? Do not the contortions of the planks create so many frozen waves in your matting, even if only because you know they are there? Now perhaps the years will pass and the cracks and bends will expand. Perchance you’ve forgotten their origin. Oh the temptation to rip off the superficial covering in order to find the sources of your vain agony and level them! But you will never render the plane even, for even these superficial marks but afford the basis for far other delineations, and all indecipherable.

“So, finding that you will forever fail to cover faults, leave them be. See if you cannot glean their story from the details, for it is only consideration of these that leads to a thoroughly appreciative understanding of signified revelations. Supply your own allusions. Gather your acquaintances together and each impart an origin. What caused this flaw? From whence this scratch? Ask a million men and each will give you a different reading: one rendering after another and another, all from one text. Just as there are all sorts of shades with which to color, so are there of men in this one world, so are there tales to

be told.

“But perhaps the crack shames you too much to lay it bare. Look thee then upon this house here and, finding yourself so far from home and your steps so untraceable, feel free to ponder. For it is a rare structure indeed, a mansion of the old school, long-seasoned and weather-stained, old antiquities renewed with each added feature in a curious quaintness of material and device. Tricked forth in the remnant souvenirs of all its ageless inhabitants. Marvel thee at the dark hue of its outer walls? ‘Tis merely a touch of the noble melancholy appropriate to a house called the Pequod.”

“How it came to stand here is unknown; rather, one explanation is as provable as another. There is no road leading easily to or from it. Perhaps (for nothing truly true can be bluntly stated, perhaps) the layer of this foundation was wandering about the Catskills and chanced to catch a glimpse of an eagle diving into a black gorge. Skirting down the hillside and up the next he at last found himself at an impasse, even at such a tremendous height, with no idea as to his location save that he was still a great distance from the tauntingly hovering bird. Finally, losing the bird in the sun, he decided to stand his ground, far from any corrupting society: no one near him but Nature herself, and her he took to wife in the wilderness with the whole of March to honeymoon. While reclining in the embrace of his moody amore, he looked to the long-drawn vales (which could no longer be said to be virgin) and the mild blue hillsides, listening intently to the leafy sighs of the trees, the gurgling of the stream, and the over-all hush and hum of solitude. Many a lovely day he may have spent thus engaged.

“But a man will ever stray when pastoralty’s motherly affection takes him to breast and indulges him with calm and contentedness. Within merely a month of marriage, linking arms with the red-cheeked, dancing girls, April and May, he sent forth his sprouts and tried in vanity to escape his homely bride. Thus scorned, the abandoned Gaea, though matronly, still not above the pettiness common to all gods, took from Apollo his song and translated the punishment of the fickle Daphne to

her own adulterous lover. But improving upon her example's design, to separate her forbidden mate from his mistresses, she forbade him the branches on which they might have begotten unto him the buds of their affection, instead substituting lattice-work and lath for living bark. Hence was he offered up as a haven for kindred spirits, and the coming of his mistresses in the moist Spring would serve to further rot him through rather than arouse him to life and ecstasy.

“Here fellows inflicted with similar meanderings of the eye would meet with the sympathy of sailors in their common pursuit and their shared privations and perils. ‘A home I’ll be for hermits, an asylum for the romantic, melancholy, or absent-minded souls,’ he would have cried as his head peaked and his mouth opened into a row of sparkling windows.

“And so it stands, this house, eyes facing off into the hills, chin rested atop a steep declivity. Reversed, as if rushing from the plateau on which it stands into the next crevice.”

* * *

“Here a brief discussion of architecture may prove meritorious, though it must be by necessity an incomplete one as the equal part of that science is conducted from an internal perspective as yet unafforded. To the untrained passer-by, this house appears to resemble many of those yet extant examples of Early American domesticity, and indeed they have much in common; but it would be overly dismissive to type-cast it under this category because that would fail to take into account the various quirks prevalent mostly by the manner and material from which it was raised and the purposes for which it is used. Granted the feel is much the same as that of the Parson Cape House of Massachusetts with the dark weathered hue of its exterior walls; it shares a certain educational designation on a level often rivaling that of any building on Jefferson’s Quadrangle; in addition, especially given its name, it must be considered as sharing some of the nautical flare reminiscent of that Old Ship Meeting House of Hinghamshire, but that Old Ship has been toppled, and its ribs open downward, whereas the Pequod still floats on; but look here, there are two open towers of medieval stone on each western corner, and the windows that grace the eastern side break any

pretense at the symmetry customary in Early Americanism: with five on the second level and two on the ground floor, on which the entry way throws off any hope of evenness as a third entity (and groups of three, I'm told, are never even-handed). No, there's more to this building than any puritan or forefather ever intentionally imbued: having sprung up mythically as it did.

“The solid construction, in contrast to the perishable foliage all around, exudes a sense of eternity only accomplished by those grand, skyward pointing pyramids of ancient Egypt, and certainly the designer had those far away erections in mind when considering the house, though it is an elongated block in shape. How small the approaching visitor feels when enshadowed by this magisterial imposition, especially when approaching from down hill, but alas the morbid design of those deserted tombs makes the difference irreconcilable on account of the drabness of their effect: there is more here than raw magnitude. Perhaps you may suggest that with their intricate friezes, Mesopotamian ziggurats would bear more close an aesthetic resemblance; however, not only are those too frighteningly covered in human-headed, winged lions, not only are those temples inverted with their most important shrine singly on the outside top, but look closely and you find that this comparison must be discarded by the actuality that it is the *corners* of a ziggurat which generally point to the four dominant directions of the compass and not the *walls*, as is the case with the specimen being here considered.

“Now, if the mountains over which you've traversed remind you of a rolling green sea, so might the house remind you of the Cretan culture of which Homer offered the slightest description in the *Iliad*, yet, verily, must the intelligent design be more like the democratic clarity of Athens' buildings, which welcomed any and all to enter. And yes, the columns that support the portico roof are almost overly Doric in their wooden-beam simplicity, but the steps insinuate a Roman mentality by their broken positioning on three sides only: a Grecian ideal would have demanded that they be wound completely about the circumference. But the Roman architects' tendency toward derivativity disqualifies them from the description, for this house here is the archetype of originality.

Additionally, the intricate Composite style of many Roman columns and the walls that grew up to twenty feet in thickness, as those of the Pantheon, were indicative of an inapplicable and overstated philosophy made apparent of that race in Virgil's *Aeneid*. What's more, Roman homesteads tended to lean toward modesty, a quality which hardly coincides in this case.

“Perhaps looking at churches will provide a more directly enlightening path to a designation. And yes, it is true that the walls of Early Christian churches faced the same directions of the compass as this secular temple and that they share an emphasis on interior, but the Christians' use of plain wooden roofs hinted at an impermanence hardly similar at all to a pyramid. Indeed, perhaps, the pagan churches of India, such as the Dargan Temple of Aihole, as they were scatalogically intended to be the seats of gods and the spots where worshippers could enter into their wills, were more wisely designated by translating a wooden erection into obdurate stone. But the Indians were too free with their decoration and so ruined any semblance to the somber-looking mansion. The same is true of the Byzantine Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and the well-proportioned but morbidly decorative Islamic Taj Mahal.

“Verily, so can consideration of the entire Renaissance be ignored for the opulence of the Louvre and the two-dimensionality of Pazzi's Chapel in Florence. Even Post-Renaissance Baroque, aided by Palladio's books and the sculptor's eye of Michelangelo for the manipulation of light, even these did not prevent the gaudy exuberance of Bernini and Borromini. Only Versailles, with its windows facing out over extensive gardens, bears any similarity in view to the structure in question. Though the trends of those times may have been somewhat improved by the intimacy of Rococo and the pedimented porticoes of the Georgian style, still the ensuing nostalgia for preceding cultures undermines any perceived redemption of the opulently vulgar Victorians. Only Eclecticism incorporated a sufficiently scholarly sympathy for design to overcome a reliance on the past, just look at the tasteful facade of General Lee's Mansion in Arlington, with its unpretentious wooden imitation of the Greeks, and by contrast you will see that surely this northern structure

outdoes any created through the 15th to 18th centuries.

“The studious listener may have noticed that one important architectural genre has been conspicuously absent from this discourse so far, and it is here that the grandest comparisons may be made. With its infinite aspect and lack of definition, the Gothic style had an ambiance that is directly parallel to that of the house. In English hands, the minsters were surrounded by vast lawns and trees similar in texture to the forests of New York State, and towers were erected on the western end in both locales. Indeed, when considering the complementary harmony of John Ruskin’s cathedrals in his *Stones of Venice* and his insistence on the human beauty inherent in flaws, it looks as if this house has found a home. Even the Gothic spirit, with the entire community hauling stones upon their backs for the construction of Chartres, could hardly fail to be, as a social statement, emulated by the Pequod’s folk. Truly, what are radiating chapels, pointed arches, and flying buttresses but the excessive, but forgivable, flamboyance of the Frenchmen who first instituted the Gothic?

“Yet, still does this partial deliberation fall short. For what is this house but the very transfer of the Forbidden City of Peking to America? And what are the Appalachian mountains but an earthly version of the Great Wall of China? And how, pray tell, does one account for the deceptive normality of the thing? It looks much like any large house, yet, it is not. No, this speculation is doomed to failure. Truth to tell, the Pequod, having sprung from a human head, will ever defy description. But is not the same true for all *natural* mysteries? And aren’t all *human* conventions and sciences really only a far-sighted search for themselves? Ach, in codifying, the possibilities are endlessly obscure. So approach, ye traveler, approach and look for truth, not explanation.”

* * *

“Properly approached from the east, the largely looming dark homestead presents you with a verandah, slanted slightly with age as if in a scowl, and not a single plant that hangs from the beams looks more than a bead of sickly green-brown saliva frozen lustily upon the upper lip of a leech. The windows on this side, denied even sunrise by the ever

drawn curtains and bitter for their lessened view, seem to glare down in jealous scorn at any creature with the ability to shift perspective.

“When one ascends from the sparse lawn to the buckled steps, the ear is accosted by groans of agony, and it is a fortitudinous traveler indeed who dares, unaccompanied, to cross the loudly protesting boards to the double doors. Progressing nearer the entrance, with eyes somewhat raised, a wooden sign, delicately carved but hardened by time, comes into view:

ALL MY MEANS ARE SANE,
MY MOTIVE AND MY OBJECT MAD.

“Woe to thee if thou shouldst stop to consider. Best here to trudge on, to rush, and thus pass the conundrum: to know not what lurks in the heart of the engraver. Enter and do so quickly, because you can feel eyes in the trees. With walls so close to surrounding you, the spirits who’ve followed thus far find a new, desperate confidence and close in. So enter. And ignore the creaking of the hinges and the wild wind which seems to whip through the aperture, for once shutting the door on the tornadoed rustling you may yet find a mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve about you, deep inside you may still come across an eternal mildness of joy.”

“Here above, the ceiling hovers, slipping, across from the door, into an accentuated statement of space broken only by the chandelier dangling down above some stairs, encandled for there is no electricity within these confines but for the occasional flash of lightening. Bathed in the murky illumination of a stained-glass mosaic window, the stairwell leads abreast the far wall, curving counter-clockwise within the semi-circular niche to the landing overhead.

“Though more mention of it will surely be made later by those more qualified to discuss it, the mosaic glass levies a more enumerative account presently, as some certain significance lurks in all things set apart and sanctified by seeming to be misplaced. Much as in nature, when the sun

goes down behind this window it illuminates three glass mountains, clearly minted after the Catskills surrounding. On the leftmost peak, an owl looks across at the steeple which protrudes from the rightmost. The central summit, somewhat lower than the others, supports a clear circle of convex glass directly in the middle, which completes the trinity but once a year when it catches the sun and sends it radiating in a single spotlight, illuminating the entrance and darkening the entire room by contrast.

“Through an opening to the left, an elegant table that once served in recreation of luminaries of every profession, each hanging by another’s words, is covered with papers strewn about haphazardly, and the dozen chairs, for all their lush velvet luxury, now host only to boxes of random books and papers enveloping arts and sciences of all types, as if promoted to supporting the stores of ideas rather than the medium through which they are often expunged.

“To the right of the stairs, two swinging doors lead to and from what proves to be a kitchen in which can still be found, through a thorough search, evidence of dishes once prepared to please the palates of any and all resident intelligencia.

“But strangest in this entrance hall is the tendency, when but a spine’s length within the confines, to sneeze, and do so uncontrollably until stumbling a few feet deeper into the room. But do you notice that the boards on which you stand are particularly loose and pliant? No? Well, would that you were provided a key to the more interesting aspects of this bastille, for the explanation of the outbursts is no farther than beneath your toes.

“Lean down and the effect is heightened; stand up and you are but farther from the truth: for underfoot are the bones of the first wanderer to cross this threshold. A man who took not the dry-boned hint and laid his own beneath the very noses of every visitor. One morning, upon waking from a restless slumber, he felt that old comrade (who but visits once, and then only to pay his respects) nearing. Old as he was, and as yet unblessed by senility, the longer he was linked to life, the less he would have to do with aught that looked like death. No. No coffin for

this old soul. His place, he knew, was as usher, and so, tearing up the boards before the door, he awaited his settlement. Often would he pass the better part of a day leaning back in his trench waiting for he knew not whom. But, as none were quick to arrive, and because when a man suspects any wrong, it sometimes happens that if he be already involved in the matter, he insensibly strives to cover up his suspicions even from himself, he drew the wooden slabs in above him. Thus lying did he spend a quarter moon, until, deciding that time was poorly wasted in this fashion, he resolved to pass on forthwith. How the wonderfulest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yielding no epitaphs. Dear man, if only you'd taken the time to inscribe a plaque in the center of the great hall, then perhaps your company would bow their heads in reverence rather than cursing the sudden onslaught and rushing to surpass your station."

"Onward. Overstep, with the imagined dinner party, the rabble and pass beneath the stairs. Through a magic portal as if into another world you find an opening. Sparse are the clouds which gather above this central eye, yet tall are the flowers. An odd place for a garden, yes, but odder still for the imposing willow that mourns its enclosure dead center of the courtyard.

"The strange effect is immeasurably heightened because no longer is the way consistently open to the sky. Perhaps it was the aristocratic second denizen who decided to enclose this eye with a glass cataract. Surely it was he who preferred a sky-light to illuminate inwards, for his was the type that considers little of value in an outward view. Whatever its origin, the translucent dome was over-spread; so, protected from inclemency, you may take the time to look around.

"Fearless now of showers, with the space being continuously habitable for the studious, the perimeter grew shelves upon which sit volumes of literature, each thrice perused: first in black ink marked, then in blue. The third examination, when so deserving, is underscored in green, until scarcely a word remains bare. However, and this is truly rare, if an author has fabricated an uncommon amount of insight, his

most discerning propositions are emblazoned with a red tetradinal consideration. But cursed be all things which cast man's eyes aloft to the heavens to be scorched, for thus reading while reclining under the glass ceiling, the bejeweled and oft-times tiaraed mistress of the manor was inadvertently massacred by her progeny, who, offering a billiard ball to the gods from outside of the house, discovered that his youthful reach fell far short, and his mother's vaulted canopy came crashing down.

"The lesson well learned from this tragedy, the house was deserted. Grass sprung up between the shards on the ground, and weeds invaded the garden. Perhaps counseled by some prophetic oracle and encouraged by that inexplicable force of nature called Fate, some future tenant found the ingenuity to contrive a system of translucent and animate plastic lenses which, with the simple turning of a crank, allowed the open air access when tranquil and denied it when acrimony prevailed. Thus did mankind convert the jaws of death into an easy chair, but take care if you tread this carpet unsoled, for still may you be pricked by the conceits of the past."

"Tea time over, take your exit. Traveling along beneath but out from under the second story balconies that shade the archives, letting your fingers only briefly caress the grand piano that stands open to catch the willow's tears, make your way through another portal into a more securely hooded chamber. Here, encompassing the entire width of the western end of the structure, is what once served as the next stop in the recreational series following reclination in the solarium at the time of day when that indoor-outdoors had lost its direct line to the sun. The only windows are those that look westward down the steep hill at the back (or front, depending upon your attitude) of the house. Some years ago, this wall of panes, as it may be properly called, offered a magnificent view of the sunset, and so the room was a lovely setting for an after dinner soirée. The design, so natural an orifice for the promotion of acoustics, presented a mellifluous resonance for the lovely voices of young maidens in their Summer dresses, and often, were the tune either

particularly deserving of, or in need of, a rhythm section, the spectators would add their own timpani by tapping their refined leather shoes upon the large black and white marble tiles: doubtless it was also here that the dwarves played their somber bout of nine-pins, the rumbling of which lulled Rip Van Winkle into his famous slumber. But within the last twenty years, the ever-growing partition of trees had gained a height so as to leave the room in an eternal twilight during those months that generally yield felicity most unhinderedly, forcing those who would watch the sun descend to its evening's rest to rise by means of the two wrought-iron spiral staircases curling steeply up each far corner to the next level. Considering the gloomy aspect which, now, through most of the day, prevails, it seems only natural that even the furniture would have removed itself from this shadow-laden ball room.

“With every door swung open, and by virtue of the broad hallways that connect the dining room on one end and the kitchen on the other to this side of the house, as well as the openings created by the stairwells, even the most discreet of whispers throughout the building may be discerned by any who might stand gazing out at the foliage from this room. And it was here that a grand, ungodly, god-like man took to fixing himself statuesquely: not so much seeming to think as to feel the world groaning about him. Indeed, if his nose were not nearly pressing up against the glass, irreparably fogging it with the acrid condensation of each breath exhaled, he may have been some ancient biblical pillar turned to salt for his refusal to flee the room at its loss of daylight. Perhaps he stood so still for so long to augment his paltry baseness thus furthering his infinite inferiority to his young cardinal: hereby, with his close relation to a Divine Inert, though in a subservient manner, he ensured his own fame. But still there can be little doubt that this incurable idea of submission often gnawed at his insides, only relieved by the firm belief that through his constant residency he was the real owner and commander of this vessel, for it was his very conscience that daily stained the walls. On occasion, he would twist his head as if hailed by some silent spirit, then turn and pad bare-footedly, with but the slightest of limbs, across the cold and dimple fissured floor, white robe trailing behind

in billows. Returning with a new acquaintance each time this happened, and a human eye in which to look, his purpose was thus renewed and the ball room would be host only to the occasional flurry of dust.

“In conjunction with the cycles of nature the company would come and go, leaving John to remove that mask which form and usage insisted he wear to disguise his more private ends, and he would return to the gnarls of trees and marble alike. Often, at these times, a tear or two would blur his vision, but whether they were for the resumed solitude or the renewed affirmation of his status, is impossible to divulge. Leave him now, sunset nears and demands that you climb to its spectacle. Take the left stair. With your hand on the banner proceed up and ignore the residual sob which explains from behind that, ‘to whom all eternity is but time, all creativeness is mechanical.’”

* * *

“My how the very air changes once the upper chambers have been gained. Across from where you now stand, and above the entrance hall, with a doorway accessible from an open hallway, sits the gray dishevelment of John’s quarters, rarely visited and so partly free of the dark disposition that his presence might have lain blanket-like over the room. But so must this splotch, this obscurity, be forgiven, as it keeps the two layers in harmony and eases the roamer from the bends.

“Five doors on each side separate the twin eastern and western master bedrooms, but these doors are all firmly closed. Allow them to open of their own accord. Were you to pass them by, you would have to walk along a balcony overlooking the courtyard, and, thus forced with each movement to be enlightened by the sun (or moon if your cravings are of the midnight sort), would be presented to any who linger yet below. But our path leads up at the moment, and not but for curiosity would you find reason to cross to the darker side of this level.

“Before climbing the last coiling flight, take but a moment to glance, yea briefly lest you be blinded, through the ever-open door to the bedroom with the sunset view. This room, though of the same proportions, is only the more light and airy in contrast to John’s across the yard, with three broad windows standing watch over the courtyard and a similar door

swung wide open on the northern side. Were all the windows boarded and the doors forever locked, still would the zephyr send an elfin flourish through the translucent silk canopy around the bed. But as it is, be blessed by the scent of the breeze that caresses your eyes and bids you close them. Ah, turn away newcomer, you are as yet unprepared. Take to the flight.”

* * *

“Up, up the foremast of this solidly rooted vessel and through a hatch. Spring now, and the fog lingers to cloud the vision, as ever all clouds choose the loftiest peaks to pile themselves upon. But breaking through to the open parapet and breathing in the purest crystalline air that March has to offer, you find that the sky looks lacquered. Of clouds there are none. Look thee to the horizon, the nakedness of unrelieved radiance, the view infinite in scope. The insufferable splendors of God’s throne! The mountains: a picture of their own merit frozen in time, memories to which you may return as oft as you like (damned be those clouds of mutable form). Earthward, only the hue is apt to change; for now, even so early in the season, a browned sea of grass beats against the mountainous islets, each haloed by its superimposition over the sun. Whether these were the visions which so captivated the prototypal pioneer will forever remain a mystery, but it cannot be doubted, nor can it be ignored, that from this lucky point of view you will catch passing glimpses of the immortal profiles of whales defined along the undulating ridges.

“Just so, while leaning on his elbows and gazing out at this great gulf, at the time covered in a shroud of dead-Winter white, did the young man who carved his name, **NATHANIEL**, in the stone of the tower, mutter, ‘let this be mine, the Pequod.’ Perhaps it is a question whether the mist which consistently lingers by the stair is but a remnant of the semi-visible steam produced by this callow hermit’s ponderous profundities, for there is none about the mizzen-tower, but it is certain that being left completely to himself at such a thought-engendering altitude the lad tackled greater ruminations than the average youth.

“Many years ago, he arrived as a sireless and damless fugitive on a crisp Christmas morning and proceeded, as if drawn, to this very spot.

What'ere his crimes, the icy steps melted to his footfall and the sky flew open to herald his arrival as he thrust his arms heavenward. He was a child of superior natural force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart. All nature's sweet and savage impressions did submit, fresh from her own confiding breast, to his scrutiny. His new life was begun. He learned a bold and lofty language formed from the circumspect and ponderous works to be found downstairs. When his was the sole heartbeat of the manor, he spent many a night-watch beneath the constellations in stillness and seclusion, but as with all men tragically great, his visits became so much the sweeter for their brevity. His became an absentee presence, but still the very walls rung with his resonance. Every lingering vitality owed its debt to him, for just as his first sign of maturity brought the Spring, so did every facet of the house with a need for renovation rush forward in an unabashed flurry to be renewed, old as they were, by his touch."

But these have all been phantoms; and now it is night, and the blossoms are sorely wanting Nathaniel's magic caress. They quiver in expectancy at his proximate approach only to shy away at the passing of another, an unknown figure. John sleeps fitfully in his cabin (for both his physical and phantasmagorical surroundings are strange and unaccustomed). The woman has drifted off easily behind the closed door nearest Nathaniel's empty room on the northern side, inscribing her essence upon her new chamber, untouched and anonymous in its evenness, with each slumberous turn. But a third, vigilant occupant marks his bare-footed strides in the thawing turf of the courtyard. A single night owl coos softly from its perch in the willow. The stranger glances upward into the branches and the bird takes to its wings.

A cloud passes from the moon, nearly full and bright in its reflection of the sun, and two green eyes peer out at it from behind a shaggy mane of blonde hair. He pauses. From a distance comes a low groan, as if a mountain is inching its way through the waves of a pasture. The restless interloper turns, but winces from a sudden stab at his heel. He reaches down and removes a daggeresque piece of glass. Holding it

up to the moon he examines it, five inches long and sharp as a razor. His foot will heal; he pockets the shard. Whistling the melody of some well rehearsed and often heard choral symphony, he strolls to the old ballroom where he leaves his trail in warm pellets of salient blood upon the cold, colorless marble.

The sleepers sing out mildly in unison. But now it is night. Time will roll along. The green eyes stare through the panes at the dark forbidding trees. Time will roll along. What's to be will be: it's all fixed, all arranged. Then again, perhaps the die is not so surely cast.

Chapter 3

D. woke from a frightening dream and sat bolt-upright supported by her arms, one of which had still not yet awakened and so buckled. As she lay on her side her heart beat like crazy and she panted at the scattered remains of her horrific illusory life. She had always believed that dreams should be taken flippantly, if not altogether dismissively, but of these dreams of hers she did not know what to make.

She had begun the evening, as it seemed, naked in a white world though wrapped in silvery cellophane with malenky little flowers trapped between her skin and the plastic. Writhing and gasping for breath she got only the smallest sniff of pollen, and this got her to sneezing. With each sneeze and then gasp combination the wrap around her head loosened, dropping off in little pieces. When the piece that covered her ears fell away, she could hear a single piano all around, and she was very pleased and proud and feeling intelligent-like to be able to give a name to the music, though she had to admit that it was one of the more famous works by one of the more famous composers. It was the first movement of Beethoven's Pathétique Sonata (Opus 13 in c-minor, although this she did not know), very dark and passionate. In her wrapped-up dream, and wrapped in sheets on her bed, she flopped about like a fish on the deck of some very cushy cushy like ship until two very soft doves came to rest on her ears, and these were really the mattress on the left and pillow on the right. All peaceful now, she rolled over and the birds flap flap flapped away letting in the music. But this time it was all nice and calm, being the beautiful second movement.

Out of the white around her, which now she knew was only a thick thick fogiwog, came walking statues of men in the height of ancient Roman fashion, followed by a man she knew, though she could not recall ever seeing a picture of him, was P. B. Shelley, the poet, with long

dainty scissors in his dainty hands. Off with the cellophane, and under was a real sharp evening gown, and on with the dance! A twirling and a dipping in a slow sleepy two step, and then a faster but still sohlenumkuous waltz. When the movement ended, Peebee stepped back and clapped and like bowed as if to say, “Thank you for the dance my lovely.”

Then the music was very sad but skorry, or quick, and D. saw that her gown was now all grazzy and ripped, and her not looking much like a princess but more like a peasant. Just then the piano started to swell and grow-like, and this seemed as if it was meant to introduce an army of little fairies, but without wings, who all linked arms to dance a jig around her feet. Suddenly, the fairies or elves made to grab at her, so she just stepped real easy over them all and started to run. Another crash of the piano is what finally woke her up.

But the piano was still going on with its song and she was quite sure now that she was awake, so she snatched up an ample white robe that was just lying on a chair at the foot of her bed. She tugged on the door, but it wouldn't open until she unlocked it with the key that she had left in the hole. When she had gotten out onto the balcony, she noticed that the light that came into the courtyard was that colorless white or gray dim twilight before dawn comes with its flaming ball. A thin ground mist lay above the grass like dust on a carpet and twirled about the maroon-slacks-covered legs of a youngish man at the piano under the willow, his longish hair swinging here and there in front of his eyes in time with the music. Just then, from the perpendicular side of the courtyard, on the balcony outside his room, John shouted down through the empty willow at the pianist:

“Alex! Damn it, there are people sleeping up here!”

Alex, as was apparently his given name, looked up, not at John, which would have required a standing and a ceasing of the playing, but at D. Something in his eyes, all radiant green like puddles of leaky anti-freeze, sent little lizards running up her spine as he played the final downward scale and chord.

Jumping up, he knocked loose the mast and the lid of the piano

slammed shut with a loud Crash! As he disappeared into the ballroom, D. noticed that his shirt was all chalky and frilly like a pirate's. John shrugged his shoulders in a silent guffaw and went back into his room. Puzzled, D. returned to hers, turning the key in the door behind her.

Tightening the robe around her, D. lay on the bed without any inclination toward sleep. Very strange was all this, indeed! A piano player up and stroking away before the sun was full on the horizon. An old man, who promised fires and food, delivering only brandy, fake eggs, and stale toast the night before. But the room to which he had led her once his persistent talking had begun to obviously drain her of her consciousness was pleasant enough, when finally she was taken to it.

She sat up and looked around. The walls were covered with an old and peeling patterned paper that had faded to a dull pink. Opposite the entrance was a window, draped with an ancient dark green curtain, looking out into a gnarling mesh of branches, the closest of which had grown so near that a strong wind might send it crashing into the room. There were no closets nor wardrobes nor dressers. Aside from the bed and chair against the eastern wall, a free-standing mirror and a desk touching the western were the only furnishings. On the desk was the candle, thrust into an opulently ornate silver candelabrum with a coffee cup ring for the grasping, with which John had guided her the night before.

Next to the candle was a neatly folded white dress that D. had not noticed before, though she was sure that she could not have missed it. In fact, she was positive that she had thrown her own clothes, which had actually dried before she had had the opportunity to ask for new ones, on that exact spot. But she had locked the door. Yes, she had just had to unlock it to get out. *Well, John would have a key, I'm sure*, she thought and another shiver shook her at the thought of him standing over her while she slept.

"That's it, I'm out of here," she said out loud, springing from the bed.

The dress was of an out-dated fashion, but was very pretty nonetheless. Not too frilly, but with a lovely cut: the kind of getup

people are only looking for excuses to wear. She slipped it over her head and shoulders. Looking in the mirror, D. thought that she now looked fit, in style and era, to dance with Shelley in the Spring English country side. Forgetting for a moment her predicament, she giggled to herself and was about to invite her reflection to the ball when she got the strong feeling that somebody was watching her from behind and thought she saw but the slightest of shadows in the glass. She spun and, of course, found herself alone, but her desire to leave this place at once became a desperate need, and she fled the room.

Padding quietly past John's room, for she had not wanted to take the iron staircases for fear of bumping into that Alex fellow, she made her way as quietly as was possible down the front stairs, across the entrance hall, and out the creechy protesting front door.

Outside, the cool air slid its fingers under her dress and up her legs indecent-like and the skin goosed up all over her body. Crossing the damp dewy lawn, she realized that she had no shoes for her feet, but pushed on through the bushes from which she had emerged the night before. Once out of sight of the house, and in the new world of like trees all lonely and lovely and naked, she listened to hear the shoom of the stream, but heard it not. Glancing around, she picked a way that looked right and started off in a rapid march.

As she walked, the forest around her began to make strange sounds, and she told herself it was just the trees and the earth and the wee-little animals all waking up and rubbing their woodsy eyes and nothing to get all poogly about. But when the thicket thickened so did her fear do the same and she imagined she heard first a *swish swish swish* from the left, and then a quick *swoosh swoosh swoosh* from the right. Not wanting to lose her composure, but not really caring if she did, being all on her oddy knocky and all (she hoped), she started to run, keeping a very careful glaz on the ground for roots and such but not really noticing the little branches and twigs that were whipping at her bare arms.

Soon, hearing a gurgle gurgle that would be the treacle of the creek, she quickened her step in that direction, and all around her was like a whispering of like filthy slovos, as she fancied, though it was only windy

shushing. But then, with the treacle becoming more like a quiet roar, she heard sure the cracking of a breaking branch and faltered. Whipping her head to and fro she turned and ran contrary to the sound.

The shushing of the wind began forming slow and slurred and breathy words, all around like coming from the air itself, though none with which she was familiar with.

Just my mind hearing nonsense that isn't really there. Probably the wind, she thought, but ran a bit faster.

“Ohhhhhhbollshhygrooodieeeshorrrorrrrsshhowwlusssciousss-glorryeee.”

These were starting to sound like words she might know, some of them, so she knew she wasn't verily by her lonesome. Through the greening brown vesches and mist, she saw a twinkling of glass, and there was her car. She made for it real skorry, but from behind came a chumble chumble and a ringaling. Turning, she saw that Alex veck holding out her keys and making them glitter and clang by twirling the ring about his finger.

“What's it going to be then, eh?” he asked, like leering like.

But answer not did she, just by dashing off sidelong only responded. From behind, a little smeck and then the sound of chasing footsteps. And then a voice singing gromky-like, almost shouting at the peak of its goloss, and this melody she knew to be of the same composer as the Sonata but this time his 9th Symphony:

Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium,

A branch or rock scraped at her ankle and she stumbled anxiously.

Wir betreten feuertrunken,
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!

The goloss stopped, and hope of hopes maybe so the singer did, but then, and closer still, started up again, so she thought maybe his hands

were near touching her shoulders and clawing at her trailing skirt in time to the melody:

Deine Zauber binden wieder,
Was die Mode streng geteilt;

Panting, gasping, veering right then leftward D. cut suddenly.

Alle Menschen werden Brüder,
Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.

And then there was like a leaping sound and crash, Alex was on her back and her face down on the cold dusty ground. Laughing, he forced her over and like straddled her with his knees, all the time humming the tune of poor Ludwig Van who never did anything to anybody but give them music. He rip rip razrez skvatted tearing like at her dress. She slipping and slithering. Up went his arm to tolchock her hard on the litso. She twisted and pushed and kicked and clawed and pushed and kicked.

“Oh my merzky yarbles!” he shouted, falling over and like grabbing at his crotch, and she was free and running.

She ran and ran until she hadn’t heard anything from behind for some time but the bushes and branches bouncing into their natural place behind her and was turning her head to look back when she hit hard into strong grasping arms.

“What’s gotten into you?” asked John’s voice. “Stop it! I’ve got you.”

She stopped punching at him and stammered out, “Alex,” pant pant, “just attacked me.”

John looked over her shoulder and, seeing nothing there, suggested, “We’d best get back to the house for the time being.”

After a bit of quick walking, John told her, “When Nathaniel departed last Autumn, he told me that if a man should come and be unwilling or

unable to choose his own name, then I should call him ‘Alex’ if it suited him.”

“Hmm?” asked D., who hadn’t been listening; she had been too occupied casting glances all around, trying to see everything at once and imagining that there was a shimmer of a shadow behind every tree.

John, either having not heard or not caring to hear her, went on, “In the midst of January, late at night, a rapping came at the front door, making me jump, because I had been reading an eerie book by candle light.” He paused to consider, “What *was* it that I was reading? Hmm. Well, it must have been Poe. Or was it Brown? No, it was definitely Poe, but which story I cannot recall. Whatever it was that had gotten my hairs on end, I was still a little apprehensive when I walked through the entrance vestibule to answer the door. Standing on the porch, all hunched over and shivering from the icy rain that was falling was a young man, looking as if he had been badly beaten. He didn’t speak, but I fed him and gave him a change of clothes and put him to sleep in the room nearest mine on the southern side of the house.

“He didn’t say much throughout the following weeks, and generally in an odd nonsense slang when he did speak. After a while it seemed apparent that he wasn’t going to name himself, so I started calling him Alex to no objections. Strange lad, Alex. I hardly ever see him during the day, but he appears most evenings to play the piano, which, by the way, he tunes himself. Pianists, as a rule, are generally mild in temperament, and it is very pleasant to have music while I read at night; so when next I see him, I’ll ascertain what it was that possessed him this morning. I’m sure there’s a perfectly plausible expla...”

“That’s not good enough,” D. interrupted. “I want you to stop your babbling and get my keys back right away and then walk me to my car. He wouldn’t even have them if you hadn’t snuck in last night with this stupid dress!”

“Excuse me?”

“This dress! The one that you put on the desk in my room last night while I slept!”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. I read in

the solarium for a while last night after you went to your room and then I went to my own bed. Besides, I heard you turn the lock, and I haven't another key."

"Then how do you suppose this dress was there in the place of my own clothes this morning?"

"How am I to know? I slept directly through the night and there's no way Alex could have done it, because there is, as I've said, only the one key. Perhaps it was the work of a phantasm," John suggested with a slight gleam of intrigue in his eyes.

Now the anger pulsed in D.'s temples, and she had nearly forgotten the danger she might be in for all her exasperation. "What? I don't care. That's it! I'm not going to listen to any more of this shit! I'm going to go lock myself in that room, and you are going to go find that psycho and get my car keys!" They had just pushed through the bushes into the grassy yard of the house, and D. stormed up the first step to the porch. "Come get me when you've got them." She stopped in front of the entrance and turned to face John, "And get my shoes back while you're at it!" Slamming the door behind her, D. tramped angrily to her room and locked the door behind her, throwing the key on the bed.

She paced circles in the room, looking at the dirt and grass stains all over the white dress reflected in the mirror when she passed that, glaring at the entangled branches and budding leaves through the window when she came to that. Conducting herself thus for what was perhaps nearly an hour, D. heard a tentative knocking at the portal.

"You better have my keys!" she announced, but there was no answer. Placing her palms against the wooden door, she called out, "John?"

Still receiving no answer, she pressed her ear against the door and fancied she heard a like breathing sound. She started to shake as she looked through the klotch hole, this being a very old-type lock. She saw nothing but the top of the willow and the doors, all closed on the other side of the house. Then suddenly, a green glaz sprung to the other side of the hole. She fell back on her yahma.

"Go away! You better leave me alone!" There was a smecking like chuckle from the balcony. "I mean it," she warned. Now there came a

scraping as of glass on wood. She started to cry, "Leave me alone!"

Just then the front door could be heard shutting. There was a shuffling of feet from outside her room. A moment later, John knocked at the door, "I can't descry him anywhere."

Through her tears she managed to creech, "He was just here."

"Oh," said John, "did he give you your keys?"

Almost laughing, she told him that Alex had only come to the door. "Maybe I can catch him then," said John and then sauntered off.

After another long period of time, John's voice called from outside the room, "I can't find him. I'm sure that he's only playing around and that I'll be able to get your keys when he comes back, for supper most likely. Would you like to come out and have some breakfast? It's almost eleven o'clock."

D., who had skirted backwards to the wall across from the door raised her head from her knees and told him that she was very happy where she was, thank you very much.

"Then would you like me to bring you something?"

"OK."

"Do you want eggs and toast?"

"No," grimacing at the thought of instant egg.

"Then perhaps a sandwich?"

"That's fine," she said, and then added, "and some water, please."

John acknowledged and went downstairs to prepare the meal. He returned with a knock and said, "Open up, I've got your aliment."

D. was in the midst of standing, when it occurred to her that it was very possible, if not likely, that John and Alex were in cahoots. "Why don't you just leave it outside the door," she suggested.

"Oh please, dear! You don't think that Alex and I are in league against you, do you?"

"How do I know you're not?"

"All right, fine. I'll just leave it here. If you need anything else just cry out. You may need to open the door, a smidgen at least, for me to hear you." And with this she could clearly hear John's exaggerated

stomps moving toward the front stairs.

She rose and picked the key up from the bed. Placing her ear to the door and looking through the key-hole, she satisfied herself that there was nobody outside her room and cautiously opened the door, seized the plate and glass that were waiting for her, and made sure she was securely locked in. She pondered the food: smelling it and tasting for strange flavors in every bite. The sandwich was only peanut-butter and jelly, and the bread was a bit stale around the edges, but, as she was more hungry than she had thought, it was truly a calming relief to eat something. When she finished, she placed the dishes on the desk and lay down in bed.

Wondering how best to proceed from here, she drifted off to sleep.

D. awoke with a bit of sun in her eyes, so she knew it had to be sometime in the middle of the afternoon. She wiped a little crust from her eyes and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. After a moment of head clearing, she tried to call out to John, but a glob of phlegm prevented her from making an ample sound. Encouraged by her dreamless nap, she went to the door and opened it enough to fit her head. The weather had turned quite fine, and the smells of early Spring had drifted into the courtyard. Sticking her head out and glancing up and down the second floor landings, she noticed John sitting in a plush but worn chair on the opposite side of the tree from the piano. She called his name a bit more unobstructedly, and he looked up from a book he had been reading.

“Have you gotten my keys?” she asked, having to raise her voice to compete with the sound of birds.

“No, Alex hasn’t been by yet. Why don’t you come down for a cup of tea?”

Remembering that she had no reason to trust him, D. just asked John what time it was.

“I think it’s about three o’clock. Are you going to stay up there all afternoon?”

“At least until you get my keys.”

“Have it your way. Would you like something to peet?” he queried.

Perhaps she misheard, but something in that last word brought suspicion slinking up her throat and through to her eyes, “what did you say?”

“Drink. Would you like a drink?”

She glanced up and down the hallway again, thinking that perhaps she was being tricked, “No thank you, I’m fine, really.”

“Well, if you’ve no desire for company and have resolved to spend the entire day, and perchance, for fear, another night in that room, would you like a book?”

She thought about this for a moment. “Yes, please.”

“What would you like to read?”

“I don’t know, what have you got?”

“Miss, there’s quite an extensive library here. Why don’t you just come down and look for yourself. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Looking right and then left again, she stepped out to the railing, but a strange sort of rustling of the willow frightened her back to the doorway, “Why don’t you just grab one and throw it up here?”

John, appearing somewhat perturbed, strode to the far bookshelf, looked for a moment, and grabbed a book. D. checked the landing again and stepped out. Up came a formulaic romance novel, and back into her room went D., locking the door once again behind her.

Night has come once more. John brings the woman another sandwich and some more water, feeling unsettlingly like a prison warden as he leaves the food and a bell-boy as he takes the dishes that she has left on the floor outside of her room. He returns to his place in the ballroom and D. slyly cracks open the door and snatches the food. Her fingers, in nervous picking, have shed the six fake nails that were left after her tromp through the forest.

While she munches on the sandwich, of the same flavor as the last, she jumps at a tapping on the window pane. Silly woman! It is no more than a twig on a branch on a tree, undulating to and fro with the wind. She rises and glides to the window to check the lock and to close the curtain.

Two green eyes watch her by the light of the moon as she pauses to look out into the darkness. She closes the curtain. Alex lingers for a moment and then strolls away into the night whistling the first movement of a symphony by Wolfgang Amadeus (Number 40 in g-minor) and twirling something shiny around his finger.

The moon glitters against the keys. The branches continue their swaying in time to the melody. The wind shushes still through the branches.

Chapter 4

The first thing D. noticed, after the throbbing pain in her bladder, of course, was the feel of the hour. The darkness pressed in against her open eyes and held, in its stillness, every hair on her body unquivered and irresponsive. The late sounds of night had ended and the early sounds of morning were yet to begin. The air tasted bland, not bland so much perhaps, but tepid and clement like lukewarm water, even lacking the mildly unpleasant taste of stagnant saliva. In everything around her was a wordless and indescribable lateness that can only be expressed as one unified sensation: it smelt late.

She slipped from the bed and into the robe and threw open the window curtain. The moonlight blew in and cast her shadow clear across the room. For a moment she considered opening the window a crack, but the roof overhanging the verandah beneath her outside the window persuaded her to tighten the window lock instead. And the branches were ever so close.

Her bladder tugged her thoughts inward. She stepped out from the reach of the moonlight and toward the door. The night before she had used a bathroom adjacent to the kitchen, but she dreaded the thought of sneaking down the old squealing front steps and even more the idea of having to pass through the ballroom and hallway below (crossing the courtyard was too frightening a prospect to even consider). Briefly, she mused about slinking out onto the roof and urinating into the gutter, but, femininity notwithstanding, an image of Alex lingering among the bushes out there sent a shiver through her. She decided that, this being a mansion, there must be a toilette near at least one of the two master bedrooms. As quietly as she could, D. unlocked and opened her door just an eye's breadth. In the moonlight, she could see that the corners of the second story walls connected angularly on each side of John's room, with no

unaccountable doorways. She silently shut the door and held the knob, thinking. Sliding her head into the corridor, she scanned first her hall, then the opposite, and finally the courtyard: not a soul to be seen.

She slithered out of the room and pulled the door closed behind her, turning the knob as she did so to avoid unnecessary noise. Glancing about, she inched her way toward the west end of the house with her back against the wall. At the point where her room ended, the hallway opened up into a rectangular arcade, the width of Nathaniel's room on one side and her's and the landing on the adjacent, with a window overlooking the mountains on the far wall and a spiral staircase descending from a hole in the ceiling through the floor at the center. She stopped and inhaled deeply. Nearly *expecting* to find Alex waiting for her, she peeked one eye around the corner. Set back a bit, so as to be inconspicuous, was another small room.

The door to this room was open merely a sliver, with the darkness seeming to undulate outward from the crack. By sheer force of will, inspired by natural needs, D. slowly swung the door open enough to make out a sink and a toilet. Stepping into the dimly moonlit room, she noticed an old porcelain bath tub with curved legs supporting it and an undrawn curtain hanging at its back. Just as with the one downstairs, this bathroom was trapped somewhere between the advent of indoor plumbing and that of hot water faucets: the water ran and the toilets flushed, but the water needed to be pumped by hand and was deep-crevice cold. The door closed quietly at her touch, and D. was thankful to find that it sported a bolt-lock. She did what she had to there in what little light was provided by a small, murky window and, without flushing the toilet, snuck quietly back into her room, much relieved.

Early the following morning, D. lay in bed trying to cipher a way out of her mess. Were she positive that Alex and John were both in the building, she might be able to sneak out the window, or through the house, were they both out of doors, but, either way, she still would have been without her keys. That fact left her with two options: try to walk out of the forest with no shoes or hide in the woods and lay for Alex,

attempting to collar him from behind and escape by car when she got the chance. It occurred to her that, for all she knew, Alex had passed her keys off to John, or even to somebody that she had yet to encounter. However she eventually escaped, she wasn't going to stay cramped in this room much longer.

She heard a sound, like that of a galloping horse, outside and made it to the window in time to see a large black dog charge into the bushes. The foliage swayed pliantly with the dog's roundabout motion. Hearing a loud double whistle, D. watched as the dog's head appeared through the twigs, looking expectantly toward the eastern end of the house. The dog bounded in the direction of the whistle and returned again, then, sniffing at the grass and bushes directly below D.'s window, looked back and forth between the ground and whoever was at the front of the house asking:

“What d'ya smell there, ay, Jim?” in a strikingly masculine voice full of southern drawl.

D. leaned to the side and pressed her left cheek against the glass, trying to see the speaker. The new arrival stepped into a spot of early morning sun. His bare toes curled in the stiff dead grass with the rolled legs of his over-sized denim slacks swinging bell like over them. Unhooking his right thumb from his single suspender and running his hand through his slightly auburn silvering hair, he said, “I reckon somebody been doin' some spyin'.” He looked up at D.'s window. She shrank back into the shadows. With the sun at his back, the man had an unwrinkled boyish appearance as he smiled, winked, turned away, and whistled, “C'mon, boy.” The dog ran after him.

Moments later there was a knock on the door. “Hello, anybody there?”

D. held her breath. The door knob jiggled.

“Well, I hope yer in there, 'cause there ain't no other key but the one fer this door.”

Crossing the room, D. told him, “Not to worry, I've got the key.”

“Oh, well hello, missus. You figurin' on stayin' in there all day, are ya?”

“Not if I can help it,” she responded cynically.

“What’s preventin’ you if you got the key?”

Pausing for a second, wondering if perhaps the answer were truly that simple, D. responded, “Because there are two gentlemen I’m not all that anxious to bump into.”

The man outside her door laughed, “If one a’ them gentlemen’s John, I reckon you ain’t got no reason to be afeared of more than the other’n. Who’s he?”

“A younger guy, not much out of his teens, if at all, named Alex, I think.”

“Well, as I don’t know him, I can’t offer no assurances about *his* demeanor, but I brought some surplies with me if yer hungry. Between Jim an’ me, we oughtta be able to protect you from the chile so’s you don’t get ransomed to death.” Jim the dog barked in agreement.

Ignoring a hungry growl in her stomach, D. declined the offer, saying that she’d rather stay put until she’d had time to consider her options.

“All right then. I’m gonna fix myself an omelet with bacon ‘n’ cheese. Yer welcome t’ one if y’like.”

D.’s mouth began to water, and she nearly swung the door right open. Something in her upbringing forced her to stop. “Could you bring it up to me?”

“Sure, if that’s whatcha want. How ‘bout some orange juice on the side?”

“That’d be wonderful, thank you.”

“By the way, my name’s Huck. You picked your’n yet?”

Picked it yet? she thought, then remembered how John had nearly fallen over himself to keep her from telling him her name. “No, but my real one...”

“Hold it. Needn’t do what we ain’t supposed to. Rules is rules.”

“Don’t tell me you’re stuck on these silly rules, too. Is everybody here nuts?”

“Well, I can’t account fer nobody but myself, but as fer me, I’m inclined to believe in the words of a wiser man’n me, that ‘it don’t make no difference how foolish it is, it’s the *right* way, and it’s the regular

way, and there ain't no *other* way.' Once you go messin' around an' doin' things diff'rent, yer liable to get it all muddled up."

"Let me guess, you're quoting that Nathaniel guy."

"No'm, but I might as a-well be."

Huck started to walk off, but D. called after him:

"Huck. Wait."

"Yes'm?"

"How did you get here?"

"Over land, mostly."

"No, I mean, do you have a car?"

"Yep, I reckon I do, but it's a way far off in the hills as it's supposed to be."

"Huck, would you be willing to take me to a nearby town? I could catch a bus or something from there."

"You got someone expectin' you elsewheres?"

Before she had thought, "No," slipped from her mouth. "No, I don't. But I'd like get out of this place nonetheless."

"Leave here? I reckon you ended up here a-lookin' fer a change, and I reckon that you found one. Fer what would you wanna go somewheres else fer?"

She couldn't come up with a quick answer straight away; Huck might not have expected one. He trundled off toward the kitchen.

Because everybody I've met out here has been absolutely crazy, Mr. Huckleberry Finn, she thought, and my name isn't going to be Alice.

D. put on her dress while she waited. Leaving the plate outside her door without any wheedling, Huck had told her to holler out her window if she needed anything else. The omelet, made with real eggs, was perhaps the best she had ever had, and the orange juice tasted freshly squeezed. She looked out the window. Jim was ambling toward Huck with a medium-sized stick in his mouth.

Crossing the room, D. looked through the keyhole then unlocked the door. She gathered up her dishes, and was opening the door when

she heard something charging up the stairs and down the hallway. Before she could react, Jim knocked the door open and jumped on her, toppling her over. Her plate bounced and rattled in circles until it was flush on the floor. She screamed a bit, but the dog was licking her face in such a friendly way that the screams turned into giggles. When the giggles and licks subsided, D. looked up and saw Huck standing in the doorway. Jim scurried back and forth between them excitedly.

“Oh I see,” Huck said, “you’ll let in a dog but not a man.”

With her laughter still evident in her smile, D. stood and brushed off the seat of her dress, “I didn’t have much of a choice.”

Up close, the wrinkles of later middle age were apparent at the corners of Huck’s hazel eyes and in the smile-lines by his mouth. His hair was neatly combed, and D. thought that he might look more himself in a suit. The oversized white button-down and lone suspender seemed contrived, somehow.

“Y’want me to take ‘im outta here?”

Reminding herself that this was a *new* man and that she had a generally trusting personality, D. decided that there was something about Huck that made the idea of him being dangerous ludicrous. Perhaps it was his laughing eyes. Feeling somehow more secure, “No, that’s alright. To be completely honest, I could use the company.”

“Well, that is somethin’ no man nor woman should oft’ be without.”

D. sat on the bed, and Jim offered his head for scratching, “Have a seat if you’d like.”

“Thank you, kindly. I think I might just do that. D’ya like me to close the door?”

Reflecting for a breath D. responded, “No, I don’t see any need for it right now.”

They were both quiet for a moment, watching as Jim leaned to one side and scratched his own belly with a hind leg. D. thought he looked like a lab/shepherd mix, but she suspected that the truth was more likely that he was just a big black dog. Huck cleared his throat and said:

“So I reckon you’ve been havin’ some excitement ‘round here last few days.”

“I’ve only been here for two nights, and I wouldn’t call it exciting as much as disturbing.”

“I’m always of a mind to hear a good story, if yer of a mind to tell’n.”

“There’s not much to tell, really,” D. said and proceeded to relate the highlights of her arrival and residence at the old house, concluding with, “So now the questions are whether or not John is in alliance with Alex and how I get home.”

Huck laughed. “I realize things can change consider’ble when a body’s off gettin’ sivilized, but John’s been through this all so many a-time I don’t imagine he gives more’n a hoot if you stay or go. Sticks to his own, mostly. As fer th’other guy, Jim ‘n’ me’ll keep an eye on ya. Prob’ly don’t even need ta, but better safe than sahry.”

Turning her head a little to the side and considering Huck, whom for some reason she was beginning to trust, D. asked, “So what is this? A club, or a cult, or something?”

Huck laughed and smiled, but this time something in his eye hinted at a keen intelligence behind his country-bumpkin posture, “Le’s go upstairs, so’s I can show you somethin.” He stood and motioned toward the door.

“Upstairs? What’s up stairs?”

Looking a little surprised, Huck asked, “Well, surely John showed you the towers?”

“No, he didn’t. Just the front hall, dining room, and courtyard.”

“You must’a been able to see’m from the other end of the yard.”

“It was night when I got here, and ever since then I’ve been too concerned with what was going on around me to sight-see.”

“Well, there’s your problem. C’m on.”

Huck walked out the door and toward Nathaniel’s room with Jim at his heal. D. followed, inspecting the halls and courtyard as she went. Standing at the spiral staircase, Huck told Jim to “Set an’ keep an eye out,” and began to climb the stairs.

The drop from the towers, mostly by virtue of the steep hill directly behind the house, would most likely prove fatal. The mountains swelled

and abated all around. The world was warming and greening. D. shivered and made a complete circle around the tower, looking down into the courtyard as she passed it.

“So what’dye see?” Huck asked her when she had settled at his side, looking west, the sun nearly directly over them now.

“It’s pretty,” was the answer.

“Darn, woman, anybody could see that! What do *you* see?”

D. realized the game that Huck was initiating and looked around at the mountains. One to the southwest peeked sharply and a cascade of rocks coated the side facing the house. Pointing to it, D. said, “That one there is bald.”

“Pfft! That one’s bald! Well, shoot! I reckon next you’ll tell me that the grass is a-turnin’ green and the sky’s mostly blue where there’s no white, and that the white’s a-cause a’ clouds!”

“What do you see, then?” She was beginning to fluster.

“D’you see that smaller’n off in the distance there?” he pointed to a hill next to the balding mountain, “the one that’s got the small peak in the middle with two big lone trees afront of it? And the rounded hump at the back?” D. said that she did, and Huck continued, “See how it shoots up perty much straight all around, on all sides but the back?” Once again the answer was “yes.” “So what does that look like to you?”

“I guess it looks a little like a steamroller going the other way.”

Looking slightly disappointed, Huck told her, “Maybe it does, at that, but what I see’s a steam*boat* ferry without any lights.”

D. thought it did look like one, just a bit.

“Now, Nathaniel’ll tell you that from th’ other tower there’s a whale-mountain to be seen up to the northwest there. I ain’t been up in *that* tower but once, and then it was too dark to see it; but he takes these hills to be an ocean and this house, a ship. The Pequod, he calls it, from a book made by a man named Mr. Herman Melville. Fer my part, I like to think of this here pile-a-wood as a raft on a wild river durin’ flood season. A ship’s awf’ly cramped up and smothery, but not a raft. And that’s the way to treat this house: free and easy and comf’terble. Yer on

a ship ‘cause you got to be ‘till you hit land an’ can git off. Yer on a raft ‘cause you wanna be, an’ can get off whenever you want. I reckon there ain’t no home should be thought of but like a raft.”

Before Huck could go on, if such was his intention, the front door squealed audibly open. The pair could hear Jim barking down the hallway, and saw him disappear down the stairway across the courtyard. Even from where they were standing, they could hear John’s faint groan of slightly disgusted surprise.

“Hello, King John!” shouted Huck amiably when he and D. had reached the mosaic window on the front stairs and could see John struggling to keep Jim from jumping on him.

“Huck, you get this mongrel away from me before I give him a swift kick!”

“Aw, he ain’t doin’ nothin’ but sayin’ hello and how-de-do, yer majesty,” Huck responded but whistled Jim away for safety’s sake.

Brushing paw marks from the front of his white robe, John scolded Huck, “You know that I don’t like to be called that.”

“Sorry, sir. I’ll stop, promise. Been visitin’ the Nonesuch Inn much lately, old man?”

“Don’t you old man me neither, Huck! I’m barely ten years your senior.”

“Ah, more senior’n I’ll be in thirty, I reckon, and were I a hundred, I reckon I’d be the junior still! But why don’t we let bygones be bygones, John? S’been nearly since you was my age that we been disagreeable t’each other, ain’t it?”

Relaxing a bit, and subtly, very subtly, smiling, John said, “Huck, you do this every time you arrive. You know that before you leave you’ll have done yet another horrible and inconsiderate atrocity to me, so why do you bother apologizing before you’ve even done it?”

“Aw, shucks, John, you know that what I want is fer everybody on this here raft to be satisfied and feel right and kind towards each other!” claimed Huck, winking at D.

“Yes, I’m sure that’s exactly what you’re after,” John retorted but

let it lie at that, then, changing the subject, “I see you’ve rousted the rabbit from her hole.”

“Naw, it was Jim. He’s always been a sight more person’ble than me. What would you want to go scarin’ this girl into stayin’ hidden for two days fer anyway?”

“It wasn’t anything I did. I’ve been nothing but helpful to her. It was the doing of the other new arrival, Alex. Wasn’t it, young lady?”

D. mumbled that she supposed that he was telling the truth.

“I really did attempt in earnest to retrieve your keys,” John avowed. “In fact,” he continued, “I’ve managed, not to find your clothes, but at least some comfortable looking slippers that might be fit for you to use for the time being.” He raised a finger for them to stay put, disappeared into the courtyard, and returned with a pair of slippers that did, indeed, look comfortable. “It’s a petty conciliation, I know, but I searched them out to show that I do not condone what has happened since your arrival.”

D. slipped them on; they fit perfectly. “Perhaps I have been a bit too rash in suspecting you,” she acquiesced.

There was an awkward silence broken when Huck clapped his hands and said, “Welp, I’m glad we’ve got that settled. The lady ‘n’ me were on our way for a stroll to wear out the new shoes, d’ye like to come, yer eminence? Or would you rather stay here and partake of the provisions I put in the pantry for you?”

John’s eyebrows raised, apparently catching the exact meaning of “provisions.” “I’ve been walking all morning. I suppose I’ll have something to eat and then relax with a good book.”

“Oh, yer welcome to the food, too, but I suspect you’ve a bout a’ thirst,” Huck said, laughing. “Just don’t stuff yerself so full that yer too cross-eyed to read.” John shot a mildly nasty look at Huck, who only laughed and clapped him on the back. Then to D., “Le’s go an’ leave the king to his refreshment.”

She didn’t object, in large part because she hoped their walk might bring them to Huck’s car, and neither did Jim, the dog, so out they went. As soon as the door closed behind them, John marched hastily toward the kitchen. On the porch, Huck whispered to D. that he thought John

would be feeling considerably more mellow by the time they got back.

D. wanted to check on her car, but Huck convinced her that without the keys there was no reason to frustrate herself further, so they walked north rather than south. Between blitheful bouts of hopping around them, Jim would charge far off into the woods until Huck whistled for his return. The dog came back each time with a different stick, letting his two companions take turns at trying to wrest it from him and running off after a new one when they succeeded.

The foliage pressed in thickly around them.

“You must get lost out here quite a bit,” D. remarked.

“There’s paths if you know where to look.” Huck indicated the direction they were heading, and D. saw that the bushes leaned just slightly outward. She supposed that traffic on this particular highway was light, and a fractional regret presented itself for ratification when she considered that the scars left by her car would be a long time healing. But toward her defense, she recalled that the road off of which she had driven a mile-and-a-half from where her car now inanimately lingered had been on a new map that she had bought the week before and was already losing ground to the forest at its borders and gushing sprouts of green at uneven intervals across the asphalt.

“Huck?” she hailed.

“Yes’m?” he responded as he threw yet another stick out of sight between the trees. Jim watched it fly, then bounded briskly in the opposite direction.

“You said you parked your car quite a distance from the house right?”

“Yes’m.”

“Then you must not have been able to bring all that many provisions with you.”

Chuckling, as if he thought that she was trying to catch him in a contradiction, “There’s a wheelbarrow I leave near the spot when I go.”

“But still...”

“I left most of the stuff that’ll keep in my truck. I reckon I’ll go back and get the rest in time.”

“Oh,” she said, somewhat dejected, then, “Would you like some help?”

“Naw, it’s my part to do. House rules.”

“Oh great, more rules.”

“You’ll catch on.”

“To be honest, I don’t think I’m going to be making that a priority.”

“Do what you like, but there’s a bundle a’ int’resting characters to be met here.”

“I’ll bet.”

They walked on. D. would have asked about some of these “int’resting characters,” but she figured that Huck would only tell her that she would see when she would see, or something along those lines. Spotting a squirrel sniffing around under a nearby tree, Jim took after it. The squirrel ran around in a confused circle and leapt up the harboring trunk, halting in alertness fifteen feet above the barking dog, who began running around the tree and stopping every few revolutions to make sure the squirrel knew that he was still there. Whistling, Huck threw a stick away from the scene. With his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, Jim disappeared in the stick’s general direction and returned with a rock that was one size too big for his mouth. Huck laughed and told Jim to drop the stone. Doing as he was told, the dog fell into a meandering amble a pace ahead of the people, looking back and waiting whenever the distance grew to a dozen yards or so. A bird called out above them. Another responded with a counter melody a few trees over. D. looked at Huck.

“So what’s this Nonesuch Inn.”

Huck smiled fondly to a memory, “Oh that goes back to the beginnin’ of my knowin’ of John and Nathaniel.” He snickered.

“A funny story?”

“If you know how to look at it.”

“Well, I’m of a mind to hear a good story if you’re of a mind to tell one.”

Huck smiled kindly, old age obviously loitering behind his pensive posture as he glanced out over the field to which they had come. The

grass was wild and dead, but still high, and the wind blew across it in waves of life. Huck smiled again, this time with a bit more enthusiasm, the old age, if it had not been an illusion, skittered away or was sucked into the boyishly glinting hazel of his eyes.

“I reckon I was the first to come along after Nathaniel invited John to the house,” Huck began. “Back then it seemed John found his way into some town or other an’ got himself a jug a’ somethin’ to help thicken him up when he needed it, which was most a’ the time. He’d been storin’ the bottles, when empty, in his room so long that there warn’t no wheres left in there to put any more. By the time I got here, he’d got in the habit of usin’ ’m as decoration where there warn’t no books on the shelves.

“Things was quiet for a while, and time went quick on account of there bein’ so many books to read and me an’ Nathaniel havin’ such prime talks all the time. He had an amazin’ head fer jest a boy! Well, we’d talk all the time, an’ when we warn’t a-talkin’, I was a-readin’. Finally one day, Nathaniel was playin’ at the piano when I walked up to him an’ told him my name. He said it suited me just fine and we set about rumagin’ through all the rooms to find me an outfit. What we found was the same as what I’m a-wearin’ now, only a sight older an’ more authenticated, an’ when I had got it all on, Nathaniel laughed an’ whistled. ‘I do b’lieve we done found a match,’ he said, an’ I was awful glad to know who I was, ‘cause now we could get on in a suitable way.

“Round this time, John’s bottles had got so they filled all the empty spots on the shelves, an’ he started puttin’ ’m on the railin’ outside his room. Well, Nathaniel saw this an’ was tolerable mad. ‘I’ll never b’grudge a man his whiskey,’ he said, ‘but perty soon we’ll be throwin’ out the drinkers to keep what’s been drunk outta.’ An’ I could see that this gave him an idea.”

“Hold it,” interrupted D. “John told me that he was homeless before he came here and that he doesn’t get paid for watching the house.”

“Yes’m, that’s true enough, from what I’ve heard.”

“Then how could he possibly afford to fill the bookshelves with

bottles, let alone his room?”

“Well, that’s a question I’ve yet t’have answered fer me, so I’ll be darned if I c’n give’n to you; but I ‘magine Nathaniel’d been givin’ him some comp’nsation on top a’ providin’ all his food an’ housin’. Now where *he* got it from, I daren’t even guess.”

“Why didn’t Nathaniel just cut John off if the drinking was becoming a problem?”

“Well, darn, woman! What good would that do but creatin’ an ornery an’ sober ol’ man to deal with? Nobody minded the drinkin’. Truth be told, we would sometimes take a peck at the stock, an’ stoppin’ the flow would ‘a’ been like dryin’ out a toilet to keep a chile from playin’ in it!”

D. had to mull that one over a little, and Huck let her. They had reached the tree-line at the other end of the field when he started up again.

“While John was off restockin’, or wherever, me and Nathaniel borrowed a dozen ‘r so bottles from his room, ‘cause we knowed he wouldn’t miss them from that mess. The coll’rd ones, that was about six of’m, an’ two of the clear ones that had vodka labels, we filled with water from the bathroom; and we took the rest of the clear ones down to the stream to fill’m with muddy water that didn’t look much like the dark rum that John drinks, but would pass from a distance if ya shook it first. We tucked all the water bottles away up in the south tower an’ waited for John to git back.

“He was already a-whoopin’ an’ a-hollerin’ drunk by the time he walked in the door, an’ it warn’t long before he was snorin’ away in that big ol’ chair a’ his. Gatherin’ up all his new jugs, ‘bout seven all told, we lugged ‘em up to the tower and started workin’ our way to rip-roarin’. After one a’ the bottles was tapped, we was makin’ such a racket that John sort of waked up a little, but not enough for what we wanted, so Nathaniel woops to him an’ shouts down:

““Hey there John! What’s a fella gotta do to getcha outta that there chair?”

“John didn’t pay no never mind to that, except to sort of mumble a

yell and slip back to nappin' a bit. So Nathaniel woops again and yells:

“‘What if I told you that if you didn’t come help us out with these here drinks, I don’t reckon we’ll be able to finish ’m before earlier than six in the mornin’, just the two of us?’

“‘This got John a-rollin’ enough to get ‘im outta the chair, an’ he screams that we best not finish them all without him and he warn’t of the mood to drink no more.

“‘Well then,’ says Nathaniel, ‘I reckon we’ll have to find ourselves some other way to unload this here burden.’ An’ he takes a big swig outta’n bottle a’ rum, an’ drops his hand enough so John couldn’t see that he was switchin’ it fer a bottle a’ nothin’ but dirty water. Nathaniel, he takes an’ holds it up so’s John gets a good enough look to think it was the rum and chucks it right off into the trees. I ain’t never heard the woods so quiet as when waitin’ fer that bottle to fall, an’ when it did, it was the most God awful and beautiful crash a body ever heard.

“‘Now John’s purty well stirred, with this look on his face like bloody murder, an’ he comes a-rushin’ up the stairs an’ I barely had the time to throw myself over the hatch so he couldn’t lift it. I’ve always been a damn sight heavier than John could hoist. So there we are, Nathaniel a-laughin’ like to raise the dead, John a-swearin’ cusses that I knowed he made most of ‘em up, an’ tryin’ to get through, an’ me just bouncin’ up an’ down on the hatch and a-gigglin’ away like a Sunday School girl at a circus clown. Eventu’lly John gets tired an’ we heard him goin’ down the stairs; next we knowed, there he was on the other tower a rantin’ an’ ravin’ an’ carryin’ on like the house was on fire. When he’d got a hold a’ his self, Nathaniel takes up a bottle a’ clear water, takes a sip an’ makes like it’s the worst moonshine he ever tasted and then throws that bottle far off into the trees.

“‘John couldn’t take no more a’ this, so he climbs all shaky like down th’other tower an’ starts crossin’ the peak a’ the roof with his arms out fer balance. Well, I was mighty impressed, ‘cause he made it ‘bout halfway without fallin’, an’ when he did fall, he didn’t stop swearin’, not for one second. No sirree, he just kept on a-yellin’ at the top a’ his voice an’ tryin’ to stand. He got to his feet an’ starts swingin’ his arms,

an' I don't think I ever seen a man so sober or scared as when he discovered that he was a-goin' to topple anyway. He rolled over backwards once'r twice, an' slid the rest a' the way 'till his feet was danglin' over the edge of the roof an' he was grabbin' at the shingles to save his neck, all the time slidin' just a little more.

"I reckon me an' Nathaniel sobered up then just about as fast as John did, an' we shinned it down into Nathaniel's room. And there in the window was two hairy legs all bare an' naked an' white as a ghost, just a-swingin' an' trying to get back up to safety. His robe was all bunched up by his waist, an' I seed that he was wearin' a brand new pair a' boxer shorts with little paisley designs all over 'em. We threw open the window and grabbed those kickin' legs an' told John to just let go so we could get 'im in. After a minute of arguin' he just let go his faith an' slipped over the edge an' into the room.

"Well, me an' Nathaniel felt a world a' sorry for what we'd done, an' fixed John up with a rum 'n' coke. He went on fer a while 'bout us tryin' to kill such an' old an' kindly gentl'man who'd never been nothin' but good to us, an' we just kept on apologizin' until he wore himself out an' we all went to bed."

Huck and D. had come to the edge of a small lake (or big pond), and Huck skimmed a rock across its surface. The sun had dipped out of sight behind a mountain to the left, turning the water a pale and silent kind of black. Except for the faint buzzing of mosquitoes and the more vehement tweeting of the birds, the air was still. About twenty feet to the right of where they stood, D. saw a haphazardly built gazebo beginning to bend in on one side with the weight of a drastically tilted roof. The pair walked past the structure, keeping to the water's edge, and Huck skimmed another stone. Jim dove in and swam to the spot where it had sunk, paddling about and looking for it before giving up and swimming back to shore.

"Me an' Nathaniel agreed to be nice to John for the time bein', an' there warn't nothin' we didn't do to help him out an' make him feel all at home an' 'mongst friends again," Huck continued. "He started hidin' all his bottles but the one he'd be drinkin' at all the time, so *a' course* we

couldn't help but try to find 'em all out. One of 'em he put in the piano, which warn't too hard to 'cipher out on account of it rattlin' so every time you hit the lower keys. There was a couple behind the bathtub upstairs and a cartload under a loose board in the front hall. 'Bout the hardest one to find was away behind some books by a man named James Fenimore Cooper. I found that one detective fashion, 'cause I figured nobody'd ever take them books down off'n the shelves t' actuly read 'em.

"Well, it got to where we knowed where just about ev'ry bottle was. Nathaniel an' me was out explorin' one afternoon when he turns to me an says, 'Well, Huck, I reckon that it ain't no use havin' all this information an' not usin' it.' I told him I reckoned he was right, so he goes on, 'and I don't think it would hurt the ol' man all that much if we was to fool with 'im jest a little.' I told him I reckoned he was jest about on the mark again.

"The first thing we did next time John was a-snorin' in his chair, which warn't too long away, was to switch all the liquors around. We got an ol' crystal pitcher with a real slim spout from the kitchen an' went an' put vodka from the bathroom in the Kahlua bottle from the front hall an' filled the vodka bottle with water, an' swapped the whiskey in the piano with the Southern Comfort behind that *Muleravisher* book or whatever it's called. Next all we did was wait.

"The afternoon after, we climbed up into the willow, which was all thick with leaves, an' watched John take his sweet-tooth over to the bookshelf. He looked around like he was bein' sneaky, and took down the bottle a' what he thought was SoCo. He sort a' smiled to himself an' went off into the ballroom. We dropped down from the tree just in time to hear his loud 'yeck' when he discovered that his Southern Comfort was beginnin' to taste awful sim'lar to Jack Daniel's. We strolled in to where he was an' Nathaniel says:

"'What's all the gaggin' fer John?"

"'Well, this here bottle's supposed to be full of Southern Comfort, but I'll be damned if it ain't J.D.,' John snarls back, an' in a voice that showed that he suspicioned what we was up to.

“‘Give it here,’ says Nathaniel, an’ he takes a big pull, ‘tastes like SoCo to me. Here, Huck, you give it a try.’

“I took the bottle an’ says that I hope’ts the Comfort, ‘cause Jack Daniels makes me powerful sick from just a sniff. So I takes the bottle an’ smells the top with one eye all squinted so’s it looks like I’m really makin’ sure, an’ then I gulped down a good amount a’ the whiskey an’ says, ‘well, I ain’t a-pukin’, so’s I guess it’s just what it says on the bottle.’

“‘Gimme that,’ says John, not believin’ us more’n a bit. He took a sip an’ gave us a look like either we was foolin’ with him or he was goin’ crazy. He ordered us out to the courtyard an’ to close our eyes. We did what we was told an’ I heard him gettin’ the Jack Daniel’s bottle that was full a’ Southern Comfort out from where it was hid in the piano. ‘Now you two are gonna drink this’n here with yer eyes shet an’ tell me what yer tastin’. And don’t say nothin’ ‘till you’ve both had yer go.’

“First Nathaniel took a drink an’ then smacks his lips real loud. Next John shoves the bottle against my chest and says it’s my turn. Well, I hardly had the bottle to my lips an’ I starts gaggin’ an’ makin’ like I’m gonna throw up. I was bent over on my knees an’ spittin’ on the ground when Nathaniel says, ‘I reckon Huck agrees with me that that there is Jack Daniel’s.’

“John took a swig an’ swore up ‘n’ down that what he was a-tastin’ was Southern Comfort. Nathaniel chimes in with, ‘Well, I see what’s goin’ on here.’

“‘Really? An’ what’s that?’

“‘You’ve been mixin’ an’ matchin’ these diff’rent liquors so much yer heads gone an’ switched ‘em all around.’ So John says we’ll see about that, an’ marches up to the bathroom. I guess he didn’t want to let on where his big stash was, ‘case we hadn’t found it yet. Well first he takes a drink a’ the gin that was there, points to the label an’ says, ‘now that says gin, it smells like gin, it tastes like gin, an’ I’ll swear by God that it ain’t nothin’ else!’

“‘We didn’t say nothin’ diff’rent, so he takes up the vodka bottle an’

just about finishes the whole thing in two gulps. ‘Try it,’ he d’mands without sayin’ nothin’ else. Nathaniel drinks it an’ makes a more squintin’ an’ wrinkled face any twelve year old fiddlin’ around in his pap’s liquor cabinet ever made.

“‘That’s some powerful stuff!’ he says when he’s all done makin’ like he’s gaspin’.

“So John says, ‘Look me in the eye an’ tell me that warn’t water you just took a drink of.’

“‘Damn, John, would I be all a fluster like this if I was drinkin’ jest water?’ an’ I seed that he was indeed all a-fluster, with his eyes a-tearin’ an’ ev’rything.

“John reckoned not if he was tellin’ the truth, an’ when I tasted the water I told purty much the same tale, but not with so much style. We was all gettin’ a little thick from all the tastin’, an’ John twice as much on account a’ his startin’ to believe that it *was* vodka that he had drunk so much of. So now he takes us down the stairs so’s he can prove he’s not insane an’ all the bottles under the floor is what they say they is.

“First he goes through a few tastes a’ rum before he believes his tongue on that one. Then he had a pull a’ tequila that we hadn’t even seen hidin’ down there, an’ says that he reckons if it wasn’t tequila he was tastin’ then he’d have to be an imigr’nt. At last he comes to the Kahlua, which, if you never had it, is sweet as molasses compared to vodka, an’ takes the biggest gulp yet. Believe you me that there vodka didn’t so much as touch his guts before he was down on one knee doin’ all he can to keep it down. Meanwhile, Nathaniel’s dumpin’ the vodka in a plant that used to be by the door there, before it died a short while later, so when John righted himself an’ asked fer the bottle, there wouldn’t be nothin’ but air.

“‘Dagnabit,’ he says, still kinda droolin’, ‘that warn’t like no Kahlua I ever had. No way, no how! That was vodka or I’ll eat myself a hairball!’

“‘Well, John, I’d love to prove you right, but you done drank all there was to drink. That Kahlua’s some heavy stuff, you must be feelin’ a might bloated right about now.’

“Snatchin’ away the bottle, John sees that there ain’t nothin’ left but a lingerin’ smell a’ the Kahlua that used to be there before me and Nathaniel drank it all, an’ let’s out this moan, ‘Awwohh, boys, I reckon I’m a gonner now.’

“Nathaniel grabs him ‘round the waist and leads him to his chair. ‘You better rest for a while,’ he advises, an’ John sort of groans his agreement. The way the man went on you’d a thought he had drank a whole case a’ caster oil. ‘Ventially he’s off an’ snorin’ again like always.’”

Huck stopped talking for a moment.

“So what’s the Nonesuch Inn?” asked D., who was looking over the tree tops to where the towers of the house protruded from the mist of bare branches. They had been climbing the rocky side of the first hill to the north of the house that was higher than the one upon which it stood.

“I’m a-gettin’ to it,” Huck told her, “but while I do, I think we best head back. My stomach’s tellin’ me that it’s gettin’ on to dinner time.”

Stopping a moment to look at the beautiful view of the little lake, D. followed Huck down the rocks the way they had come. They walked in silence, listening to the late afternoon stillness in the air. Jim broke D. from the state of country enchantment that had started to come over her by poking her in the bottom with a stick that he wanted her to throw. Once she realized that it was going to be more work than it was worth to wrestle over a stick that Jim wouldn’t even chase after it was thrown, D. picked a fresh one from between the blades of brown grass and threw that one. Jim dropped his stick and ran off after a new one. D. was surprised at how quickly the day seemed to be passing.

“After that day,” Huck started up again, “we switched around the liquors so much that John stopped lookin’ at the labels an’ only just drank whatever it was he got his hands on without complainin’, so that game got tiresome. Both me an’ Nathaniel figured we’d got to come up with some sort a’ topper ‘cause the Summer was endin’, but we neither of us could think of a plan. Must’a’ been a week or two later that I hears this meowin’ outside my window in the middle a’ the night. It was Nathaniel an’ he whispers up at me that he’s got to show me somethin’.

I shimmied down the porch roof an' we took off real quiet into the woods. We passed over this field that we're walkin' across now, an' a little higher up on that mountain, where it's a sight more woody, we came to a cave which I didn't believe you could find if you didn't know where you was lookin'. Inside, the cave was mainly one big room like a wigwam with a bit of a slice taken out of the top an' you could see a sliver a' the moon overhead. It was an awful hot night, but it was cool in the cave. We spent the rest a' that night comin' up with a plan, but I needn't tell you what 'cause I knowed it would change consider'ble once we got a-goin'. Just that we was goin' to scare the wits outta John an have a grand ol' time a-doin' it.

"The first thing we set out to set up was to make the cave a proper place for me to stay an' make like I was a murd'rous bandit. Nathaniel wanted to be the one to hide out in the cave, but he figured John'd miss him before long an' catch on. I told Nathaniel that one've us would have to go to town an' get me some canned food 'cause there warn't enough in the pantry to take any without John missin' 'em.

"'Ain't none of us goin' to need to go shoppin',' he says, an' I asked him why, 'Huck, you ever hear of a criminal on the run goin' off whenever he felt like it to get some prime vittles fer his self?'

"'No,' I says, 'but I thought I was jest a bandit, I warn't awares that I'd been runnin' from people.'

"'Well, a'course yer on the run! Why else would you be out in the woods where there ain't nothin' or nobody to rob from?'

"'I reckon you got a point there, but what'm I supposed to eat?'

"'He told me that I could catch all the squirrels or raccoons I wanted if we made some traps for'm; an' I suggested that I could jest get the fishin' pole from out the closet an' catch me some trout in the lake.

"'That won't do,' he told me. 'If you want a fish, you got to sharpen up a long stick on a rock an' stab 'im through like an injun.'

"'Why don't I jest set out a line then, if I can't use the pole?'

"'Well, darn it, that'd be too simple, now wouldn't it? No, the best convicts all learns how to stand real still an' pierce the fish when it swims by.'

“I said I’d give ‘er a try, but I reckoned I’d use my pocket-knife to shave the stick.

“Where would a runaway bandit get a knife from?” he asked.

“You said I was murd’rous, right?”

“Yes, what’s that got to do with it?”

“Well what did I kill the people with that I’m runnin’ for?”

“I reckon you used a gun. Warn’t no pocket knife, that’s fer sure!”

“What would I wanna go catchin’ squirrels an’ stabbin’ fish fer if I got a gun? Why wouldn’t I jest shoot a deer or somesuch thing?”

“Why, I suppose you stashed the gun in the river when you knew they was after you.’

“What would I do that fer?”

“So they wouldn’t have no evidence against you when yer caught?”

“But if they ain’t got no evidence, why’m I runnin’? It’ll jest make me look more s’picious.’

“Nathaniel looked like he was startin’ to get a-boil in his blood, ‘it don’t matter nohow,’ he says, ‘because we ain’t got a gun fer real even if you was dumb enough to keep the fake’n!’

“So I’ll jest pretend I killed ‘em with a knife an’ held onto it when I ran.’

“By now Nathaniel was sick of arguin’, so he said alright an’ suit myself. The next thing we figured was how I was goin’ to cook the food once I’d caught it, an’ Nathaniel, he said the only way’t do was to only cook at night an’ to use alot of green wood so it’d give off a good ‘mount of smoke.

“Now I can see that wait’n ‘till dark would keep me from gettin’ caught so easy,’ I said, ‘but why would I want more smoke than I got to have?’

“Dern Huck,’ he says, ‘ain’t you never read a book in yer life? Crim’nals always get caught ‘cause somebody sees the smoke from their fires.’

“Well, if I’m lookin’ to get caught, I reckon it’d happen quicker if I cook durin’ the day.’

“How you talk! Yer not tryin’ to get caught! Yer jest tryin’ to

make it *possible* to get caught.’

“I told ‘im that I could see tryin’ to do one thing or the other, but I warn’t sure why I would want to *try* to do one thing bad enough that th’other would happen.

“‘Then how’d you ‘spose anybody would come fer you to take’m hostage?’

“‘What I want a hostage for if I can avoid havin’ one?’

“‘But you got to get a hostage so there’s somebody to help you when you break yer leg?’

“‘Shoot, Nathaniel, I ain’t gonna break my leg!’

“‘You have to break yer leg! Or at least yer arm. One a’ the bandits *always* gets hurt an’ has to be looked after by a hostage so’t the others can get away.’

“‘But there ain’t no other bandits but me!’

“‘That’s why it’s got to be you that gets hurt.’

“‘Well if I’m gonna have to get hurt fer the sake a scarin’ John, I’d rather jest make like I was pushed outta the tower an’ have done with it.’

“Nathaniel considered it for a second and then said that there warn’t reason enough fer me to fall from the tower unless it was while John was tryin’ to get away. I said that John was a smart enough man to know not to run up to a tower when there was plenty a ways to ‘scape from the house an’ not drop more’n a couple feet. He asked if I thought I could break an arm fallin’ a couple feet, an’ I said that I reckoned I could if I wanted to, but that I didn’t want to so I wouldn’t.

“‘Fine,’ he says, ‘then jest cook at night so’s you don’t get caught, an’ use alot a green wood so’s I can point it out to John so’s he’ll know there’s somebody up here.’

“I told him that he could ‘a’ just said that to begin with an’ saved us all the trouble of arguin’. He grumbled somethin’ ‘bout me not knowin’ nothin’, an’ we went back to the house to get some shut-eye.”

“The followin’ day, Nathaniel an’ me went around lookin’ for things that I might need, which warn’t much, since I was supposed to be a fugitive and all. In one room we found an old straw hat. Nathaniel said

I'd have to start wearin' it all the time so't would be a mysterious omin that I could leave in the woods when I disappeared, an' I told him that it was a heck of an idea. In another room we found a women's white robe with a hood that I thought I'd filch an' hold on to 'cause we might come up with a use later on, an' Nathaniel said I was startin' to get the feel fer this kinda work. Next to the robe was an old worn Winter jacket that Nathaniel said I'd best take, too.

“Now what need do I got for a heavy coat like that'n in the middle a' the Summer?”

“You don't reckon a runaway killer this far in the mountains can count on gettin' caught b'fore it gets cold out do you?”

“I told him that I warn't goin' to wait around that long to get found out, an' if Nathaniel didn't get John to discover me before a week had gone by, then I reckoned I'd make sure they *both* knowed there was somebody in the woods. He said that I didn't have to wait 'till Winter, only wear the coat to the cave next time I went, 'cause a crim'nal wouldn't want to have to carry such a thing when he was on the run, an' leave it in a corner so the police knowed I had been there some time. That didn't seem too much to ask, though I knowed I'd be sweatin' like a pig by the time I climbed all the way up that mountain, jest so long as the police he was talkin' about warn't no more real than the gun or the people I'd killed with it.

“We borrowed a box a' matches from the mantle on the fireplace in the dinin' room an' filled a couple a' John's empty bottles with well water, an' took everythin' to the cave after lunch. As I e'spected, I was a-drippin' all over sweat by the time we got there, an' I thought I'd take a sip a' the water. B'fore I could unscrew the cap, Nathaniel up an' tells me I can't do what I was a-plannin' to do. When I asked why not, he just told me that I'd miss it if I ran out while I was hidin'. I didn't bother pointin' out that I could go back to the house an' get more whenever I pleased 'cause he'd 'a' just told me that a fugitive bandit would be too afear'd of gettin' caught, so I just waited 'till we got back to have my drink.

“John was tolerable drunk when we got to the house, an' somehow

managin' to read some book or other that seemed to 'a' got him on edge. He went on an' on talkin' 'bout the state a' the gov'ment an' how he wouldn't be s'prised if they was hidin' out an' waitin' to catch him.

“‘What'd the gov'ment want with you fer, John?’ Nathaniel asked him. John told us that he'd said some things t'upset 'em in his time. Well, me an' Nathaniel jest let him go on, sometimes leadin' him back to it when he started to wander to somethin' else, so by the time we was eatin' dinner, he was jumpin' every time a body threw a stone or piece of metal to the floor behind him.

“‘Wassat?’ he'd shout an' start spinnin' 'round lookin' fer the gov'ment. After a while I couldn't help but laugh a little an' tell 'im that the gov'ment was too sneaky to jest up an' tap his shoulder. I reckon that was the wrong word to use 'cause then he got going on how they was always list'nin' to what everybody was sayin' all the time an' had saterlites hoverin' over our house an' watchin' us when we was out in the yard.

“‘It was gettin' close to twilight, an' Nathaniel gave me a signal that maybe I should make a break for it now.

“‘I think I'll go'n take a walk to work off my supper,’ I said by way of excusin' myself.

“‘Watch out,’ said John, ‘if you see any men in suits, get right back here just's quick as you can.’

“‘I told 'im that I reckoned if I came 'cross a man in a suit this far in the woods, an' lookin' like I was lookin' after bein' here so long, then he'd be the one runnin' the other way. Not hearin' me, John told me to holler if I had any trouble. I didn't 'spect I'd have any, but I considered hollerin' anyway.

“‘Well I climbed all the way to the top a' the mountain that the cave's on, an' fell asleep watchin' the sun go down. When I woke up the moon was over head an' the stars was all twinklin'. I heard the wind rustlin' through the trees like it was mournin', an' there was an owl in the distance purrin' out 'bout somebody that had died. I couldn't say fer sure it warn't part a' my dream, but it felt like the wind was tryin' to whisper somethin'.”

D. shivered; the shadows were long across the ground.

“Then I thought it was the voice a’ spirits a’ people that’d been dead a long time, an’ maybe they was gossipin’ to me ‘bout each other. I shook off the fear an’ stood up. The straw hat was still on my head. I shinned down the mountain ‘cause it seemed Nathaniel might a’ brought John out to look fer me by now an’ be expectin’ to find the hat knocked off me in a struggle.

“When I got to the lake by the gazebo, I ran right into Nathaniel. He looked at me somethin’ fierce when he saw what I was still wearin’. ‘What’re you doin’? We been lookin’ fer that hat all over!’ he whispered.

“‘Sorry, I fell asleep.’

“Just then, we heard John askin’ Nathaniel who he was talkin’ to. ‘Jest myself,’ he says, snatchin’ the hat an’ pushin’ me into the bushes, ‘I found that hat that Huck’s always wearin’.’

“‘I ain’t never seen Huck in a hat b’fore.’ He was still drunk, an’ prob’ly a little tired to boot.

“‘He found one yesterday, an’ I guess it just seemed so perfect on ‘im that I thought he’d always had it,’ Nathaniel came back right quick, an’ blame it if he didn’t sound like he was gettin’ all choked up. B’fore he went over to where John was most likely startin’ to doze off ‘gainst a tree er somethin’, Nathaniel took a big bite outta the brim a’ the hat an spit the straw on the ground.

“I peaked through the bushes I was hidin’ in an’ saw Nathaniel handin’ the hat over to John, sayin’, ‘The rip wasn’t there before, though.’

“John just looked at it with a blank face an’ then says, ‘I reckon it was the gov’ment got ‘im. The cannibals!’”

Scattered glimpses of the house began appearing through the branches, the shadows of the trees drawing stripes across its sides. D.’s stomach growled, and she asked Huck what he had planned for dinner.

“I had a hankerin’ for a burger, an’ thought I’d drag out the grill.”

“Sounds good,” D. said, and she meant it. The idea of a juicy cheeseburger made her mouth water. She helped Huck drag the old charcoal grill out to the front yard, where Jim trotted around it in happy

expectation. After Huck had gotten the coals lit, he suggested they go in search of John. Finding nothing but an empty brandy bottle by his recliner, the pair took a package of supermarket ground beef from an old ice box, the type that actually kept food cold with the insertion of a block of ice, and a package of hamburger buns from an even older wooden bread box with a loaf of steaming bread carved into the lid.

Perhaps catching D. staring inquisitively at the ice box, Huck told her, “Enough people gener’ly bring ice enough to keep the per’shibles good for a while.” He motioned toward an empty red plastic cooler that looked entirely out of place. “It’s reg’lar for the last person here to go off an’ get enough to last John ‘till he don’t need it no more. There’s usually people here well into the cooler months anyhow.”

D. didn’t ask for any more information, so they brought the meat and bread out to the grill, which was well on its way to smoldering already. While the paddies of beef simmered, D. asked how long Huck had stayed in the cave.

“Oh,” he responded, “not long. Nathaniel came out to see me ev’ry day to tell me what kind a’ state he’d got John into, an’ ev’ry night I snuck back in an’ borrowed a bottle’r two a’ liquor so’s Nathaniel could convince John that things was startin’ to disappear. We figured that was all he’d a’ noticed missin’. Two nights into the whole thing, I asked Nathaniel if a crim’nal who snuck into a body’s house to take his booze wouldn’t steal a fishin’ pole if he warn’t havin’ no luck stabbin’ at the things an’ fallin’ in the lake most ev’ry time. He reckoned it’d be possible if somebody in the house got it out to the hall with the intention a’ usin’ it. So’s it’d be missed an’ all. Then I told Nathaniel that I had a terrible time tryin’ to light a fire a’ green wood, so he says it’s alright ‘cause he warn’t able to make out the smoke at night anyhow.

“Once I’d got the pole, bein’ out in the woods was like a week a’ playin’ hooky, what with drinkin’ an’ nappin’ by the water ev’ry day a-fishin’, an’ lookin’ up at the stars most ev’ry night tryin’ to ‘cipher whether they was made or jest happened. Me an’ Nathaniel built us a raft jest fer the sake a passin’ the time, he said, but I reckoned he was workin’ out a way to fit it into our plan.

“In about a week, John was startin’ to miss his lost bottles so much that he started drinkin’ as much as he could so’s it couldn’t be filtched, an’ Nathaniel’d got him so outta mind ‘bout my disappearin’ that he was gettin’ afearred to go out a’ the house. Purty soon, it got so’t Nathaniel’d have to bring him up his meals to his room. At night John got so thick he warn’t afearred of nobody, spesh’ly nobody who warn’t there anyways, so he’d go staggerin’ around the courtyard yellin’ up at the saterlites that they might’s well just out an’ take ‘im away. When this got to be the usual way a’ things, Nathaniel took that white robe a’ mine an’ started walkin’ up ‘n’ down the balconies after John knocked off in his chair.

“We figured it’d be safe for me to sneak into the house to hide and watch, so one night I was hidin’ in the shadows by the piano when John shot up outta his sleep ‘n’ started hollerin’ at Nathaniel, only he didn’t know it was him a-cause a’ the robe, to leave ‘im be ‘cause he never was nasty to the dead an’ they had no quar’l with him. Nathaniel jest raised one arm slow so it was pointin’ at John, an’ the robe was so big on him that it didn’t look like he had no hands. John screamed an’ ran off through the front hall an’ out the door. Throwin’ the robe down to me, Nathaniel whispered, ‘Quick, now, Huck, follow after us an’ wait on my signal. Out he went, after John.

“Well, this was all impr’vised, so I jest chased after’m a little ways off, an’ I seed that Nathaniel had got John headin’ fer the lake. I ran quick ‘round infront a’ them an’ threw on the robe when I’d got to the gazebo. The fog was toler’ble thick over the water, an’ when they got to there, Nathaniel saw where I was an’ turned his back to me. Jest then, John looked right up at me an’ screams:

“‘Oh Lord! Banish this evil spirit! Save me, save me!’

“So Nathaniel turns back around twice an’ asks John what the Hell he’s a-screamin’ about ‘cause he can’t see nothin’. John starts cryin’ an’ screamin’ that it must be the angel a’ death come fer him an’ nobody but him *would* be able to see’m. I took the hint an’ slipped off into the bushes.

“‘John, calm down! Look again, I’m sure yer jest seein’ things,’ I

heard Nathaniel sayin’.

“John looks an’ says, ‘He was jest there! I’d swear by it! Lordy, lordy, I’s sunk, Nathaniel, you got to help me!’

“Takin’ him by the arm, Nathaniel says that he reckons they’d best get away by water, ‘cause Death couldn’t likely swim out’n fear that his robe ‘n’ sickle’d drag ‘im down, an’ pushes John over to the raft. I reckon John musta been consider’ble drunk, ‘cause he staggered onto the planks an’ nearly tumbled right off th’other side, shoutin’, ‘quick, quick.’ Nathaniel signals to where I was, though I don’t reckon he could see me, an’ I got his meanin’ to be that I should set the robe afloat on a piece of wood an’ push it off into the water. When it was a ways out on the edge a’ where I couldn’t see into the fog, I swear it nearly sent the shivers into my guts, ‘cause nothin’ don’t look nat’ral nor right in a fog. They set off, with Nathaniel usin’ a paddle we’d found on the shore a couple a’ days b’fore, an’ I lost sight a’ them in the fog, but I could hear ‘em goin’ in circles, ‘cause Nathaniel didn’t want to get too far from shore an’ knowed that John wouldn’t know the diff’rence.

“For a while ev’rythin’ was quiet, an’ then Nathaniel was standin’ there all drippin’ wet next to me. I asked him what he was doin’, an’ he says he slipped off the raft real quiet an’ swam away, so John would be floatin’ all by his lonesome. Jest then we hears this terr’ble scream, an’ then a splashin’ right towards us.

“‘Quick,’ says Nathaniel, ‘go off that ways a piece an’ make ghost sounds so’t John runs straight up to the cave. We both done it, with John runnin’ back ‘n’ forth between our woooooos an’ ahhhhhs. He got to where the hill’s real steep an’ with loose dirt, an’ down he slides, loosin’ his gown an’ gettin’ covered in dirt. I could see that he was naked as the day he was born, an’ it was all I could do to keep from bustin’ out laughin’, but eventu’lly we get him up to the cave entrance, an’ in he goes.

“We was outside a’ that cave fer near a half-hour when finally Nathaniel takes off his shirt an’ makes a torch on a stick. When John sees us comin’ into the cave, he throws down a bottle he’d found an’ starts prancin’ this way ‘n’ that an’ screamin’ that he warn’t ready to

die an' then busts out right between us with his arms all wavin' over his head. That was it, neither of us couldn't help but start hollerin' an' laughin' 'till tears rolled down our cheeks.

"We walked back here an' set on the roof a' the porch right there," he pointed to a spot over the door, "an' waited fer John to get back from wherever he'd gone to. We fell asleep an' woke up, an' went through the whole next day without hearin' nothin' from him, but late in the afternoon, John totters outta the bushes with a bottle in his hand an' his gown on, all ripped an' dirtied up, an' shouts, 'Get on down here! I've a mind to lynch the lot a' you!'

"Nathaniel jest stands up, all calm an' delib'rate, an' looks down on him. John tried a little to outgaze him but faltered an' looked away. 'You think you got the nerve to lynch us?' says Nathaniel, knowin', I 'spect, that it was jest a tern-a-phrase, 'Why, nobody but a man'd have the gall to follow through on that one! An' you ain't been a man fer quite some time, I reckon! That's it, look away. Don't look up here; you ain't got the right! Now yer gonna stand there an' listen to me good, 'cause yer gonna take to heart ev'ry word I has to say. I know you feel you've suffered, an' I'll give you that you have more'n most an' had a right to wallow a bit. An' I know yer thinkin' we ain't done nothin' but make you suffer some more, an' I'll give you that we have. But we jest as much had the right to do what we done, 'cause you long ago used up all a' yer wallowin' priv'ledges, an' I'm damn sick of it!

"I know yer prob'ly thinkin' 'bout leavin' now. An' if you do, I'm a-goin' to help you pack. But I don't b'lieve you'll do it. No, I don't b'lieve yer man enough to even give up an' take off. You ain't nothin' but a coward! Wallow all you like, but if you was a man, you'd have pulled yourself together when I brought you here. You ain't even tried! Not once!

"John sunk down as low as he could an' still be standin'.

"Now, what we did, we done fer the adventure of it an' to teach you a lesson,' Nathaniel kept on, 'A body that ups an' tells the truth is takin' consider'ble many resks, an' I know it. But I'm a-goin' to tell you that you got to stop actin' like there ain't no world but the one in a bottle. I

don't want you to leave, and I won't insist you keep off the booze if you stay. I don't b'lieve droppin' it all together will settle anythin' for you. But if you stay, yer gonna drink like a man. If you choose to live here, as I hope you do, yer gonna treat others like a gentleman should. Y'hear?"

"John whimpered that he did, an' Nathaniel hopped down off the roof. Bein' not as young an' spritely, I climbed through the window to John's room. I walked down past that window town clock, an'..."

D. interrupted, "Wait. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You must a' seen it," said Huck, "it's that window over the stairs. You know which'n I'm talkin' about?"

"You mean that stained glass one?"

"Well, yes, that'n is the only one over the stairs, I reckon. Anyway, seems ev'rybody thinks a' that picture in a diff'rent way, but to me it's a little country town scene, an' the clear spot is where the sun swings by ev'ry now an' then like a pendulum, though not keepin' reglar time as far as we see it. It don't go by jest right to fit the hole but once a year, an' I ain't never been able to 'cipher out any rhythm to it."

Considering this for a moment, D. told Huck to go on.

"The front door was openin' when I got to the bottom of the stairs, an' in comes first John then Nathaniel, an' he was sayin' that th'other should go relax an' he'd heat up some water fer him fer a warm bath. Jest as he was closin' the door an' turnin' around, the sun hit the window jest right an' a beam a light shoots across an' hits square on Nathaniel. I swear I thought he must 'a' been an angel sent from Heaven. He sort of tilted his head an' smiled, with the light glintin' off his teeth. Nearly as quick as it came, the sunbeam went away, but both me an' John had seen it.

"John took a long bath down in the toilet by the kitchen, an' Nathaniel played at the piano. Music is a good an' freshenin' thing, 'specially after such hard talkin'. Since then, I've jest kept up with the little pranks an' games at John's expense an' callin' him yer majesty and that cave the Nonesuch Inn, jest to remind him. He still drinks consider'ble when he gets the chance, but I reckon he's much improved in his habits."

They had gotten ketchup from the kitchen and eaten their burgers on the front steps, Jim lying quietly at their feet and gobbling up what scraps were given to him. The sun was far down on the other side of the house and the stars were beginning to show to the East. Directly across from where they sat, a shadow moved behind the bushes. Perking up his ears, Jim lifted his head. John walked out of the bushes into the yard. He looked at the two of them.

“I don’t imagine I’d be far off if I guessed that Huck has been telling some of his favorite yarns.”

Not believing that she had been afraid to bump into this man not twelve hours ago, D. told him he was right.

“Don’t believe it all, miss, he’s renowned for his tendency to fib.”

Huck defended himself, “Now there’s things I stretched a little, but mainly I ain’t told nothin’ but the truth.” Huck smiled, and D. thought that John might have, too, just a little.

“We made an extra hamburger for you,” she told him.

John thanked her, and sat down on the steps to eat it. After helping Huck stifle the coals and put the dinner provisions where they belonged in the kitchen, D. asked John if he would mind if she drew a bath for herself. John didn’t object, so she went back into the kitchen where Huck helped her prepare to heat water on an old wood burning stove that had been converted to be gas fueled. He escorted her up to her room so she could get her candle, her book, and her bathrobe and found a towel for her in his room, the one at the other end of the same hallway.

Once inside the bathroom by the kitchen, she locked the door behind her and slid into the tub. Finding the water extremely refreshing, she recalled what John had said about getting clean after a long period of being filthy. She related but hoped she would never have to know the feeling to the same extent that John had. After her bath, D. unlocked the door as softly as she could and opened the door enough to peak one eye through. There was nobody there save Jim the dog lying right outside the door. He looked up at her with friendly brown eyes. Jim followed her halfway up the stairs and then turned to the sound of Huck’s voice:

“Hey Jim, why don’t you keep the lady comp’ny tonight?” Jim

barked his approval.

“That’s really not necessary,” D. explained, “I can take care of myself.”

“Still,” said Huck, “better safe... Lest I See Thee Not In the Morn Alas, sweet Emmeline. You never know what the people livin’ here can get themselves up to.”

Dismissing the strange phrase and name despite their familiar ring, D. agreed, “I’m starting to see that. But I must say that you seem awfully jovial to be among such strange fellows.”

“Well, thank you.”

“What keeps you here? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I don’t b’lieve in lonesome vacations, an’ I reckon that in a barrel of odds an’ ends things go better.” He turned back toward the front door.

“Huck,” D. called after him, “are you sure you don’t want Jim to sleep with you?”

“Naw, I reckon I already know where I’m headed in the end; I decided that one forever long ago, an’ now I don’t have nothin’ to be afear’d of. Ain’t nothin’ or nobody a-goin’ to lay a hand on me.”

Huck looked young and old at the same time. Extraordinarily alive and tired, too. “What makes you so sure?” D. asked.

“‘Cause I don’t put no stock in there bein’ a plot to this whole thing, I don’t give a dern fer any motives but mine, an’ I got my own damn morals.” He turned and left.

Jim followed D. up to her room, sat comfortably by the door, and watched her lock them in, blow out the candle, and climb into bed. “Goodnight Jim,” she said. Jim barked in response.

It is late at night. D. is sleeping peacefully, not dreaming.

The front door squeals open, leading Jim to raise his ears. There are footsteps up the stairs and along the balcony, and he sniffs at the bottom of the door. A green eye looks through the keyhole, only to jump back at the sight of sharp teeth behind a vicious snarl. Alex flees, but calmly, down the spiral staircase with a slight chuckle and something

jingling at his side.

D. rolls over and asks Jim what the matter is. He ambles over to her bed and licks her face. Nothing at all. Looking at the door, she lies back with her hands behind her head. She feels safe. The room is warm. Climbing out of the bed, she opens the window a little: just the tiniest bit, but a cool breeze squeezes its way into the room.

Giving Jim one last pat and scratch on the head, D. goes back to bed and to sleep. Jim hunkers down for the night.

The wind flows dreamily through the courtyard and out over the trees. It whistles through a hole in a cave. It ripples the grass in the field and the water in the lake. Tiny waves lap up against the bottom of the mountain. The water recedes enough for the moonlight to reveal a white robe with a hood buried in the mud.

Chapter 5

Excessively early the following morning, D. awoke to a whine and a lick with the predawn light just murky enough to see vague shapes in the otherwise inviolable darkness.

“What’s the matter boy?” she asked Jim, reaching out and patting his head on the second attempt. Encouraged by the gesture, Jim scurried to the door and looked back and forth between it and the dark mound on the bed.

“You want to go out?”

Hearing Jim shake his head spasmodically in an affirmative announcement, D. swung her legs from the bed and rubbed her eyes. The damp air made the coolness of the floor on her naked feet more conspicuous, and she shivered. She felt her way to the chair and slipped into the robe that lay across its arm.

Jim whined again.

The instant the key was turned and the door open, he darted out onto the balcony and toward the eastern end of the house. D. considered whether or not to follow. With the dog not directly at her side, she experienced a recrudescence of the unease that her Cerberusian protector had allayed. She glanced around, attempting to pierce the shadows of balconies and courtyard and shivered again from the mist of precipitation that hung in the air. The panes of the sheltering dome were hanging down in limp acceptance of the weather, awaiting the impetus of a hand at their controlling haft. The reticent shapes of the chair and piano lay vulnerable in the yard. The books aged on silently in the dampness.

Scanning the over-head apparatus bemusedly for a method of closure, D. was startled into her room by the padded footsteps of Jim returning to beseech her assistance with the front door. She smiled demurely at being so quick to retreat to what had become her barrack. Her question,

however, had been answered for her: she must accompany Jim away from her haven. She wished she had a leash to keep him near.

Once outside, Jim scurried into the nearby bushes, and D. contemplated the most secure stance and position, her inability to decide leading her to move her arms about as one does when incapable of finding a comfortable posture in an awkward situation. She had just settled, for the moment, on a cross-armed self-hug when the sound of somebody turning the crank to enclose the courtyard caused her to jump skittishly and her arms to spread in the anticipatory gesture of a gunslinger. Prowling her way quietly onto the verandah, she began sliding one of the front doors open incrementally. Before the opening was a shoulder's breadth wide, the squeal of the steps behind her caused her to pirouette in alarm, and the door swung closed with an unjustifiably loud crash.

"I'm sorry," said John. "Did I frighten you?"

D. breathed in deeply and tried to regain the reins of her racing heart. "Oh... no. I just didn't think anybody was out and about."

John, smoothing his wildly tousled hair, crooked his head in mild interest, walked past her to the door, and told her, "There's nothing quite as invigorating as a morning walk."

"I usually find that it's best to wait until it's actually morning for that."

With a perfunctory chuckle, John replied, "Perhaps I'm paying back consciousness for the years that I spent asleep."

As John crossed the threshold into the house, Jim bounded out of the woods and jostled the man's leg. Regaining his balance after a staggering moment, John hissed venomously an allusion to the animal's parentage.

Huck already had the stove heating in the lantern-lit kitchen when the trio entered. "Mornin' ev'rybody. I see I ain't the only one with a hankerin' for early mornin' vittles. How d'y'all want yer eggs?"

They ate at a small servant's table in the kitchen. As he wiped bits of egg from his beard with one finger pointed into a cloth napkin, John announced, "Martin arrived late last night."

"Oh," replied Huck, "an' how's th' old red-boy doin'?"

“Pshaw! Do you think he would demean himself to speak to a plebeian such as myself? He just asked if Nathaniel was here and went into his room.”

“Aw, yer majesty, it’s only hittin’ a man that’s a’ready down t’ hold a grudge ‘gainst a body as mis’rble as him.”

“He is the author of his own tribulations, and there is no need for him to be spreading his mordacity to anyone misfortunate enough to make his acquaintance.”

“Nobody makes themselves dispirited without there being an outside societal agent to start them on the path to self degradation,” D. interjected.

John pinched his lips and crinkled his nose as he turned in his chair to face her and snarled, “Until you’ve met the scoundrel, I don’t believe that you are in any position to spew your platitudes at me. Martin is as solemn and serious as an old owl and begrudges anything resembling imagination in anybody besides Nathaniel, whom he follows like a sycophantic puppy dog.”

“Now, now,” Huck began to defend the absent man, “y’ have t’ admit that he has his cagey moments.”

“Oh yes! He is most cleverly stupid and succeeds in flattery by dressing up a man’s own thoughts for presentation to him, but he only thinks he thinks, and is otherwise stodgy, galling, and an annoyance.”

“Well, whatever it is ya think a’ him yerself, y’oughtta let him discov’r himself to the lady here,” stated Huck, then smiling at D., “who knows, mebbe she’ll actually like him.”

“Perhaps she’ll save him, as well,” rejoined John with a sarcastic nod, and he stalked out of the kitchen.

D. and Huck looked at each other and began to clean up the clutter left by their meal.

Beyond the translucent ceiling of the courtyard the dark sky threatened rain. The romance novel, though unfinished, was no longer of interest to D. Every misunderstanding would be reconciled and wedding bells would toll as surely as detectives, in their own genre, would solve any mystery presented to them; so she determined to find a

replacement. After she had passed beneath the grand stairs of the entrance hall, with Jim meandering along behind her, her bare feet brushed against the grass, which was damp yet from the mist.

Finding that the extensive archive of books began winding its alphabetical expedition through the musings of myriad authors in the southeastern corner, D. attempted to locate the space in which the book for which she no longer had any desire belonged. The book cases were eight rows high, and though the uppermost ledge held the first authors of "A" precipitously well over her head, a tiny portrait of Sinclair Lewis glared at her from the binding of *Arrowsmith* at eye level. Reasoning that a comprehensive library such as this before her would be hard pressed to cramp eleven letters of writers into three shelves, D. followed the wall of literature to the distant west and back only to discover that the sequence was still interrupted.

Crossing to the spot directly under her room, D. learned that to follow the books in order would require the aimless browser to perform laps around the entire circumference of the enclosure. With the employment of deductive reasoning, and not a little wandering, she eventually cried a small "hoorah" to the panting dog at her side and slid the book easily into the spot from which John had drawn it, in plain view of her, just two days previous.

This accomplished, D. stared along the broad avenues of possibilities, finding the choosing of just one book to be a formidable venture. The sound of Jim cleaning himself at her side rescued her from the incapacitating irresolution into which she had fallen. Dog and woman each looked into the eyes of the other, and, as if some communication had taken place tacitly between them, D. set about finding the works of Mark Twain.

Book in hand, she retreated to her room, mostly on account of the moistness of the proximate furniture of the yard. Pondering whether or not to close the door, she decided to leave it open but resolved to shut and lock it if Jim should choose to seek out company elsewhere.

The appearance of a shadow across the book on her lap caused D. to glance at the window. The sun had broken a pin hole ray through the clouds, and the single beam stretched the silhouette of a nearby branch across the room to where she sat. She rose, eliciting no more than up-turned eyes under arched brows from Jim, and walked to the window, where she searched the sky for signs of clearing. The glimmer of light proved to be an ephemeral anomaly, only serving to briefly increase the overall sense of darkness that lay on the land.

As she spun to return to her book, D. caught a glimpse of a balding head looking over the banister of the hall opposite her room. The head raised with bottom lip thrust outward as if in disappointment at finding the courtyard unoccupied. The lip drew back into an indifferent line when the eyes of the face caught D. watching, and, without any further acknowledgment of her, the man to whom the features belonged marched to a table under the southern counterpart of D.'s window and began typing on a stentorian typewriter. The sounds of the hammers felt to D. as if they were being shot intently across space into her ears.

Not sure whether the time was auspicious for introductions, D. sat down and stared with distant eyes at the page in front of her.

tacktackclicktacktacktacktackclickclick

After a moment, the sound of typing stopped, stirring D. from her remote meditation, and did not begin again until she appeared in the doorway of her room. The man, still facing away from her, resumed his typing. Considering, briefly, the broad black back of the man's suit-jacket, D. took a step out of view, and the typing ceased again. Upon the instant that her inclined head had broken the plane of the portal the typing proceeded.

Snapping her fingers to bring Jim to her side, D. strolled around the second story, taking the circuitous route in order to avoid trespassing through Nathaniel's ever unrestricted quarters. When she rapped her knuckles audibly against the stranger's door frame he paused only stutteringly in his labor.

"Hello?" D. called.

Slanting his head to and fro as if trying to disprove the solicitation

of a spirit, the man turned and started as if in surprise. “Oh,” he puffed, “I didn’t hear you approach.”

“Sorry to startle you,” D. apologized, “you must be Martin.”

“Why yes, yes I am. Have you heard of me?”

“John told Huck and me that you arrived last night.”

In a cross between dejection and slow comprehension, Martin nodded his head. “Oh.”

“Did I disturb your writing?”

“No. No, I was finished anyway.”

Smiling coyly to affirm her purely facetious intentions, D. told him, “You must be a concise author to convey your thoughts in such a short amount of time.”

“Oh,” was the response, “well, yes. Yes, I guess I am.”

“I mean to say that you haven’t been at it long.”

“Well, I’ve been writing for years. It came quite naturally to me, you know.”

“No,” trying to salvage her meaning, “I’m saying that you haven’t been writing for a very long time *this morning*.”

“Oh.” Martin furrowed his brow in thought. “Well, one mustn’t attempt to exasperate the spurts of one’s inspiration.”

Martin was wearing a drab black suit with a plain blue tie. Drawing a handkerchief from his breast pocket with his plump fingers, he wiped across his double chin, down his flabby neck, and along his beaded forehead. Above his bulging eyes, which seemed to have been squeezed to their too narrow position by excessive pinching at the bridge of the nose during attempts to alleviate the arduous strain of thought, the sweat burst through his skin in three tiny beads identical to those that he had just swept away. He replaced the kerchief and ran a hand through his greasy graying black hair.

Striving to redirect her attention to conversation, D. prompted, “So are you named after Martin Arrowsmith?”

“Who?” came the reply.

“Martin Arrowsmith? From the book *Arrowsmith* by Sinclair Lewis.”

“Oh,” Martin looked confused. “No, I’ve never read that one.”

“So what Martin are you?”

“Hmm? Oh. Why Martin Eden, of course,” answered Martin, evidently believing himself to be stating the obvious. Then, D.’s reaction not being what he had expected, “by Jack London.”

“I haven’t read much London, but I did like *The Call of the Wild* when I was younger.”

“Oh,” Martin remarked, “I haven’t read that one.”

The conversation came to a silent halt. D. leaned over to scratch behind Jim’s ears, and Martin repeated his handkerchief exercise with repetitive futility. The faint patter of rain fell on the dome. After smiling absently at the dog, Martin blurted out, “He was a writer! Like me!”

“Who?”

“Martin Eden.”

“I imagine Jack London was one as well,” responded D. jokingly.

“Yes, I imagine. But I hadn’t given it much thought.”

“So you’re a writer?” D. asked, reeling slightly in the midst of bafflement.

“Oh, yes! Well, not by trade, yet. But I’m trying to get my works published. Editors are a mass of boors, don’t you agree?”

D. was struck suddenly with the impression that she had seen this man before and did not respond.

“You do agree,” stammered Martin, “don’t you?”

“Oh,” D. said, recovering, “I’m sorry. Uh, yes, I guess. Yes. What did you ask me?”

“Don’t you believe editors to be a collection of ignoramuses?”

“I don’t think I’d be the best person to answer that.”

Nodding in condescending comprehension, “Well take it from a real writer: they are.”

Allowing the potent resolution of his point to linger in the air undisrupted, Martin swiveled in his chair and tore the sheet of paper from his typewriter, knocking over a standing mirror on the desk in the process. Opening a drawer of the desk, he flung the paper among a heap of brethren. The brash manner in which he had thrown open the

compartment left the pages agitated, unsure of where they belonged and denying closure of the drawer. Once his works in progress were mashed out of the way by two fat fingers, Martin was able to shut the drawer.

“So what made you want to be a writer?” inquired D., clearing her throat.

Without hesitation, Martin responded, “I want to be one of the eyes through which the world sees, one of the ears through which it hears, and one of the fingers through which it feels.”

D. opened her mouth to speak, but Martin smiled, held up his beefy hand, and continued, “I know what you’re thinking, and yes, I really do understand that there are many many people who would aspire to that disposition. But I am peculiarly constituted to write. You see,” he went on, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his writhing fingers intertwined, “I am capable of making something, sometimes even a great deal, out of nothing at all. For example, there are two men who work in the laundry that I own...”

Covering his mouth in a nakedly aghast reaction to his faux pas, Martin said, with a pleased gleam in his eye, “Oh my! I have slipped, haven’t I!”

“How so?” queried D., not sure exactly what the blunder had been.

“Why, we’re not supposed to divulge details of our normal lives,” was the explanation. “But masquerade is foreign to my nature. I must be real! As I am constantly telling my tenants... well now, I’ve done it again. Now you know that I own an apartment complex.” He leaned back in his chair, satisfied at his rebellious honesty. “But to Hell with conventions! Tell me, what is it you do on the outside.”

Squirming, D. told him only that it was difficult to explain. Before she was through, Martin interjected, “Say, you look awfully familiar to me.”

Glancing at Jim, who was showing great interest in an ant struggling to carry a moth, then down the hall, D. assured Martin that he was mistaken and then changed the subject slightly by asking, “What do you plan to do if it becomes apparent that your career as an author is not to be?”

Martin smacked his hand good-naturedly upon the desk and declared, “Well then life would be an aching weariness. You know, it’s always been my intention that the instant I know, I’ll cease to know. If you get my drift.”

“When you know what?”

“Hmm... Well, I suppose when I know that people would be more willing to accept my originality were I unable to create any more, I guess. Yes, that’s most definitely the answer. I guess that’s why I return here every spring: to make sure that there’s enough of my works to be published when I’m departed. As I’ve said, when you own a laundry, an entire apartment complex, and a liquor store, managing to write becomes a challenge, even if all of your operations *are* on the same block.”

“Have you been coming here long?” asked D.

Martin lurched to his feet and, motioning toward his chair, said, “How discivil of me. Have a seat, have a seat, and I’ll tell you about it.”

Looking around the visible areas of the house, D. acquiesced. Jim, swatting the ant carelessly, sauntered into the room and plopped himself down at her feet.

Martin sat, amidst a protesting cacophony from the springs, on the bed.

“One afternoon, nearly a decade ago, I was surveying some land not too far from here when one of my tires burst on an inconspicuous road that I had taken mostly for the adventure of it. Well, a venture I had been seeking, and adventure I found, for I discovered adjoiningly that somebody had neglected not only to inflate my spare tire but to charge the batteries in my cellular phone as well. Somebody, incidentally, who is no longer employed by me.

“After a brief bout with fitful panic, I picked a direction and strolled down the road. It was terribly hot that day, and it was not long before the combination of bountiful sweating and the blistering rub of my expensive leather shoes induced me to rest on a fallen tree by the road. It bears mentioning, at this point in my story, that I was unversed in the ways of country hiking, and no sooner had I alighted on the log than it

rolled over and pitched me careening down a deceptively steep decline. When I finally stopped rolling, I found myself so disoriented that I staggered randomly into the surrounding trees.

“This forest harbors many pitfalls and obstacles for the untrained woodsman. Consequently, by the time I stumbled upon the Pequod I was bruised and exhausted. I crossed through the hatchway on my hands and knees, gasping for water. Inexplicably, I was driven to my feet by a spell of sneezing. Upon rising, there came to my ears the beautiful intonation of a piano, not to say that I’m remarkably susceptible to music: the beauty was in the emancipation signified by the beacon. Looking briefly at the trick picture in the entrance hall, I walked...”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” apologized D., “but what do you mean by ‘trick picture’?”

“Oh, you must have seen it... that stained glass monstrosity over the stairs? I call it a trick picture because I find it to be a great sacrifice of beauty simply in order to advertise the artisan’s cleverness. Leaving a bit of glass to represent a sun that only fills the gap but once a year. Phah! What a waste.

“Well, anyway. Where was I?”

“You had just walked beneath the stairs, into the courtyard, I imagine.”

“Yes. Yes, quite. Under the willow, a young man, who I later found out to be Nathaniel, was playing the piano. Sitting in various places and positions around him were John and Huck, whom you’ve already met, I believe, and a negro,” this word eked out forcedly from his mouth, “that called himself either George or Henry, dependent upon his mood. He, however, you will not meet here, for he no longer graces us with his presence.”

“Why is that?” wondered the sole member of Martin’s audience, who was a little bothered by Martin’s choice of words.

With a brusque statement, he informed her that that was the very story that he was getting around to telling and went on. “Over the next score of days, I was bystander to more insightful discussions than ever a college professor participated in. Now, I’ve come to realize that it is a

fact that all well-groomed persons above the working class exude an inherent power of intellect, but back then, in my youth, it seemed the books were alive in these disputants. Their opinions were not premanufactured. They were rebels of their own sort. Within reason, of course,” Martin qualified.

“*My God*, I thought to myself, forgiving myself the oath, *here is intellectual life! Here are the books come to life and electrifying the very air!* By Nathaniel’s advice, I read the book by Jack London that later would become my defining story. The tale so motivated me that I began reading the dictionary to improve my vocabulary and ability to express my thoughts — an occupation to which I’ve religiously devoted no less than five minutes of every day... the dictionary, I mean, not the other. This habit is only during my yearly residency here, of course, but a finer mastery of phonetics than mine I’ve yet to encounter.” Martin nodded his head curtly out of pride in his achievement.

As if he had been awaiting a lull in Martin’s oration, Huck stuck his head around the entrance to the room and said, “I’ll be makin’ soup an’ san’wiches fer lunch. Y’all game?”

D. smiled and told him that she was.

“No,” proclaimed Martin, “I’m quite contented.”

“Suit yerself,” said Huck, and then to D., “I’ll holler up t’ya when it’s a-ready.”

Martin shook his head incredulously at the interruption and in shaking shed his agitation. “Where was I?” he asked, squeezing at the bridge of his nose.

“Reading the dictionary.”

“Oh. Yes. Well, it was while so occupied, or rather, while resting my eyes after a particularly arduous study, extended by fully two minutes, that I tore my eyes from a cumulus cloud to give voice to my mind. ‘Every line of the really great poets is an indispensable statement of innate beauty and truth,’ I claimed.

“To which Nathaniel responded beguilingly, ‘What makes you say that?’

“I thought for a moment and then explained that a poet whom every

eminent personage of the literary world agrees is great would, by nature of his being great, be incapable of putting pen to an extraneous line, for it is the power and greatness of their writing that makes them great.

“‘So,’ came the infernal response, ‘the greatness of the poems defines the value of the poet?’

“‘On the surface it may seem so,’ I insisted, ‘but it is the poet who crafts the words and places them in such a way as to make them remarkable; from which accomplishment, the reader learns to define poetic greatness.’

“‘Then it is the critic’s ability to recognize the inherent merit of words that have been auspiciously placed by the poet, whom all agree is great, that makes of the critic a qualified judge of the extent to which the poetry exalts the poet?’

“‘I told him that, apart from my preferring the term analyst to critic, his assumption sounded reasonable. He could not, however, let the topic remain at this elevation and said, ‘So what do you make of instances when two prominent *analysts* disagree?’

“‘Well,’ I rationalized, ‘in any such case, it will not forever be dubious which of the two is the lesser, for, obviously, one must be wrong and one right.’

“‘Nathaniel then proceeded to fumble about for a retort by suggesting that poets who become famous years after they are dead must necessarily have been at least a generation beyond the readers of their time and somehow worked his way to the casuistic conclusion that either the poet’s greatness must have been externally and posthumously imparted on him or the human audience must deny its ability to definitively declare that any poem or poet is great, or something to that effect. Ignoring his erratic logic, I submitted that since the poet must have been raised under the same literary principles, albeit perhaps with a more privileged education, as his audience, he could not possibly have intended to say more than humanity, even if delayed, would eventually be able to understand.’”

At this point in Martin’s discourse, Huck’s voice poured over the banister and into the room, and, much to Martin’s chagrin, D. stifled a

yawn and excused herself and Jim, who had been obviously snoozing, to lunch. At the bottom of the stairs, Huck asked her how she was finding Mr. Martin.

“Oh, he’s very... pleasant,” was the answer.

After she had eaten, however, D. found that she felt a throbbing aversion to returning for the consummation of Martin’s story. Despite the pang of guilt that was aroused by this sentiment, and the fact that she could not discern the exact cause of her repugnance for the man, still she could not deny that it existed.

Huck birthed a chimera of hope by informing her that he was off to collect the remainder of his provisions. Reminding her that it was his own to do, however, and commanding the mistakenly exuberant Jim to stay with her, Huck departed alone.

Procrastinating yet a little longer, D. finally started toward her own room, but, feeling guilty and rude for entertaining her first impulse, she eventually made her way to Martin’s, utterly expecting him to be poised on the edge of the bed ready to pounce and waiting to accost her with his recital. Instead, she found him sitting at his desk gazing out the window, utilizing neither the paper in his typewriter nor the book in his lap. As D. watched, Martin picked up the book, read a line, and put the book down, lips moving as if he were trying to memorize something by repeating it over and over to himself.

Exhaling an exasperated breath, she posed the question, “So where were we?”

Martin swung about in his chair and blurted, “This world is so ordered that money is necessary to happiness.”

“Excuse me?” asked D., fairly certain that she was sorry to have returned.

Martin squinted his eyes, as if trying to decipher her question, and explained, “That is what I had been trying to explain to Nathaniel when George came ambling into the yard. He sat down, and I no longer felt free to speak my mind openly,” explaining, “He was the type that compels you to watch your words, so to speak.

“Nathaniel, unmoved by the third party, declared, ‘It is not the being famous, but the process of becoming so, that counts.’

“This, of course, was poppycock. What could be the possible justification for writing that which no other person would ever be granted the opportunity to appreciate? ‘No,’ I told him, ‘art must see print or it is no more than amusing.’

“Nathaniel protested that it would be a tremendous mistake to envision a world in which there are no objectives unfettered by the opinions of somebody else. To which silliness I avowed that culture is an end in itself.

“‘What is culture,’ he struggled, ‘but the conglomeration of all human opinions?’ And I decided that we had reached the limit of Nathaniel’s ability to conceptualize the topic at hand.

“After a moment of silence, the very calm before the storm, a harsh cry of dogma crashed into the intellectualized calmness. ‘All your culture does is crush us and keep us down,’ professed George.

“I, of course, set out to explain to him that it was by virtue of culture that empires had been built, that so many people could be provided for in the world, and that it had even led us into space. ‘Culture,’ I told him, ‘does not crush, it emboldens.’

“Nathaniel interjected that my folly was in often confusing culture for education. To which accusation I contested, ‘Education is indispensable for whatever pursuit one may endeavor to achieve, cultural or otherwise, but is only a division of culture as a whole.’

“Again George interrupted, ‘But your educational system teaches only how to live in your culture.’

“As I tried to explain to George that he was mistaking racial culture with *true* culture, which is inclusive of every constituent of God’s kingdom, Nathaniel attempted to reconcile the difference by pointing out that, though I was onto something by forcing a distinction between the two, the teachers of our educational system were inherently limited in their perspective, and, as mere guides to the classroom of knowledge, as it were, could only describe those things that they had been culturalized to recognize. George, despite the fact that I don’t believe that he had an

inking as to what Nathaniel's meaning was, nodded his head in approval. I put forth that, even taking him to be correct, adroitness in culture was the very tool needed to understand how to apply our knowledge.

“‘Like two hundred years of slavery?’ shouted George.

“‘Why does it always return to slavery with you people?’ I criticized.

“‘Because slavery always ends in misery!’

“‘To which Nathaniel suggested that slavery had ended.

“‘It may have ended for the white man,’ came the confutation, ‘but it is alive and beating at the souls of every African American alive. Only in the grave can we find equality.’

“Nathaniel told him that by taking such a stance, George and his people were frustrating any chance of alleviation.

“Ignoring me when I suggested that the only hope lay in creating a society in which the law of development could be annulled, and in which every person of lesser advantage might eat as many times a day as he desired, George griped, ‘How can we think differently when the effects continue to prevent us from even finding jobs? Do you think I’d be spending so much time here if I was able to find a career that gratified me?’

“Telling him that he wasn’t going to find a career here in the mountains, Nathaniel explained to him that true rewards never landed in any man’s lap, and if they did then they weren’t rewards but charity. ‘Get off your ass,’ he said, ‘and work just like any man of any color must do.’

“At this point, George was beginning to show signs of anger. ‘That’s easy for you to say, who’ve had every advantage of white society.’ And Nathaniel, squeezing his hands together to abate his own growing rage, suggested that George had no idea what he did outside of this house.

“‘What about this fat,’ calling me a nasty name, ‘here? He’s never had to work a day in his life. He practically brags about his poor treatment of my brothers and sisters that he works to death as employees and soaks the life out of as tenants!’

“I began to protest this horrid accusation, but Nathaniel stepped in and defended me, ‘That has nothing to do with you,’ he stated, ‘I

guarantee that he treats with impartial *pess-tif-er-us-ness* [I haven't had a chance to look this word up yet, but it sounds grand] people of every race. The point is that you are wrong to use that as an excuse to waste away your life complaining. Go out and make something of yourself! Martin cannot help his advantages, nor should he be forced to make apologies for them, for he is no more than a triviality of means [doesn't that just sound so poetic?]. But you have been granted the opportunity to become a saint in slime and may achieve the satisfaction of attempting to drag yourself from the mire into which you were born. Even were you to fail, still have you gained the self-fulfillment of the trial. But it is easier to bewail your position than to improve it. You could refuse to subordinate yourself to the unanimous judgment of mankind; but, no, the truth is that you are lazy. Yours is a manifest burden and easily rallied against. It is a color that you are fighting — no less difficult an obstacle for being so, but unhindered by enigmaticism. I tell you that you are lazy, and that you are afraid to discover that convenient skin does not preclude suffering and hardship. Hidden behind your belligerence is an apprehension that if you deny your skin dominion, then you will next be forced to be conscious of the fact that life is most often just plain hard no matter who or what you are. Much the more comforting to be fighting a word than a certainty of reality, and rather than better yourself and make of yourself an example, you succumb to that very word and make of yourself a nigger.'

This last word Martin rasped softly under his breath as if reluctant to speak it, but, given the circumstances, reveled in uttering the forbidden oath.

"I'm certain that the wisdom of this diatribe was beyond George's ability to comprehend because on the instant he jumped up and charged at Nathaniel. At first he had the advantage of surprise, and even got in a few skimming blows, but Nathaniel, by virtue of keeping his head, soon gained the upper hand, flipping George upon the ground and landing on his chest."

Martin squinted one eye sagely and accented the words with one corpulent index finger, "'I refuse to hit you,' he said. 'What good would

it do? The point has already been made more potently than I could have conveyed it in words. I have now bested you in your own language, and you can hardly compete in mine. So where's your angle?"

"I, myself, couldn't help but pity George, as I do any human creatures that are less fortunately placed than myself, but I also couldn't help concluding that, since Nathaniel's and my thoughts were beyond him, so must we be beyond him. Nathaniel let him up cautiously, and we have never heard from him since.

"I must admit, though I believe that Nathaniel knows very much about very many things, his flashing insight and flaming uncontrol of genius prevent him from living down his working-class origin, and I lost a good deal of respect for him that day. I guess when one is raised as a child, one will only know the solutions of immaturity. And so, I couldn't help pitying him as well, a little, for he is without past, has only the imminent grave in his future, and exists in a bitter fever of living."

D. was stirred from the half-attentive state into which she had retreated over the course of Martin's oration by the harsh ringing of a spring-powered alarm clock. "Well," Martin announced, standing and clapping his hands together, "it is time for my daily regiment of study and exercise." He motioned to the door, "So if you please."

Entirely contented to escape his oppressive presence, D. roused Jim and made the journey back to her room. The sky above the protected courtyard was still gray, but a lighter shade. Scarcely had she reached her doorway when Martin burst from his room and called across to her, "Do you know if there's any soup left?"

"I don't know," she responded. "Probably."

Nodding, Martin made his way toward the kitchen.

D. spent the remainder of the day reading and had nearly finished the book when Huck announced that dinner was ready. Bringing two folding chairs up to the northern tower, the two ate while watching the sun, which had broken from the clouds just in time to set. John had disappeared, as was, according to Huck, his wont to do, and Martin had paced around the house, occasionally stomping grandly to his room with

a ceremonious announcement that he was returning to work and typing erratically for several minutes. D. wondered how many times Martin had told the story that she had heard from him and whether it might be that same story that he was constantly typing, over and over, with very minor variations.

But then, she had more than ample evidence to support this conclusion.

Huck had passed the time between lunch and dinner with several bottles of beer pushed into the damp soil at the juncture of a cool stream, which sprung from the earth high up on the mountain, and the pond in which a fishing line lapped lazily at the water. The line had, apparently, been more profitable than the bottles, as evinced by the facts that each of their plates sported an amply sized trout and that Huck had moved on to a large glass of vodka and cranberry juice. He had the air of a man slipping gently into the indolent undulations of a temporary Summer retirement.

“So,” he said, leaning back in his chair as the last fingers of red light slipped over the mountains, “I reckon ya haven’t got yer keys back yet.”

“No, not yet. The guy who could set me free has been mysteriously absent lately, and nobody seems willing to help me leave otherwise.”

“He’ll turn up ‘venchally.”

D. looks up at Huck as if to ask a question that will relieve the consternation in her face. Huck keeps his face in profile for a moment then smiles genuinely at her before raising his glass to his lips. Martin whistles to himself as he climbs laboriously up to the southern tower, looking quickly toward the purple horizon when Huck waves to him.

In the distance, two owls exchange questions.

The front door squeals open and Jim can be heard charging from his sentry position below Huck and D. toward it. In the mild evening air, John’s expression of surprise floats across the courtyard, seeming to rustle the willow’s branches in lieu of the negligible breeze. D. laughs quietly.

But the branches continue to quiver long after Jim has returned to his station and John has found sleep in his chair. The tree trembles as if in expectancy, with labor looming. D. tilts her head as if straining to hear the groans of Nature waking up. Perhaps she trembles imperceptibly herself. The forest bursts forth another cumulative bloom and thickens as if solidifying. And D., just like a high flying bird who wonders that there could be anything dangerous hidden below the clouds, looks upon the interlocking branches that will soon disguise the earth with life and listens to the sounds of a house relearning to handle people.

Chapter 6

It likely happened that the increasing warmth in each breath of a day, with the green light of life that it brought, pushed D. past the desperate urge to leave. It wasn't so much that, once delivered by her canine guardian from the clutches of any perceived immediate urgency, she forgot that it had been her intention all along to not stay, nor did she relinquish this intention, but perhaps she caught herself in the leaves of books and, having no more compelling reality to call upon, diminished the effort that she insisted be put forth toward her escaping and increased the minimum impetus required to make her flight feel imperative. Whatever the case, the days went on and the forest burst forth its essence in increasing time — until a single breeze ticked out each underlying beat of the season's rhythm.

The elapse of hours became a blur to her. Fully three days, or six days, or a week, drifted in lethargically cyclic shadows across the pages before her eyes, the turning of which sounded maraca sub-beats. A cloud would block out the sovereign eye of the sun and then release its hold to allow the rays to grace D.'s smiling lips as she entertained reveries elicited by whichever tale she happened to be perusing: each titter a reaction to the light that certain words shed upon her specific situation and life in general, or perhaps the inverse was true. Still, these reveries provided an outlet for her anxieties and sufficiently convinced her that the concrete world was founded no more securely than on the wings of fairies that she allowed herself to ignore the unreality of her predicament.

In the evenings, various combinations of the cast would perform discourses and soliloquies for the company on multifarious topics. If the theme was of art or literature, John and Huck would recite the bulk of the lines with an occasional quip from D. Were societal diatribes the order of the day, Martin would slither from his room and offer an erroneous opinion or two.

However, and such was the case on one of two nights that stifled the stream of D.'s awareness adequately for moments to endure as memories, a conversation concentric on Nathaniel would draw the entire abbey to the courtyard for the hearing. Of course, it merits mentioning, the lingering menace to D. loitered further and further from the group's consciousness until he seemed to cease his lingering and sink into the distant ground as a high mountain will appear to shrink in upon itself as it drifts toward the horizon and, if the traveler cannot deny that it persists of itself in an equal capacity, still he knows also that it is only so for somebody traveling after him.

So it was that the troupe seemed huddled together as if in prescience one evening. D. sat against the willow reading a book, the view of which she attempted to obscure from Martin whenever he strolled by. John lay tipsy snoozing in his chair, an adventitiously telling critique of the thriller that lay open upon his lap. Huck sat at the piano, flailing a capricious, almost accidental, blues (although it is likely that he was trying for rag-time), with Jim at his feet occasionally lifting a watchful eye to D. Martin sidled before the bookshelves reading titles under his breath with an amusement that was either childlike or Alzheimeric, repeating those that he found to be the more interesting — if only by virtue of the shapes that they forced his lips to make.

It was Martin, as if tired of waiting for the inevitable opener, who burst out, "It seems to me that Nathaniel used to be here directly on the equinox every year."

Letting a jangling verse hang in the air in expectant incompleteness, Huck responded, "Has that passed a'ready?"

"Yes," patronized Martin, "it was last week."

"Well, I always miss it. Mebbe he'll a-be here for the solstice. That'n's a little more o'vious."

"What makes you say that?"

"I'd say it's a darn sight easier to pick out the longest day than the middle-mos'. The first'n goes on an' on, an the second just ain't much different than the two around it."

"But," interjected D., noticing Martin's quandary, "by that method,

it is only easier to know that you've missed it. It wouldn't do you any good for scheduling."

"Well," rejoined Huck, "I reckon Nathaniel wouldn't bother schedulin' hisself 'round nothin' so flighty as the sun, anyhow. He's a-gonna git here when he wants ta git here."

Martin, who seemed not to have understood how his simple observation could have gone so awry, said, "All I was saying was that he's been arriving later the last few years."

"Well," suggested Huck, "a man's gotta work, I reckon. Ain't no young man ever drifted out'n nowhere to direct an entire castle. Least not to my knowin'."

As innocently as was possible, D. inquired as to what, if anything, those present knew of their good friend's livelihood. Huck indicated that it was Nathaniel's affair, and none of the party, especially when it was considered that they had all, with the exception of John, arrived as uninvited guests, had any right to question after it.

Mostly for the audience of D., Martin crowed, "I've made somewhat of an endeavor to find out." And then qualifying, "Not that I assume to be always amended in my assumptions."

"Oh?" Huck tilted his head and leaned forward mockingly.

D. asked what Martin's educated conclusion was.

"Well," he stammered, "I may not be the smartest person in the world, and... well, I can be fairly intuitive, on occasion. I don't know, but I believe Nathaniel might be — note that I say might — well, I believe that it is possible that he's a politician."

Huck sent him reeling in perplexity by simply requesting that he justify his statement, and Martin, something pathetic in his concentration, appeared to nibble on memories and expectorate his murmurous thoughts. "He." His lower lip thrust outward as he measured the potency of his revelation. Then, to the reception of much supercilious laughter from Huck, "Well, he just has that sort of smile."

A handful of fluid days later, but who's to say it wasn't closer to a week, Martin was performing his characteristic nose-pinching as he satisfied John's inquest into the current events of the world at large,

with the often utilized aide of the news magazine that John had just read. The entire discussion had the air of a ritual — one that was apparently appropriate unless, and the absence of this quality could only have been an incessant pique to Martin, the news concerned one of the members of the household.

Following a dubious compendium regarding the state of the American presidency reported by Martin, John burst forth the violent ejaculation, “Civilization is going to pieces! For my part, I am ever more gratified that I haven’t left these premises these many years.”

“The real question,” stated the starry-eyed Martin, “is whether or not we’re becoming too extraneous in our treatment of details. The activities of men in power have always been flagellous, and I can’t help but deduce that the longevity of the practice proves its equity.”

Shaking his head in perturbation, John questioned Martin’s use of words.

“Oh,” was Martin’s dilatory response. Producing his fortuitously located dictionary from the ground behind him where he sat, he flipped through the pages and recanted, “Oh, excuse me. I meant to say flagitious.”

“Whichever word you should use to describe it, it is a travesty that our morals and leadership should be so adulterated.”

To which Martin responded, “Let’s not forget that the American system, one which must be proper and correct because it is the only successfully American one on the planet, justly allows for men of greater means and education to hem and haw their way outside of decency. What would be the reward for success if it were not so? No, I maintain that it is an earned privilege of the exultant to be fallacious.”

“I hope for the sake of the final vestiges of patience that I harbor for you that you say that facetiously.”

Martin whisked through the crisp pages of his antique dictionary and amended, “Oh, excuse me. I meant to say factitious.”

D., who had been passing above them on the balcony called down, “The real problem would be solved if the most accurate ‘f’ word to describe men was ‘flaccid.’”

Martin and John, not having realized that they were being overheard pricked up at the female's voice. "Well," offered John, "perhaps if women weren't so insouciant with their attire and activities..."

"Then men wouldn't be so quick to show their true selves and brandish their cigars so flagrantly."

The intercourse being beyond him, Martin could only testify, "I never..."

John, apparently more aware of current events than Martin, who lived among them, interrupted, chortling, "Well now we're discussing a humidior enveloped in public hairs."

"Where exactly do you stand on the issue of the presidency?" Martin attempted to reinstate himself into the conversation.

Settling back in his Morris chair, John reflected and explained, "It has little effect on me. I stand alone on this final boundary of civilization throughout the entire year, and when I was a mendicant of the grandest metropolis in the world, I was even less prurient. Therefore, I am an impotent arbiter."

Perhaps these were the songs that called to D. Strange to hear, but who's to say? When thoughts of escape hinted at the edges of her mind they may have been overwhelmed in repartée and allusion, the incomprehension of either of which left her ineligible for commencement. Yes, she was immobilized by curiosity. Who could guess what mellifluous speech would be presented in the evening. And increasingly intriguing was the fact that each day was pregnant with the possibility of even more entertaining company and perhaps even the arrival of that one expected person who would, by his inimitable nature, blot out the relative doldrums of these many days. As time progressed, D. found herself further removed from fear and drawn closer to interest; and so, with no compelling reason not to stay, she resolved, at the very least, to diminish her efforts to escape.

Not too many days subsequent to this poignant exchange, but certainly not before or concurrent to it, D. decided to take in the sunset from the towers alone for the first time. Partially because she did not

believe Jim capable of the climb, she had been afraid to risk the venture. However, her newfound complacency suffered her to rise to the northern height.

A curious tinge of melancholy gained purchase within her as the salacious rouge that coated the western lip of the sky inherited the day's ducat in exchange for a cold silver dollar. Just as welts along her arms responded to the iniquitous swap and the chill air that was its decrement, John's head appeared through the hole in the floor.

"Nick?" he called, and looking around at D., "Have you seen Nick?"

D. began to tell him that she hadn't met the man when a bronze voice wafted over the parapet, "Are you looking for me, John?"

Stumbling up the final steps to the platform, John looked anxiously across the roof at a man on the southern tower. "Nick, my boy, you seem to have forgotten something in your car."

Nick laughed heartily, "And what might that be?"

"Well, I'd hate for anything to spoil. The weather is quite a bit warmer this evening than it's been."

Nick informed him that there was nothing perishable left for him to deliver, but that if John was impatient to augment the variety of his diet then he could collect the keys and get whatever he desired himself.

"You know that I can't do that," John protested.

"Sure you can, a little divergence from your code might prove edifying."

"Impossible."

But Nick held as fast to his stance as John to his, and the latter went away somewhat dejected. Even from her distance and through the dark, D. could tell, if only to the satisfaction of her expectations, that Nick nodded suavely at her and sauntered nonchalantly to gaze off after the dissolved remnants of the sun. He was dressed all in white, but some enchanted trick of light gave his silhouette, which, truth be told, had little more clarity to D. than a will-o'-the-wisp hovering above an inordinate tomb, an ethereal green tint. With the effervescent stars above him and circling around him on his perch he gave the impression of an olive in an upended glass of black champagne. D. looked off into the

graying west.

When at last she coyly glanced in his direction, Nick had disappeared as if disintegrated into the moist darkness. Following the perimeter of the platform, D. gazed down upon John settling into his chair in the courtyard. The balcony adjacent to Martin's room appeared to flicker with the candle light that flowed in spurts through the doorway, and the hesitant ticking of his typewriter pecked at the serenity of the evening. In the distance, she could hear the straining of pipes as somebody, most likely Huck, pumped water into the dish basin in the kitchen. As the pumping abated, a raucous snoring filled the aural void, but, as branches blocked her view of John's face, she could not tell if the sound rose from the courtyard or the open room, as the successor of the now desisted typing. An owl called out to the evening company and metallic footsteps began to rise to her position.

Turning, with a slight patter of heart, D. watched as Nick's head levitated into sight. His hair was a straight and neatly combed brown, and a thin matching mustache pointed downward toward the stiff white collar of his shirt. Hanging from his shoulders was an unclasped white velvet vest, offset, in color only, by smooth strands of protruding chest hair. The hair of his forearms, exposed by virtue of the up-rolled sleeves, proved to be of an equally silken texture, so calm in hue as to be nearly invisible against the well-tanned skin. In one hand were two champagne glasses and in the other was an anonymous bottle.

"I thought that you might like some company," Nick explained. "These enchanted twilights can cede to a haunting loneliness sometimes."

Slipping into form, D. responded, "I find it more peaceful than haunting."

Nick, who had gained the tower by this point, smiled and placed the glasses upon the stone parapet. "Ah, but calmness is seldom an end in itself."

"I find it romantic," offered D., and amended for the sake of quenching innuendoes, "or solacing."

Nick's lips parted as if to begin a phrase but only released a wisp of air.

“Yes?” asked D.

Shaking his head dismissively and smiling again, Nick told her, “Oh, I was reminded of something in what you said, but I couldn’t resuscitate the thought.”

“A lover, perhaps,” it must have been the stars that made her speak so freely, “perhaps a squandered affection?”

Handing her a tastefully half-filled glass, “No, I believe it was more akin to human sympathy having its limits.”

D. sipped the champagne. Because she was no connoisseur, to her the tickling juice seemed pungent. Glancing at her over his own glass, Nick sipped from it and stated candidly, “I don’t like mysteries.” Sip. “You must tell me who you are.”

Thinking that he referred to the frivolous game of aliases, D. told him that she hadn’t chosen yet.

“No, I did not mean that. I was speaking of your type. A name, after all, is merely an arbitrary title.”

Seeing that she was uncomprehending, Nick suggested that she might either be a Daisy or a Jordan. “Not the flower for the first, and certainly not the river for the second,” he specified.

“You’ll have to refresh my memory. What would be the difference between the two?”

“Well, are you wise enough to let forgotten dreams linger in their proper age, or are you stubborn enough to vainly attempt to remain a beautiful little fool?”

D. considered whether to be amused or insulted, then responded, “I don’t believe myself to be of either school. Despite your phrasing them to make one so much more attractive than the other. I’m afraid — Nick, is it? — that I’m wise enough to forget and vain enough to pray that I continue to smolder with my memories.”

Nick snickered, “Very cleverly put! But you can’t mean to be a Myrtle: then you’d be left to a chill fall. You can never truly escape the call of the ashes, you know.”

Smiling politely, handing over her nearly untouched drink, and thanking Nick for his company, D. made the excuse of intending to help

Huck with the dishes. As she drifted down the steps, D. paused in response to a burnished call:

“Have you heard, miss, that all people in this world are either pursued or pursuing?”

“No, sir, I can’t say that I have.”

“Well, stay busy then. Stay busy or resolve to be weary.”

The dish washing station was really quite remarkable. Perhaps the average visitor would pay it little heed, not only due to an acclimation to the luxury of instant hot water in the home, but also because the Pequod was so full of intriguing items and ingenuities that innovations of the domestic kind could only pale in comparison. But then, perhaps it wasn’t such an amazing contrivance. After all, the inventor would most likely have been accustomed, himself, to modern running water systems and, thus, come up with this invention because he was unable to develop a more convenient method.

The following morning, D. thought of Nick as she stoked the flame in the small enclosed oven under the dish basin and pumped water to clean the breakfast dishes. Huck had begun the process, with the promise of D.’s assistance, but had marched off, book under arm, hinting that he had some immediate personal business to attend to.

During breakfast, Nick had been excessively civil to D., and she could not help but feel that he was struggling to devise some means of speaking with her. They had sat, all five of them, at the servant’s table in the kitchen, and Nick had remarked that it would be prudent of somebody to clear off the dining room table in the near future — their current dining arrangement would only seat one more. He had addressed the comment to the entire audience, but in some tacit way made it clear that he had no intention of being the one to perform the task or even to help.

She was pouring soap into the as yet cold water when D. heard the door swing open behind her. After waiting for some salutation or annunciation of intent that never came, D. turned to find Nick leaning, with arms and calves crossed, against the door frame: the picture of

apathy even concerning the length of time it took for any conversation that he was planning to initiate to take form.

D. was the first to speak. “I don’t know how we’re going to continue to eat like that if many more people come.”

“Oh, we’ll get by.”

A discomfiting, but perhaps so for having been planned to be such, silence settled on the room like downy linen. Nick shifted to the other shoulder on the opposite door frame. “I’ve been meaning to apologize.”

“What for?” asked D.

“I don’t know, entirely. But I seem to have upset you last night, so this morning I’m apologizing.”

Smiling amusedly, D. accepted the apology, half-heartedly insisting that it wasn’t so much that she had been offended, but that she hadn’t been of a mind to have a discussion as had seemed brewing.

“It’s just,” Nick struggled, “it’s just that, to my experience, it is invariably saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have expended your own powers of adjustment. I suppose I addressed you so put-offishly because I wanted to leave the way open to deny any insights you might have in the future that contradict everything I assume to be true. In part, as well, I must admit that any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency, such as you were demonstrating, draws a stunned tribute from me.”

D. wondered what specific evidence she had provided Nick to justify this flattery. The next swift moment, the door swung open to Huck proclaiming that he felt lighter. Nick was flung into the room and asprawl the table at the room’s center. Huck sized up the situation and said, “Oh, I’m sorry Nick. I didn’ know you was there.”

Stroking his vest and hair so as to straighten them along with his composure, Nick suggested, “Well if you’d be more careful with that cruel body of yours...”

Huck cut him off with a laugh. “My body ain’t been fitted fer cru’lty fer quite a while now, I’d say.”

“Well still, if you weren’t always seeking the dramatic turbulence of your irrecoverable college football games.”

Looking at Nick quizzically, Huck corrected, "I was a baseball man."

Storming huffily out of the room Nick asperterd, "And I'm sure you never tire of reminding the whole sad world of your advantages."

When Nick was gone, Huck shrugged his shoulders for D.'s benefit and asked, "I'll wash, you dry?"

Having read the book to the very last word, D. lay it closed upon her thigh and ran her hand along the cover as if she wished to smooth a wrinkled cloth. She looked up from her chair and out the window at the branches that hung threateningly near. Though parts of the book had dragged, she had to admit that in the end she was moved. One thought led to the next, and she decided that it would be best to stroll and clear her head.

From the balcony she could see John, still awake and reading in his chair. Huck was beneath the tree engulfed in an apparently humorous tale, and Jim pranced circles around the yard in pursuit of his own. Looking to the left as people look down well known roads in their commutes, D. instead took the spiral staircase down into the empty ball room.

Her bare feet sent rhythmic shushes into eternal channels of echoing. She noticed that there was nothing to be seen from the broad picture windows but the budding green of the proximate trees. To be honest, the scene was mostly brown, and as the birth of leaves is one of nature's least spectacular events except when viewed in turns, she initiated a pirouette in order to leave the morose sight. But as she spun, some anomaly in the hue of one of the trunks caught her fancy. Having noticed a stark difference, more minute ones became apparent, and yet more. In one spot a branch with the same curvature as another had a juvenile leaf at the elbow. One tree trunk was so wrinkled that the preponderance of shadow made the bark look nearly black.

Once, when she had been younger, though perhaps not much, she had spent a house-ensnared snowstorm piecing together a jigsaw puzzle of a verdant forest. She was three quarters finished when the snow had stopped. In conjunction with the placing of the final piece to its natural

residence, the sun broke through and drove away the clouds. While surveying the weighty mask that lay across the land, D. had noticed that what had appeared to be a blinding white was, in fact, a collage of hues and tinctures. Here a mound of snow fallen from an overhanging branch left a squirrel shaped shadow. There the snow had melted into a sheet of nearly reflective ice and appeared to sparkle blue with the mirrored sky.

The differences, it need not be said, would have been there had she noticed them or not, but her eye had just graced three thousand similarly colored bits of cardboard for the most minuscule of details, and the habit had yet to dissolve. So did the trees before her now ripple into disparity.

A clicking of nails on marble startled D. from her reverie, and Jim came bobbing across the room with a rubber ball in his mouth.

“Where did you get that, boy?” inquired D. of her mute companion.

Jim swished his tail from side to side and dropped the ball at her feet. Sweeping it up before it had come completely to rest, D. hurled the ball against the nearest wall and watched as Jim slid, as if on ice skates, to intercept the unpredictable projectile.

Nick appeared from the hallway that ran along the southern side of the house and issued a resonant whisper, “Those toes of his make quite a racket in this room. I rather think that they are in need of grooming.”

Jim did not answer the suggestion, nor did D. respond. Speaking in a near whisper, Nick said, “I don’t suppose that it’s difficult to discern that Huck and I are not on the best of terms.”

“Oh. I hadn’t noticed.” D. reconsidered, “At least he hasn’t said anything to me.”

Crossing the room and gazing out the window with his arms clasped behind his back Nick told her, “I’ve yet to deduce the reason that the builder of this house placed the widest range of windows in view of nothing more than tree trunks.”

“I imagine that the house was built before the trees had grown so high.”

“I suppose you’re right. But for the half-decade that I’ve been here, I haven’t noticed any significant change in their height, though I can’t

claim to have been watching closely.”

D. noticed that Jim was quietly attempting to peel the skin from his ball and asked Nick, “So what story are you going to tell me?”

Turning only his head, with eye brows up-raised, Nick seemed to be calculating the amplitude of D.’s true interest. “There are many I could tell you. What would you like to hear about?”

D. chuckled at the seemingly superfluous question. “How about Nathaniel?”

“Oh? Have you been told much about him?” And after D. had answered in the moderate affirmative, “Have you been given the same portrait each of the three times you’ve heard tell of him?” D. stated that she hadn’t. “Well I don’t suppose he’d be bothered much whatever impression you develop of him, but I wouldn’t care for you to get a wrong idea from all the stories you hear, so remember: until you’ve heard the same rumor from three people, you can’t be certain that it’s true.” He smiled to indicate that the specific number was arbitrary.

After D. had reassured him that she would keep an open mind and not come to any conclusions at all until she had met the man, Nick yanked a chain that disappeared into a pocket of his vest and pulled out a watch. Debonairly flicking the cover shield with the nail of his thumb, he checked the time against the exterior shadows as if the trees formed a peculiarly accurate sundial. He replaced the watch and began to speak.

“I, like most of the people that you’ll meet while you are here, was an uninvited guest. Oh, some will claim to have been brought. If not by Nathaniel then by some higher power or some such gobble-de-gook. To my knowledge, the only person who did not just arrive here, excepting acts of God, that is, was John; but in the state in which he generally comports himself, Nathaniel’s might as well have been the voice of Jesus for all he’s aware.

“No, I barged in on the Pequod’s patrons in as harsh a manner as is likely to be possible without ending one’s life. Several accomp... acquaintances of mine deserted me not far from here. You see, I was forced, by circumstances that I won’t describe to you now, to make a

quick exit from their moving vehicle, and it was quite beaten and bruised that I first knocked on the door without drawing a response from anything but a hooting owl.

“I must have fainted, because the next thing of which I was aware was a large tree that seemed to be dripping snakes all around me.”

“The willow?” interrupted D.

“Yes,” responded Nick, slightly perturbed that he hadn’t gotten to tell it as he wanted, “Yes, the very same. But in my state it seemed a blurry monument dripping snakes all around me, and I nearly jumped through the branches when a strange, bulbous face leaned over me and glared at me with protruding bug-like eyes. The phrase, ‘they’re real, you know,’ drifted through my semiconscious awareness.

“‘What?’ I said, startled to rising, ‘the snakes?’

“The man who I would later learn calls himself Martin gave me a much deserved look of bewilderment, ‘What snakes? I noticed that you were looking at the books and I thought that I would save you the trouble of having to ascertain for yourself. They are all real. I’ve read the titles of every one.’

“I, understandably, had no idea what the fool was talking about, but rather than admit this to him, I merely asked, ‘Why shouldn’t the books be real?’

“‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I was fooled.’

“Before I could make any sense of the matter, John came into the courtyard and managed to get me cleaned and fed. After situating me in the room next to Martin’s, John explained to me the etiquette of the household and told me that if I needed anything he’d be delighted to oblige me.”

D. interjected, “Sorry to interrupt, but there’s something that I’ve been wondering about John that maybe you could shed some light upon.”

Smiling sardonically, Nick told her that he’d be happy to try.

“OK. When I first met him, John lured me here by claiming to have a lit fire and plenty of food.”

“What of it?” impatiently.

“Neither was true.”

“You mean to say that he was unable to provide you with any sustenance?”

“Well, if you call instant eggs and stale bread sustenance...”

“So then he did give you food.”

D. responded irresolutely, “I guess, but there was no fire.”

Nick looked at her as if he could not comprehend her insinuation, then explained that “Dishonesty in John is a thing that you never blame deeply,” and a block of confused muteness was broken when he requested permission to continue his story.

“Oh, sure,” said D. “I’m sorry.”

“Not a problem,” Nick consoled. “What was I about to say... oh, yes. I don’t believe that there was anybody here then that you have yet to meet, including Nathaniel. Apparently he had disappeared quite mysteriously, and my arrival served only to exacerbate the uneasiness that seemed to monopolize every conversation. For my own part, I enjoyed this period, not only because I was as yet unnamed, but because I was generally unnoticed due to this ineffable vanishing of a person of greater concern. In short, I was within and without. I could drift from room to room and between conversations and the awareness of the others. I found, as you will, that quite a diverse clientele congregates here and amazing railleries are issued: even more amazing for the fact that diatribes and casual innuendoes alike are between men who’ve never known each other’s names! But still, contrary to the tension that one might expect, there is an overall sense of calm. All keep in sight of the fact that presently this year’s foray will be over and a short trip later they will all casually put each other away in their minds as strangers in a daydream.

“Perhaps some things never change. Perhaps there are constants in subject matter as much as in weather. Or perhaps some topics age like wine, becoming more pungent with each ferment of consideration. But then, it must be acknowledged that his mysterious absence made Nathaniel the modish topic of the early summer. Martin, I recall, was vainly attempting to deny that he was worried. His supposition was that Nathaniel was a juggernaut and that nothing short of an apocalypse

would prevent him from returning. I suspected, and time has made me more firm in this conviction, that Martin, in all his conceit, was afraid that Nathaniel would never return of his own volition and that such an act would be exclusively a comment about him.

“John, however, was afraid for Nathaniel’s safety. ‘He is, after all,’ John would say, ‘just a man named Nathaniel.’ And while I agreed with this observation, I couldn’t comprehend the need to refer to him as merely ‘just a man.’ Huck, on the other hand, claimed to have no concern about Nathaniel’s safety; but I suspect that he was just covering his confusion, for his is a simple mind, and, as I’m sure you know, there is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind.

“However, despite all the conjectures, I couldn’t help but feel an admiration for this man who was able to inspire romantic, in the classic sense, speculation from three so enthusiastically obsequious characters and yet still force them to pay him the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him. Although, I often question whether this treatment of his guests isn’t more of an instinctive reaction to his lack of knowledge about them. After all, even I forced my way in after a fashion, and maybe he’s just too polite to object.

“Nathaniel returned quite a while after I had arrived, and I wondered what all the fuss had been about. I was pacing laps around the house on the verandah, and from the dreary east during sunset I made out a figure in the murk emerging from the underbrush. His head was hung low, and as he passed under a tree he reached up apathetically and plucked a ripe leaf from a low-hanging branch. The branch wobbled slightly and stopped as if it had been disturbed by no more than a slight twirl of air. I leaned against the railing and watched as the figure crossed the yard and, without so much as a glance in my direction, vanished into the house. He must have slunk directly into his room, because none of his ardent followers made any mention of his arrival until the moon had slid so far across the sky that his silhouette was suddenly visible on the southern tower.

“Huck noticed him first, and, after squinting in his direction called out, excuse my poor imitation of his accent, ‘Nathaniel, is ‘at you?’

After everybody had called up to him in their own manner, he was finally persuaded to come down into the courtyard and greet everybody. I was introduced as a new arrival who had not yet chosen a name, and he indifferently shook my hand without meeting my eyes.

“Over the next week I saw very little of Nathaniel. What I did see of him imparted onto me the unfavorable impression that this sullen mopish figure was the embodiment of everything for which I have an unaffected scorn. He would drift around the house like a ghost, and if he approached you at all, it was as if he believed you were so indefinite that he could pass right through you. Each evening he would ignore the concerned inquiries of his purported friends as he stared off into the woods in the manner of one who is trying to determine what share of the local heavens belongs wholly to him.

“In late August, John came down to breakfast one morning with the news that Nathaniel was not feeling well, or at least not himself, and had requested with all possible submissiveness that we all bring our vacations in his home to an early end. Martin protested blandly, but John insisted that it was for the best and assured us that life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall, and Nathaniel would be his usual ebullient self come spring. The combination of Nathaniel’s mysterious demeanor and what was probably an earnest reluctance to leave his host in such a disquieting state of mind with no means of finding out how he fared for at least seven months prompted Huck to refuse the request and storm off in search of Nathaniel.

“I was in my room looking around, feeling as if I should be packing despite my lack of personal effects, when an imperceptible sound called my startled attention to a figure in the doorway. It was Nathaniel, and he did look as if something undefinable was ailing him. Before he spoke, I felt a sudden surge of sympathy for him as it occurred to me that there is nothing so disconcerting to a healthy man than one who is ill, even a stranger. As if he had read these thoughts, he said in a low voice, ‘Listen, old sport, I was wondering if you might be able to stick around for a week or so.’

“The request was completely out of keeping from anything that I

could have expected. I, after all, was already picturing my return home; so I stuttered those same hasty questions that seem instinctual reactions in order to leave open avenues of evasion should such prove to be the rational mind's inclination without closing doors of acceptance should the opposite prove true. After he informed me that he had convinced both Huck and Martin, who had come to him in a somewhat more insidious manner a few moments before he came to see me, that everything was fine and that he just needed to be alone, Nathaniel smiled at me. To be honest, my mind had been pretty much made up to leave, but something in his smile made me want to stay. I understood that he must have learned long ago that people would react favorably toward him when he smiled, but that comprehension did not in the least dampen the radiance of the smile that now flashed for my benefit. There seemed to be nothing but sincere innocence in this particular smile, and I felt reassured that, even were politic smiles his usual habit, in my case it was different. Indeed, there was suddenly a pleasant significance in having been asked to stay, and I could not refuse.

“We decided for the sake of appearances that I should take an extended walk about the forest in order to avoid sparking exactly the kind of jealous outbursts that were precisely what he did not need at the time. Having offered farewells to Martin and Huck — and even to John, though he assured me that he was not a seasonal occupant — I left for a very pleasant romp amongst the trees.

“When I returned, I approached from the west, a sliver of the moon protruding above the roofs of the house. It may seem odd, considering that the absence of two people from a property that commonly houses only four, with a capacity of much more, is hardly a populous decrease, but the silence that issued forth from the hard dark outline against the velvet sky seemed to infiltrate the entire countryside. The windows looked down the hill at me in empty conviction, broken only by the outline of Nathaniel sitting on the roof between the two towers.

“And so it was, because John is apt to disappear for long intervals without notice, that I found myself in Nathaniel's house, and alone.”

As if he had been trying to make good time in his telling of the yarn,

Nick produced his watch and repeated the dramatically indifferent flick that lay it bare for his inspection. “Well,” he said, “would you mind if we concluded our colloquy in the evening?”

Dinner had passed with no sign of Nick. D. was surprised to find in herself a modicum of apprehension not unlike that of a lovelorn maiden. It wasn't that she was developing any attraction whatsoever for him, but Nick's tale, apparent in the telling, had been heading into the realm of melancholy. With her imagination hopelessly inclined to create vast and morbid possibilities, D. began to long for the end of the story so that she could choose another book from the shelf and curl into a literate ball in her room. That would, after all, leave her mind to ponder securely fictional accounts.

After dinner, D. noticed that the day lingered longer than it had been, and, strolling through the entrance hall, she watched the bright blur of the sun pass through the stained glass owl and disappear as it sank below the distant roof. The hall turned instantly dismal, and she hardly heard the creak of the door and footsteps behind her until a voice whispered, “So what do you see?”

Spinning with a start, D. inhaled deeply and pressed a hand to her chest, “Oh, Nick. It's you.” Then, “What did you say?”

“The window,” he replied, gesturing to the subject of his inquiry, “what does it look like to you?”

Turning back around, as if a final glance after having looked at it so long would prove to be the decisive one, D. decided, “I haven't decided yet. What does it make you think of?”

“A token,” Nick told her curtly, “for the subway.”

“Oh.”

Moving next to her, Nick watched with D. as the shadow of the roof rose until it had completely engulfed the window. As if he had been waiting for the exact moment when the darkening of the room would cease to be observable and begin deepening in increasingly murky shades of gray, Nick said:

“You know, my first year here I used to watch undevotedly for the

day that the sun would line up with that pigmentless hole. Even more so once everybody had left, before Nathaniel and I began to talk in earnest. It was only a matter of days after I had watched him from the underbrush as he sat on the peak of the roof that I was standing on this very spot watching the bright splotch of the sun descending in a direct course for that center shard. It sounds either fanciful or dimwitted to say it now, but as the climactic moment approached, I noticed that my pulse began to quicken and my eyes refused to blink. I watched as the first sliver of unadulterated light curled around the edge of the ring. I turned to witness the crescent-moon shape that had appeared against the wall behind me, only to see a silhouette block out the light. Unjustly chastising myself for having blinked and missed it, I turned to discover that the obstruction was on the other side of the glass. I could even make out the arms and legs of Nathaniel on the distant rooftop through the window. I don't believe that he knew the calamitous maneuver that he had made, but it seemed almost too convenient that he moved out of the way just in time for me to watch the sun lose its grip on the bottom arch of the ring.

"Part of me, I suspect, was bent on reprimanding him for his inconsiderate action, but when I emerged into the courtyard, I merely stood there and watched Nathaniel pace back and forth on that precipitous crux between the two towers. He'd caress the cold stone of each before twisting and casually crossing to the other.

"Would you like to go sit on the verandah?"

D. did not answer the question, for she had not understood that it hadn't been part of Nick's narrative, but she responded to the extended silence. "What was that?"

"I was just wondering if you wanted to sit down somewhere. I feel as if I've been standing all day."

D. coalesced in acquiescence, and he led her out onto the porch, where they sat next to each other in individual wicker chairs and looked off into the increasingly obscure trees.

With an elegant clearing of his throat, Nick continued, "The daily ritual of the household became so routine that it was nearly comfortable for all its morbid ambiance. John, for all I could tell, was either absent

for long intervals or wandered off before I awoke and staggered in after I was asleep. Nathaniel stayed up all through the night at his perilous vigil and so slept all day. I took the freedom of my days to reinvigorate my long lost literacy and at night watched from below as Nathaniel measured out the sunset in footsteps and glared off into nothing once the moon had risen behind him. One evening I was speculating about Nathaniel's purpose in having me stay and resolved to rise to the southern tower and confront him.

“I made no effort to conceal my ascension or position, but still he didn't appear to notice that I was watching him. From my new vantage point, I could tell that he wasn't looking after the sunken light of the day, but into his palms: with one eye covered by each hand. His posture bespoke an aloofness that compelled me to hold my tongue, and so I spent that evening, and several nights after, just watching him after he had sat down into stillness. No, that's not right. I say that he was still, but had that been truly the case, I imagine that some common concern for humanity would have forced me to attempt to lift his spirits. But the truth was that he was never quite still. There was always some kind of motion of his feet or hands that made him appear to be lost in grappling with some indomitable question, so I didn't dare disrupt him.

“It was already very nearly autumn when I finally picked a name for myself. I realize now that that must sound like a frivolous pedantism to be elated about when I had effectively been left to myself for several weeks. However, like the missed sunset through the token hole, I had been so consistently curious about the significance of the event, that when it came I felt as if I had been cheated by not having anyone with whom to share the moment. I decided to celebrate myself, and it was dark by the time I had finished the sole remaining bottle of champagne, and the house and its living gargoyle changed before my eyes into something significant, elemental, and profound. It was in this state that I finally stumbled up to my accustomed perch and called out the news to Nathaniel.

“I've decided since then that he must have been really very distant in thought, because I needed to remind him of the book from which the

name had been drawn. He glanced up at me, and through the dim light I could make out his lips moving slightly as if he were formulating a response. I flattered myself that I had diverted his thoughts onto me, but then he said, in a whisper that required me to lean so far towards him to hear that I nearly tumbled end over end to my doom, ‘I’m afraid I won’t be much of a protagonist for you.’

“I thought I was being quite cavalier when I told him, ‘Who’s to say that it is your role to play,’ but he just cocked back an eyebrow in dismissal and resumed his previous position. I had resolved, before I had climbed to that height, that I was either going to converse with him that night or leave in the morning. The stakes on my next words being so high, I took a moment to consider. Nathaniel was, I imagine, in his early twenties at that time, and by virtue of my being a little bit older, and at that age that ‘a little bit older’ seems more significant than ‘much older,’ I thought I’d be able to draw a fair conclusion of his state through mere deduction.

“On first reflection of him sitting there curled into a cocoon of consideration, it seemed to me that Nathaniel was in the process of undergoing some sort of metamorphosis, one that was still too fresh for him to have realized what he had gained by it, so he was caught in the lamenting of that which he had lost. An eager leaf, brown and dead, skimmed the rooftop, making a deceptively loud scratching noise before it floated down into the courtyard. I looked at what Nathaniel had built around him. I thought of the droll companions that he kept always surrounding: interesting if not worthy of being celebrated. First I brought a vision of Huck to be considered, he of the demeanor that suggests that he is the only person unaware that his life runs on now as if in an inevitable anticlimax to those shining, regal days of youth. Displacing Huck in my mind’s eye was Martin: a man who had been so drunk all his life on the rote maneuvers of a complacent existence and understood it enough to believe that some benefit might be gained from the world of books, but was too lazy and stupid to do more than pace the library reading titles. And over them all, to be dealt with on an even longer term basis, John, who made no qualms about preferring to be alone, then submitting himself to the rape of privacy that comes from small gatherings. But

still, they were, and still are, by the way, as are all of us who come here, all careless people. When our individual seasons are over, we disappear and forget whatever messes we've made of Nathaniel's world. At that time, I almost pitied him. I sighed at the misapprehension of this simple gift that he gave to those who shared his home for a time.

“But in his turn, I realized, Nathaniel had developed his own creation of himself before he threw open the gates to his reality. His, however, had not been an idle diversion. He was younger then, and his identity was still malleable. Once he had perceived his freedom to do so, he had thrown himself into the molding of his adolescence with a creative passion, picking bits and pieces of any plume that drifted his way. But because he was young, he invented the sort of figure that any young man of his intellect and spirit would be likely to invent and had explored this symbol of himself to the extent that it became comfortable and real to him. But, of course, we grow out of the fancies of childhood, and I had arrived just in time to witness the crucial moment of readjustment. He was running down like an old clock in order to rewind himself to a different rhythm. I think, though, that his poetic nature had imbued him with a longing for exactly the type of liberty that youth inherently imparts. I concluded that he felt his freedom slipping away like the sun into dusk, and that the sunset, as it sank and blew the verdant hue from the foliage in a radiant beacon, had become to him the sinking vision of the person that he had been, and in losing himself, his count of enchanted objects had diminished by not one, but two. If this were true, he must have felt that he had lost the whole warm world, and so, in melancholy reflections lamented the disappearance of the sun too devoutly through the night and was forced to forego his relish of it by the natural necessity of sleep.

“‘They’re a rotten crowd,’ I called out to him. ‘You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.’”

“After that evening it was as if I had discovered the key to the treasure chest and lifted the lid to observe the jewels that were temporarily mine whenever I wanted. Nathaniel began to retire earlier each night, and as he partook of more and more of the day, we increasingly occupied each other with conversation. He talked a lot about the summers of the past,

and I felt confirmed in my suspicion that he wanted to recover something but realized that it was currency that must eventually be traded in.

“As the first cool breezes began to blow, Nathaniel began making arrangements to leave. I made it known to him that I had no means of departure, and he offered to break the mores of the household just that once when he went into a nearby town to replenish John’s supplies for the winter. He dropped me off outside of a small, one window train station on the outskirts of the town. I remember that I had sat there for a moment wanting to say something insightful and uplifting. The thought didn’t come to me until I was out of his titanic and ancient Oldsmobile, and I held the door open as I told him, ‘I truly believe that sometimes, if you’ve given up something from your past and the future proves that you made an error, then you can reinvigorate that part of you that you’ve lost.’

“‘No,’ he said, ‘you can’t repeat the past.’

“And with that he leaned over and pulled the door closed and drove away. To this day I consider his departing words to be proof of his extraordinary gift for hope. I knew then, as I know now that Nathaniel will turn out right in the...”

The sound of a breaking twig stops Nick before he finishes his sentence; rather, it is D. jumping up from her seat and backing toward the door that stops him. Nick calls out, “Is somebody there?”

The quiver of a nearby bush is the only response. In the eerie light of the moon, the shadows of each leaf can be seen to flutter like scarabs frightened from their carrion. A metallic jingle sends D. racing into the house in search of Jim, or perhaps any company will do at this point. Nick, unshaken in his familiar surroundings, stands up, placing his hand on the balcony, a disquieted expression on his face as he stares into the impenetrable darkness of the forest.

“Who’s there?” he shouts. In the gloom he can vaguely make out a dark shape floating away. Shivering as the shape blends into the deep shadows all around and a whistled tune that he finds familiar but cannot place drifts out of the anonymity of the darkness, Nick enters

the house, muttering, "Like a figure of ashes gliding away from him through the shapeless trees."

Chapter 7

D. heard several voices in the courtyard when she woke up the next morning, so she walked out onto the balcony without much worry after she had slipped into her white dress. The sun was high overhead, and she knew that she had slept much later than she had been. Below her, Huck, John, and Martin were talking about something or other in which she took no interest, because, having slept so late, she expected to take a proportionate amount of time to wake up.

“I see the new girl’s fine’ly ‘cided to show,” Huck called up.

Martin had been preparing to speak and huffed mildly. D. rubbed her right eye with her knuckle and mumbled.

“There’s still some coffee in the kitchen,” Huck said.

D. yawned and nodded and walked down the eastern stairs and into the kitchen. She pulled a cup from one of the pegs on the wall by the sink and poured herself a cup of coffee and drank it black and quickly. The coffee was lukewarm. Drinking a second cup, she ate a cold leftover pancake. Her third cup of coffee emptied the pot, and D. sat down to drink it. Her slight scare the night before had left her in an excited enough state that she had stayed up late with the four men of whom she was not afraid. They had all been quite drunk and moderately amusing. D. had been sober, and she had slept late.

Huck came into the kitchen followed by Jim and commenced to make more coffee. He told D. that there had been no sign of Alex and that she didn’t really have to be afraid in the daytime at least. She agreed. Waking up this morning had felt like a Sunday morning in any mysterious small vacation hotel where all the guests know each other and the proprietor is mysteriously absent. The coffee was almost finished.

“What’s through that door?” D. asked.

“Oh, that’s jest the northern hallway. There’s some paintins that

Jake drew.”

“Who’s Jake?”

“Another reg’lar.”

“Are they any good.”

“What?”

“The paintings.”

“I reckon they are, but some’v his newer’nes are a little modern fer my tastes.”

With another cup of coffee, D. headed for the door. Huck clicked his tongue two times and nodded toward her back. Jim slipped through the door as it closed.

The corridor into which the door had opened was about six paces wide and went the length of the house into the ballroom. Halfway down the hallway two French doors faced each other, one in each wall, as did eight evenly spaced windows. Jake’s paintings filled the blank spaces between each aperture. D. noticed that some of the panes had been removed from the inside windows, probably to replace those on the outside, and the backs of books were visible in lieu of the courtyard.

The first painting on D.’s left was not much more than a mediocre sketch of a proud looking matador framed by too long horns, but the mediocrity was offset by the intricate furls of the cape, in which D. felt as if she could find beautiful images if only she could look more closely than she seemed able. She turned around. The picture opposite the one with the cape was also black and white and exhibited a human shape standing with arms uplifted against a turbulent gray sky on what appeared to be one of the western towers. Again, the picture was unremarkable but for the effort that had been put into the intricacy of one aspect, in this case the clouds.

The next set of pictures were more colorful. Headless blue eyes looking over a book on one wall stared at a smeared man spinning from a blur with horns on the other.

The bull-fighting series continued next with not much more than a colorful streak arching over a brown splotch, and the only detail was a pencil-drawn hand gripping a menacing horn. D. turned around. A

black shape was contorted over a detailed drawing of the courtyard piano as if gently stroking it. The shape had little by way of definition, but the gentleness of the playing was somehow conveyed.

Crossing the hall to the inside, D. looked at a canvas with random splotches of blue suggesting the shape of a prostrate person over a pool of red, and, surrounding the blue and red, grained yellow spread all around, and, floating above the blue, was a flowing red billow. D. realized that the lines of this streak were reminiscent, as if modeled upon those of the cape in the first painting, and she was turning to stroll back down the hallway and compare the two when the flicker of somebody entering the hallway through the outside French doors caused her to stop and gasp.

The man who strode into the hallway was tall, but not burly. He wore a short brown beard and classically short brown hair. His eyes were brown. Tucked into his blue jeans was a tan button-down shirt.

“Hello,” he said.

D. staggered back a step and breathed a faint reply.

“Did I scare you?”

“Yes. Yes you did.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t like to use the front door and there isn’t usually anybody in this hallway.”

“That’s all right, I just thought you might be somebody else?”

“Well, who would I be?”

“The guy who attacked me and stole my car keys.”

“Oh?” he asked. “That’s not a usual part of the ethics.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Who was he?”

D. looked the man full in the face. There was no malice in his eyes. But she wondered, “Who are you?”

The man stammered. “Oh, I’m sorry.” He held out his right hand. “I’m Jake.”

D. looked at Jake’s hand. She shook it lightly. “Hello,” she said. “I don’t suppose you want to know mine?”

“Not if it’s real.” Jake looked down. Jim was looking up at him with his tongue out. “Hey Jim.” Jake scratched behind the dog’s ears. Jim wagged his tail.

D. smiled. “Strange that you should arrive just as I’ve discovered your paintings.”

“Yes. I suppose it is.”

He gave Jim a hearty smack on the side. Jim spun around in a blithe circle with his tongue hanging out.

“So this guy,” Jake said, “was he attractive?”

“Excuse me?” asked D. It really was a strange question.

Jake cleared his throat. “Would you say he was a great looking boy?”

D. wrinkled her eyebrows. “Alex?”

“If that’s his name.”

“I really didn’t get that good a look at him. Why?”

“No reason.”

They were quiet for a moment. Jake looked through the French doors at the trees. The leaves were filling in the gaps quickly — as if before their eyes.

“I should say hello to everybody,” he said and walked down the hall, through the door, and into the kitchen.

D. watched after him for a moment, feeling surreal, as if she ought to know some stage directions to apply. A flurry of wind moved through the ankle high grass, through the door, and into the corridor, convincing her that she was corporeal. She shut the door and followed Jake.

Everybody was in the courtyard when Jake walked in followed by D. He hugged Huck, shook hands with John, waved to Martin, and nodded in Nick’s general direction. After brief greetings, he excused himself and walked outside through the ballroom. The men returned to what they had been doing. D. looked around and then meandered to the upstairs bathroom where she washed her face and gargled some mouthwash. Then she mulled about her room deciding what to do.

Jake returned in half an hour with a large jangling duffelbag and

two leather wine-bags dangling from each shoulder. In the short time that it took D. to make the trip down to the courtyard, one of the four leather satchels had made its way into everybody's hands. Nick turned down the wine but went up to his room next to Martin's, and the popping of a cork was heard. When the first wine-bag was emptied, another made the rounds. Nick came back.

The conversation began lightly, while everybody was still aware enough to be careful. The topics were those that most people reserve for the beginning of reunions, but since questions of everyday life were forbidden there really wasn't much to talk about and the conversation didn't stay light for long. D. slipped into the kitchen to make more coffee. She didn't want any wine at this time of day. Jim followed her.

"So what's this I hear about somebody forcing the young lady to stay against her will?" Jake asked.

"Well, there really warn't much we could do 'bout it." Huck said. "I been watchin' fer the guy, but I ain't seen him. But I reckon she'd stay now even if she had her keys."

"I think we saw him in the bushes last night," Nick said. He sipped his champagne. "She looked dreadfully frightened."

"What's his story, John?" Jake said.

"He seemed pleasant enough before she came. Kept to himself mostly. Wonderful pianist. I suppose I had a favorable opinion of him."

"How did he show up?"

"In the middle of the night, badly beaten. He said that he got lost and had quite a few falls while rambling about."

"I'd believe that," Martin said.

"Me, too," said Nick. He hid his face in his glass.

"His story is just simple and believable enough to mistrust it," Jake said. He looked at Nick.

"If I told the truth when I came, I don't see why we shouldn't believe him," said Martin. "People, on average, are only mendacious when they've something to hide; and since my story is much the same as his, I can only assume that he is telling the truth."

“Mendacious.” Jake said. “Did you learn that word today?”

Martin looked down at his hands. “Last week.”

“Well, you don’t know a hell of a lot about people.”

“And you do?”

“No, but you *think* that you do.”

D. came into the courtyard carrying a cup. The conversation stopped as if they had been talking about her. The third wine-bag was passing hands. Jim bounded around allowing everyone to pet him.

“So Huck,” Jake said, “I see you haven’t had cause to stuff Jim yet.”

D. looked at him in surprised disgust. “That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“At’s a’right,” said Huck. He was smiling. “It’s a bit a’ raillin’ ‘tween us.”

“Still. I don’t see the humor.”

“I would never joke with a friend in that manner,” Martin assured D.

“I’m sure that’s only because you’ve got more enemies than you can handle by just being ingenuous,” Jake said. “Maybe you should try it.”

Martin looked flustered. D. almost felt badly for him.

“Now, now,” Nick said, “there’s no reason to be picking on poor Martin. You’re no better than him, Jake, and you know it.”

“What’s the matter, Nick? You two have something brewing?”

“Why don’t you cut it out, Jake? You haven’t even been here for two hours, and you’re already causing trouble.”

“You’re right. Why don’t you change the subject.”

Nobody spoke. A small bird landed high in the willow and whistled.

“How ‘bout some lunch?” Huck asked.

Martin skipped lunch in order to return to work. After lunch, John disappeared, and Nick was reading in his room. D. had intended to take a look at the final painting in the northern hallway and then see what was on the walls in the southern, but Huck had sat down at the piano and she wanted to listen to the jazz that he was playing. Huck wasn’t

much of a piano player, so he repeated himself often. Soon Jake emptied his duffelbag of wine bottles and strolled off into the woods.

The sun was framed between the western towers when Jake walked back into the courtyard. D. looked up from her book. Jim pricked up his ears.

“Where is everybody?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Huck’s taking a nap.”

Nick’s door was closed. Martin’s door was open.

“You’ll have to excuse my behavior before.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed yet,” said Jake, “but Nick brings out the worst in me. In anybody, really.”

“I can see how he could rub the wrong way. But then again, I could see how you all could rub somebody the wrong way.”

“Really? I thought that we were all pretty nice people.”

“Eccentric.”

Jake agreed. “So what did you think of my paintings.”

“They’re not bad.”

“Well, I’m not an aficionado. Of that at least. I only paint two each summer that I’m here. I don’t have the time or the excuses the rest of the year.”

“So this is your fifth year.”

“Yes. And I don’t know what to paint.”

“I noticed that you haven’t painted the house yet. You could paint that.”

“It could use it.”

Jake smiled. D. looked at him for a moment and then smiled back.

“I meant that you could paint a picture of it.”

“I suppose I could, but it seems pointless to hang a picture in a house that shows what can be seen by walking out of it.”

“You could take the picture with you when you leave. Or is that against the rules?”

Jake nodded and sat in John’s chair thinking. “I used to think it was ugly, you know.”

“What?”

“The facade of this house. But it’s begun to appeal to me.”

“I think it’s spooky.”

“That’s because it’s spring. The summers here are like a fairy tale. I imagine that the winters are a nightmare. We’re in-between right now.”

“I don’t know how John stays here all Winter by himself.”

“John gets by. Sometimes I think that’s the reason he reads all those horrific stories.”

“To build up immunity?”

“No. To see what it’s about. That way it’s all explainable and has a definite end.”

“But reading a story about the unknown won’t circumvent reactions to it in the real world.”

“It will if you have faith.”

Jake walked across the courtyard to get the one wine-bag that hadn’t spilled its contents yet. He came back, sat down, and took a drink. “After Nathaniel stayed through the winter one year and saw what the Pequod was really like, he gave John a list of books.”

“This isn’t the way the Pequod really is?”

“No. In the summer everything is unreal, and there aren’t any perceivable consequences. The time is too short. At least usually. I think the fact that Nathaniel stayed here through that winter, the one before I came for the first time, and probably the state of mind that he was in at the time blended the two fairy tale seasons.”

Jake held the wine-bag above his head and a stream of wine squirted into his mouth. D. went into the kitchen for a glass of water and returned.

“So what was the fairy tale?”

“I don’t know if that’s the best thing to call it, but I guess it’ll do.”

Jake drank more wine.

“I found this house in April. Normally, I guess, John would have been my only company. But like I said, Nathaniel had stayed through the winter. I think his problem had been himself, so he stayed because moving from here to somewhere else wouldn’t have helped him any. At least here he wasn’t surrounded by people he knew. By April, the house

was a mess. It had snowed late in the season that year. The courtyard was full of snow and there were liquor bottles sticking up out of it. Nathaniel was too skinny and he was sitting in John's chair when I first saw him. From what John told me later, Nathaniel hadn't been too concerned with food that winter, but the bottles had never run out. John didn't mind.

"It all felt like something I had been through before only from a different perspective, so I decided to stay and help. I don't know why. I was in a helpful mood I guess; maybe it was only to help myself. I brought food and shoveled the courtyard. Nathaniel didn't talk to me for a little over a week. It took me several trips to get all the garbage to my car and several more to deliver it to the nearest dump. When I was finally finished, I found Nathaniel waiting for me on the eastern porch.

"Hello," I said.

"I've been so miserable," he said.

"After that, we talked more and more. Mostly about silly things and at times I felt like a therapist. He's very smart, you know. And such a fine looking boy. He told me things that he probably shouldn't have about himself and vaguely hinted at others of terrible darkness. I listened carefully and promised not to tell anybody. It didn't take me long to begin feeling very affectionately toward him. I suppose I even got to where I loved him." Jake looked at D. "Like a close friend, that is."

"Of course," said D.

"Eventually people started arriving, and they all monopolized Nathaniel's attention for a while. I didn't mind. I spent most of this time sitting apart from everybody watching. Nathaniel seemed to cheer up, and I was very glad to see it.

"He would sometimes try to involve me in their conversations, especially when he was tight. That was most of the time. One night he was blind. He found it damn funny that it was so difficult to talk to me because he didn't know what to call me. That was the night that Nick arrived.

"Nick!" Nathaniel said. "See," he said to me, "everybody has a

name. Why don't you have a name yet?"

"Nick acted as if he knew Nathaniel better than anybody else present, including John. Mostly, it seemed, his superior attitude was directed at me. Nathaniel plucked at the piano and continued to drink and eventually fell asleep. Nick insisted that he carry him to his room. John told him that it wasn't necessary, and Huck offered to help. Nick made a big deal out of having been the last person to leave the autumn before and wouldn't let anybody help him. He seemed to like the idea of everyone knowing that he had been more or less alone with Nathaniel for some time. I guess that's when I started to hate him. The fact that it was a matter of course for everybody to get their moment with Nathaniel didn't seem to matter, but nobody else seemed to feel so superior about it. I guess I couldn't help but profile Nick right there."

Jake paused as Nick's door swung open. He, Nick, looked down at them as if he knew what they were talking about and then walked toward the bathroom by the southern spiral staircase in accentuated ambivalence.

Jake drank the last of the wine in the bag. "I think I'll go see what I can do for dinner. Wake up Huck; he won't want to have slept through the entire day."

D. ate chicken with Huck and Jake. They had made extra for those who weren't there for the meal, and it fell on D. to inform Nick and Martin. They were both in Nick's room drinking champagne. Nick's walls were covered with tapestries, and the two men thanked her very cordially.

Jake and Huck were very friendly with each other, and they got D. to feel comfortable with them. Jake was very kind, but at the same time he seemed tough. He seemed like a big brother, or the fat kid in high school gotten strong without losing his perspective.

Later, everybody gathered in the courtyard and then went off on their own. D. sat in her room reading. Night slipped over the house. Somehow, the room was too warm for her, so she had the window open halfway. Jim was with her.

When she got tired, D. closed and locked her door and lay down in

her bed. She watched the ebb of moon shadows on her walls and her ceiling. The night was very quiet and tranquil. D. was amazed at the calmness with which the day had passed. Once her senses had adjusted to the night, she heard first a whimper and then sobs floating through the window. She went to the window. The crier was on the northern porch below her.

D. put on her robe, lit her candle, opened the door and looked cautiously around, and whistled to Jim to follow her. It looked like everybody had retired to their rooms except John, who was snoring in his chair. Taking the front stairs, she went through the kitchen and opened the other door enough to see into the northern hallway. A single candle lay on the floor at the center of the corridor and reflected yellowish red light off the windows and sent flickering shadows across the paintings. She opened the door a little more. All of the canvases had plain wooden frames except for the one at which she hadn't looked yet, and Jake was standing at the French doors looking out into the dark woods.

D. opened the door all the way and walked into the hall. Her candle helped to cancel out the flickers of Jake's. Jake heard her and turned around. Tears had made lines on his face and gathered in his beard at his cheek bones.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did I wake you?"

"No. I'd just gone to bed."

"Oh. Listen, if you're tired why don't you get some sleep."

Jake turned away.

D. started to turn around but didn't. "I don't think you ever finished that fairy tale that you were telling me."

Jake chuckled and wiped his eyes.

"It's the easiest thing in the world to be indifferent in the daylight, but it's a lot harder at night," he said. "You don't have to listen to me if you don't want to. You must think me odd to be crying on the first night of my vacation."

"I don't. Honestly." Seeing such a big man in tears brought a sympathy out in her that she could not explain. "I wasn't really tired anyway."

Jake nodded and started to come into the hall.

“Could we go somewhere else, though?” asked D. “Being so close to the windows gives me the creeps.”

They went into the kitchen, and they sat down. After a moment of silence, a moment that D. strove to fill with an exuded sense of openness, Jake started talking.

Jake seemed relieved to have the chance to hear himself speaking. “Well, to jump right into the matter, Nathaniel drank hell’s own amount of liquor that summer. I’m not sure what set it off in him, or why he kept drinking when it only made him more miserable, but he did. And nobody seemed too concerned by it, including myself. For all I knew, this was his usual state. As Martin put it, ‘He is the only man I know who is as intelligent when he’s drunk as when he’s sober.’ I don’t know about that, but he’s certainly more than charming enough to balance the scales. Martin probably thinks what he does because Nathaniel can lead him in circles of wordplay drunk or sober.

“It was Martin who kicked the whole thing off that evening. He, Nathaniel, and I were sitting on the eastern porch, and Nathaniel was blind drunk.

“‘You’re an angel, Martin. Simply an angel,’ he said.

“Martin blushed and said, ‘Why do you say that?’

“‘Well, no matter what you do you’re so damn...’ he stopped.

“‘passionate?’

“‘No. No. That’s not what I was going to say at all. I mean to say that you must be an angel because whatever you do you...’ he stopped again.

“‘do it well? I try.’

“‘No. No. Quite the contrary. But it seems that there’s...’

“‘What?’

“‘Well, there’s something that keeps you from...’

“‘For God’s sake, Nathaniel,’ Martin said, ‘finish your sentences.’

“‘Why? You’re probably better off finishing them yourself.’

“‘But I really am inquisitive on what you’re saying.’

“Nathaniel rolled his eyes by rolling his entire head and said, ‘That’s

not the right word!’

“‘Oh,’ Martin blushed. ‘Alright then, curious. But you don’t have to be so inclement about it.’

“Nathaniel walked into the house and came back a moment later with another drink. He sloshed some of it on himself as he spoke. ‘The miraculous thing about you, Martin, is that you always avoid consequences.’

“Martin stood up in offense. ‘Why, that’s only because I try not to do those things that lead to adverse... things.’

“‘Everybody does those things’ I said. ‘When there’s opportunity.’

“Nathaniel wagged a finger in my direction as if to suggest that I had said exactly what he had planned to. Martin stammered for a response and ended up just slithering inside. After a while Nathaniel turned to me and said, ‘I’m really a hell of a bastard.’

“I told him that he wasn’t, but he insisted that I didn’t know what the hell I was talking about.

“‘But we pay for it all eventually, though. Don’t we.’ It wasn’t a question. ‘I just want...’ he added. ‘I just want to do something that I want to do. Do you know what I want to do?’

“‘What do you want to do?’

“‘I want to do something.’ He sipped his drink and slapped his thigh. ‘I want to do something that will justify everything I’ve done so far.’

“He looked at me, and for a moment it didn’t seem like the booze had dimmed his eyes. I felt that I could see all the way into his eyes and see what it was that those eyes had looked at in the same way that had made them so deep.

“I told him that what he was saying was like wanting what you can never have. If you get what you thought you couldn’t have, you don’t want it. When you do something that erases everything that you’ve done, you lose sight of why you’ve done it.

“‘Best not to think about it,’ I said. But I knew when I said it that I was giving advice that would be impossible to follow. I suggested that maybe he needed to get out of here and get back to some routine.

““Oh, I stay here because it’s the only place in the world where I can have a routine because it’s the only place in which I don’t know anybody.” he said.

“That was as much as he wanted to talk at that time, so we went inside and found everybody in the courtyard. Martin was in his room typing. Something happens to the courtyard at night. All the candles and the shadows make everything look differently. Nathaniel fell asleep on the grass, and eventually everybody drifted off to their rooms except Nick. He tried to wake up Nathaniel.

““Oh lay off him,” I said, and I think I was looking for a fight. ‘He’s fine where he is. If he wakes up I’ll take care of him.’

““I’m sure you will.’ He tried to lift him again.

““I said leave him alone. Just because you spent some time alone with him last fall doesn’t mean he needs you to be his personal protector. Christ, Nick. You follow him around like a puppy dog when all he really wants is to be left alone. And believe me, I know why you do it.’

““And what do you know about what anybody wants? You haven’t half the breeding he does. Hell, I’m not even sure that you breed.’

“I guess he was looking for a fight, too. We’re of conflicting types Nick and me.

““What’s that supposed to mean?”

““You figure it out.’

“He had nearly had Nathaniel upright and Nathaniel had woken to an unintelligible murmuring state.

““Just sit him in the chair then. He doesn’t need you to tuck him into bed.’

“I saw that he had no intention of listening to me, so I decided to help. I moved up to put Nathaniel’s free arm over my shoulders and Nick pushed me away. He took me by surprise, so I tripped over my own feet and fell to the ground.

“Nathaniel had woken up enough to see me fall and looked at Nick and said, ‘Why don’t you just go away? Can’t you see that you’re not wanted?’

“I don’t know if Nathaniel was sincere in what he had said; in fact,

I'm pretty sure that he thought that he was quoting — he did that sometimes when he couldn't think... he quoted things he had memorized along the way — but Nick took it pretty hard and just let him go and stormed out of the yard. Nathaniel fell down. I noticed that everybody was standing on the balconies outside their rooms and looking down at us. I felt like I should bow. I got up and went over to him.

“‘Are you alright?’ I asked.

“‘Nathaniel was falling asleep again. ‘I think I was too hard on him. I don't want him to leave.’

“‘No,’ I said. ‘I don't think he'd deprive us of his company.’

“‘Huck came down the stairs and helped me put Nathaniel to bed. As we were closing the door I heard Nathaniel calling my name.

“‘‘Jake,’ he said. ‘We've got to stop putting things on the tab. It's gonna be awful hard to pay.’

“‘I know,’ I said. ‘We will.’

“‘I shut the door. Huck and I walked down here to the kitchen to warm up some milk. We had just poured the milk when Nick came in. He had tears in his eyes, though I don't think he ever lets them fall.

“‘Look,’ he said. ‘I don't know what that was all about. I'm sorry.’ He held out his hand for me to shake it. I hesitated and he said, ‘please.’

“‘I shook his hand, and he went away. I felt badly for him. It wasn't his fault that he was so possessive of Nathaniel. It wasn't his fault that he was looking for an angle. It's just who he's learned to be, here *and* elsewhere. I don't think he knows much about love, and it seemed that it wouldn't take much to bring his entire world crashing down.

“‘It's like bein' in church, bein' all the way out here,’ said Huck.

“‘What do you mean?’

“‘Well, I reckon there's no need to be ashamed'v askin' fergiveness.’

“‘I wouldn't hold that against him. It actually makes me feel for him a bit.’

“‘I warn't talkin' 'bout Nick. I meant you. Y'oughtta pity him. He's prob'ly more'n need of it'n any a' us, on a bad road as he is.’

Jake put down the water he had been drinking. “‘I know what you're thinking.’”

“What’s that?” asked D.

“That we’ve all got some kind of sickness. That I’m sick.”

“No. No more than the rest of the world.”

“I thank you for saying that, but I still feel badly about that night even if I still find it hard to handle Nick. I’ve tried to keep him out of trouble but... well, I was a little drunk that night, and when you’re drunk no matter what you say it’s just careless.”

D. got the feeling that Jake had just said more than he had intended, but not enough for her to understand why she felt that way. “Then why don’t you...”

The door to the entrance hall swung shut, though neither had noticed it open. Jake jumped to his feet, ran to the door, and swung it open. A shape was running out the front door.

“That’s Alex,” D. said.

Jake started to run after him.

“No, Jake, don’t.”

“Don’t worry. He won’t hurt me.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m not his friend.”

The door swung shut. D. waited and then, not even realizing the puzzling nature of Jake’s response, took her candle and, whistling to Jim, went cautiously up to her room. *Jake’s a big man*, she thought.

D. was pacing in her room. There was a knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Jake.”

She opened the door and he came in. He looked winded.

“He got away.”

“Oh.”

He reached in his pocket. “But he dropped these. Are they yours?” He pulled out a key-ring.

“Yes,” said D. “Yes they are.”

Jake gave her the keys and said goodnight. She locked the door behind him.

“I hope you decide to stay,” Jake said through the door.
He walked to his room three doors away.

The house is quiet. An owl calls out in the willow. In her room, D. lies in bed dangling a silver key-ring over her face. She pushes it under her pillow. The wind blowing through her window extinguishes her candle. She shuts the window, locks it, and closes the curtain. Giving Jim a fond pat on the head she undresses and climbs into her bed to sleep.

A breeze flows across the northern lawn of the house, erasing two sets of heavy footprints, tumbles over the porch, and slips through the French doors. A candle that has been left in the corridor flutters and then goes out. The light of the moon moves in. All of the paintings are dark except for the one with an ornately carved frame. That one seems to glow with a neon phosphorescence. On it a gaunt gray face with tearing blue eyes stares toward the south. It's hair is disheveled. There are small bumps like growing horns above the temples.

Chapter 8

D. woke up quite a bit earlier the next morning. She wondered if she had slept at all or if the sun had crept early to the horizon without warning. She hadn't dreamt, and so her last memory was of dangling her keys above her eyes, thinking. For a moment she panicked and padded around on the bed. She threw the pillows from the head to the foot of the bed and looked over the edge at the floor. Jim was sleeping with the key ring between his paws. *Quite a guard dog*, D. mused.

Jim opened one eye as she picked up the keys. "Good morning, Jim," said D., patting him on the head. Jim stood up and stretched like a cat.

After getting out of bed and putting on her dress, D. walked Jim down to the front door. There was nobody in the courtyard, and the front hall was silent and peaceful and the morning sun shone through the cracks around the door, sending dust specks into swirls. D. let Jim outside and shut the door quietly. Turning around, she looked up at the stained glass window. She wondered how close the sun would get to its center and was puzzled at a tiny pang of regret that she wouldn't find out. She would be gone by then.

"You look like you're trying to feel a good-bye," called a voice from her left. D. jumped a little. Sitting in one of the chairs on the other side of the dining room table with his feet up and a notebook resting on his knees was a young man who looked to be in his mid-to-late twenties. He had scruffy brown hair, dirty sneakers, worn jeans, and a blue sweater.

Partly because she was becoming used to surprises in this house, and partly because her surprise was directed, this time, mostly at herself for not having looked into that room when she came down the stairs, D. only paused slightly before responding, "I'm not trying to, but strangely enough I am."

“Well, if you’re going to leave a place, you always feel worse if you don’t,” said the young man. “I’m Holden.”

He didn’t show any signs that he intended to stand up, so D. walked toward him and stopped at the spot where one room turned into the other.

“So what’s it look like to you?” asked Holden.

“Pardon?”

“That window that you were looking at. Everybody likes to think that it’s something different.”

D. looked over her shoulder but couldn’t see the window from where she stood. The stairs were in the way. “I don’t know. Am I allowed to just see a window?”

“Well, I’m not gonna be the one to tell you that you can’t. That’s all it is to me. But as far as windows go, it’s better than most.”

“Why do you say that?” asked D., trying to remember what his response might be.

“I don’t know. I guess I like a window that you can’t see into or out of too easy unless you really want to. I hate windows that you’re always seeing people out of whenever you walk by them, even if you’re not in the mood for that kind of thing. I mean if you’re sort of thinking about something and you’re forced to see another thing that makes you think about something else and forget what it was that you wanted to be thinking about. Who wants a window like that? Nobody. On the other hand, if you *are* in the mood, then you can look through that piece in the middle and see even better, because it’s like a magnifying glass.”

D. smiled. “Does it work that way?”

“I think so,” said Holden, “but I’ve never tried it.”

Letting out a small laugh of a breath, D. glanced toward where the window would be if she were able to see it.

“So you’re leaving, then?” asked Holden.

“I suppose.”

“Well that’s too bad. It’d be nice to see a girl around here for a change. Even if all you did was look out the windows or something.”

Smiling sarcastically, D. said, “I’m glad that you have such a

liberated view of women.”

“Oh!” Holden looked embarrassed. “I didn’t mean it like that. Really. I mean, I guess you’d be great and fun to talk to and all, but I don’t know you that well. If you’re the type of girl that you could hang out with and just sort of play a game with or anything, it’d be nice to have you around. I don’t know if I’m saying this right, but you know what I mean. I mean, there aren’t many people around here that are clear-headed all the time and able to carry on a normal goddam conversation.” He looked down at the notebook on his lap. “So if you’re leaving, why did you come here?”

“It wasn’t on purpose, I can assure you of that.”

“It never is. But that doesn’t explain why you would want to leave.”

D. thought for a moment. “Why would I stay?”

Looking up at her, Holden told her that he didn’t know. “There are worse places to be. If you don’t have anywhere that you *have* to be and all.”

D. could hear Jim whimpering quietly to be let in, so she crossed the entrance hall and opened the door. There was nobody around, leading D. to believe that it was earlier than she had thought. The morning sun sparkled like a waking eye through the half-filled branches of the trees on the other side of the yard. She heard a page being turned.

“What are you reading?” she asked Holden when she had returned to her post and stood there for a moment as if unnoticed.

“Oh, just a notebook. Nathaniel’s got a million of them all stuffed in boxes in here. They’re really kind of neat. I could just read these the whole time I’m here and never know how long I’d been doing it.”

“What’s in them?”

“Mostly just random thoughts and stuff. Some of them are from classes and have algebra and school crap in them. Those are my favorites because sometimes he would write poems in them to keep from being bored. I was always bored in school.”

“Did you write much poetry?”

Holden laughed sheepishly. “No, I never did anything like that. I drew some pictures and that kind of crap. I don’t really have the talent

for it. Nathaniel, though. Boy, he can write. One of these boxes has a whole bunch of the beginnings of books and stories that he never got around to finishing. He could be a hell of a writer if he ever finished anything. What kills me is when I read those stories and I just have to go call up to his room when I'm all done with what's written and try to get Nathaniel to tell me how it was going to end."

"Does he tell you?"

"No, not yet. He usually asks me what I think and all that teacher type of crap. The thing about Nathaniel is that he knows just about every goddam thing there is to know about. I mean he's one of those guys that knows that you can't know everything and that if somebody *really* wants to know how a story ends or something, then they probably can figure out how it's supposed to. But then he knows *that*, too, so he probably knows that if somebody else finishes his stories then they'll do it how *they* want and it'd be like an insult that they didn't think enough of him to try to write it how he would've. If I *did* finish one, I probably wouldn't show anybody, anyway, because I'd be worried that they thought that I was trying to write it the way I thought *Nathaniel* would do it and not the way *I* wanted to. But I'm not a fiction writer. Maybe some of these other guys could just up and jump into somebody else's story, but not me. What if I finished it the way I wanted and that wasn't the way it was supposed to be at all? Then everybody would get all touchy as hell about it and wish that they had tried because they'd think they could do it better. People are always thinking they can do everything better than you."

"Sounds like charming company."

Holden put his feet down on the ground and shook his head with wide, pleading eyes like a child who has mistakenly implicated a friend in some misdemeanor. "Oh, I don't mean it like that. These guys are actually better than most other people. I mean, I might be the only normal bastard here, but it's the same everywhere. If you're going to go somewhere to get away, you could go somewhere with a lot more goddam phonies. I mean you could go somewhere where there's all these stupid bastards who don't even have a brain or a sense of humor. Or where

everybody's *so* smart that they know they're smart and act like it. Those kind of people never like to talk to real people, and when they do, they only like to talk about whatever *they* want to talk about."

Suppressing a yawn, D. began to excuse herself, but Holden asked her to wait.

"You could stay if you wanted, couldn't you? There's nothing you can't do here that you can somewhere else. I mean, if you know a lot about art and literature and those kinds of things you could have quite a good time here for a while. Of course, there isn't any place in the world that you can stay for a *long* time and not get bored, except maybe if you get drunk all the time. But why did you come in the first place if you're going to leave before you really get to know everybody?"

"I told you, I had no intention of coming in the first place," D. was losing patience. She felt like she was talking to one of those people who's really nice, but that could drive her crazy if she had to talk to them for too long a time.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Longer than I've liked."

"Well then how come it's taken you this long to decide to leave?"

"It hasn't been a question of deciding: I just couldn't. Somebody had my car keys."

Holden offered her a distracted look as if to say that things weren't supposed to happen that way. "Well then now you ought to stay because it would be your choice. People can't just *leave* everywhere just because they can. Nobody would ever be anywhere, they'd always be in-between. You can't stop doing something that you haven't even started."

"But I haven't started anything."

"Well then what's the point of leaving? It's like Jake told me when I first got here, 'Even if you didn't think you were coming here, or didn't really know you wanted to come here, you must have been looking for something that you couldn't find anywhere else.'"

"I'm trying to explain to you that I didn't come..."

Just then, Jim came scampering down the stairs with Huck close behind him. "Good mornin' all," Huck said. He smiled at D. and greeted

Holden. “Anibody want some coffee an’ brekfast?”

Huck didn’t protest much when he found out that D. was intending to leave before lunch. He merely suggested that she not leave on an empty stomach, told her that he’d be “sahry ta see y’go,” and offered to walk her to her car if she wanted. She thanked him and said she’d appreciate it.

Holden waited a little while before he came into the kitchen to get a glass of orange juice. He said that he didn’t eat much and might have a Swiss cheese sandwich later.

“Hope ya brought yer own cheese,” Huck told him, “‘cause we ain’t got none.”

Holden didn’t seem to be too upset. “I’ll probably just skip lunch then, I’m not a very big eater. That’s why I’m so skinny,” he explained. He stopped D. when she was about to dump the eggs that she hadn’t eaten in the garbage and asked if he could finish it.

After breakfast, Holden found D. staring out the window in her room half-mindlessly scratching Jim behind the ears. He stood in her doorway for a while and then said, “I look out the window a lot when I’m feeling lonely.”

D. glanced over her shoulder before she turned around.

“Did I scare you?” asked Holden.

“No. Actually you didn’t.” Then, “I’ve got this funny feeling that I should be packing or something.”

“Packing always depresses me. But sometimes if you feel like you should be packing and you don’t have anything to pack it’s even sadder. But at least if you don’t have anything to pack, then nobody has to look at your suitcases and think about how theirs are better.”

D. jumped a little as a branch, moved by a gust of wind, tapped at her window. “Well, one wouldn’t want to upset the sensibilities of the better off.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that,” said Holden. “I can be quite sarcastic sometimes. Sometimes I don’t really mean a single thing that I say.”

Sitting on the bed, D. said, “That’s mature.”

“I’m not,” Holden told her, jumping forward as if to assure her of something. “I know I’m not. People always tell me that I shouldn’t always do the kinds of things that I do to keep from getting bored. But I don’t *always* act like that. People always think that just ‘cause you do something sometimes you *always* do them. Sometimes I can be very quiet and humble if there’s something to keep my mind off being bored. I really can.”

D. glanced toward the window. Perhaps sensing that he was losing his audience, Holden stepped a little further into the room. “I can see why you would want to leave and all,” he said.

“Oh you can?”

“Sure. It’s always kind of boring here at first. I mean, when I got here it was in the middle of the summer and everybody was around and having a grand old time. And Nathaniel was always playing the piano. When he wasn’t making a fool of himself, that is.”

“I was under the impression that you thought that he was a genius.”

“He is, though. It’s funny, he could write this poem that makes you want to hug him or beat him up or something, but then in person he’s always getting as emotional as hell. You know what it is? He’s very emotional. He really is. Sometimes he’s too affectionate, too. He’s exactly the type of guy that could write something that you love to read as long as you can put it down and go look at a goddam beaver make a dam or something and come back to it when you’re in the mood again, but you wouldn’t want to be stuck listening to him reading it over and over. But who would want to listen to *anybody* read *anything* all the time? Not me.”

Feigning comprehension with a forced “hmm,” D. stood up and looked out the window again. Holden stood where he was for a minute or two and then sat down in the chair and sighed to draw attention to himself.

“You can’t really blame him, though. He’s gotten a hell of a lot better since my first summer. I mean John would do that to anybody if they were stuck in a house with him for a whole goddam winter and all. Always saying something and then nodding about it and then saying it

again. Whatever he's talking about. You know what I think? I think that he doesn't know his ass from his elbow. He's always talking about the rules and stuff like it's his goddam job to make sure that everybody knows all the crap they're supposed to be doing and be not doing. What a swell job for an old-as-hell guy to have."

Holden stopped talking and waited for a response, but D. only looked out at the trees. Then she began to make the excuse of wanting to wash up a little, but Holden interrupted her. "And the only time Nathaniel's really mean at all is when Martin won't leave him alone. I mean I feel sorry for Martin and all, but he's exactly the type of guy that won't leave a room when you want him to. Everybody in the world would know that they weren't wanted around, but not Martin. You practically have to curse at him to get rid of him till he *finally* gets the message. And then he'll still hang around for a while just to make sure that you weren't just horsing around with him. He could bring out the old sadist in anybody.

"But he's alright. It's *nice* to have him two doors down from your room and all, but I wouldn't want to be right *next* to him for Chrissakes. If you live next to a guy like Ack... I mean... Martin, he thinks that he can just walk in whenever the hell he wants to and make it look like a mistake. Like he just walked in the wrong door or something and didn't even realize that it wasn't his room until you started talking to him. That's why I picked the middle room on the *other* side. I didn't want to be right next to Jake. I mean he's smart and witty, if you know what I mean, but he's quite a heavy drinker, and who needs a big guy like that climbing into bed with you in the middle of the night when he's drunk as a bastard and can't see straight enough to tell that he's in the wrong room? Not me. I mean at least Nick can hold his liquor. He's usually pretty friendly, too. Sometimes I don't think he's always acting like himself, but at least he's willing to be the guy who lives in the next room over from Martin. When I first got here, Nick was always hanging around Nathaniel, and of course Martin was always there, too. And Jake was always kind of waiting for his turn. You know what I hate? I hate when people feel like they've gotta take turns to hang around

somebody. I don't care, as many people can hang around *me* as want to.

"Goddamn Nick. He's always saying that Nathaniel says 'old sport' all the time, but he really doesn't. Nick kills me with that 'old sport' crap. It's like Nick wants to say it all the time and the only way he feels like he can do it is to say that Nathaniel said it. Nathaniel would never say anything like 'old sport'. It's too phony."

"Listen, Holden, I don't mean to be rude..."

"That's just the thing," Holden leaned back in the chair. "Nathaniel's never rude. I mean you can just say anything to him and he'll never get mad. He's aces, Nathaniel. Just a little emotional is all."

D. tried to say something.

Holden stood up and started to leave the room. "Well, I've got some things I've got to do." He stopped at the door and turned around. "Say, what'a ya wanna leave for anyway? I mean where do you have to go?"

"Home."

"Yeah, I can understand *that*, but where do you live? Goddam New York or someplace? I hate New York. What's terrible about New York is that you can hear somebody laugh clear across town. You can never be alone in New York because some chucklehead's always laughing up town or something. It's the loneliest place in the world. It really is. I mean you could be sitting on your roof and wondering how in the hell you're going to eat or something that week, and the next thing you know some big shot is letting you know just how great his life is way the hell up town or something. Who wants to spend their summer in a place like that? Not me."

Raising her eyebrows as if to concede the point, D. shrugged.

"You know what I think?" asked Holden. "I think you'll get to New York or wherever and figure out that it doesn't interest you. You could leave this place and find out that you didn't *know* that you really wanted to stay. I mean, sometimes you don't know where you want to be 'till you hang around someplace that you really *don't* want to be. At least if you stayed 'till everybody got here you could say that you made a fair choice. Deciding to leave now would be like going to bed when you're

not even tired.” He paused. “I don’t know exactly what I’m trying to say by that, but I mean it.” He shuffled his feet. “Well, I have to go do some things. Are you going to stay for lunch at least?”

“Yes, I probably will. Huck convinced me that it would be a good idea.”

“OK. I’ll see you later then.”

Holden left the room, and D. could hear his footsteps moving down the balcony.

D. spent the remainder of the morning in the open courtyard and hadn’t seen anybody but Huck, Martin, and Holden. Martin seemed embarrassed when he walked by on the balcony. It looked as if he made a point of not looking at her. When the sun was almost directly over her head, D. decided to make her way to the kitchen and see what was going on with lunch.

There was nobody in the kitchen, so D. made herself a sandwich, which, for no particular reason, she decided to eat in the dining room. The floor creaked under her as she made her way across the front hall. She put her plate on the table in front of the nearest chair, but, looking over her shoulder, picked it up and walked around to the seat in which Holden had been sitting earlier. As she passed one of the southern windows, she noticed him at the edge of the forest stamping what looked like pants into the dirt. She shook her head and sat down.

After taking a bite of her sandwich, D. glanced into a box on the seat to her right. In the box, there were at least four dozen notebooks of many colors and varieties. Sticking out a bit was one of those with black and white speckled covers that she had used for all of her classes when she was younger. She pulled it out of the box to have something to look at while she ate. She took another bite out of the sandwich, put it down on her plate, and wiped her hand on her dress.

The first page of the notebook was filled with the type of drawings that any junior high school boy might draw. There were pictures of eyes, some crying. There were pictures of mouths, some laughing, some frowning, some snarling. In the bottom right hand corner was the first

of a stick figure flip-book that somebody, she assumed Nathaniel, had drawn. Taking another bite of her sandwich, she took the notebook in both of her hands and flipped through the pages. The stick figure person began to run around in circles and beat its head. It succeeded in cracking the head open, and another stick figure person began to emerge: hands first, then a head with a halo over it. The pictures stopped just as the angel stick figure had expurgated itself down to its waist. D. took another bite out of her sandwich and watched the incomplete metamorphosis of the stick figure person again. On the page after which the drawer had apparently lost his impetus, Nathaniel had written "History" at the top of the page. She knew that he had done it because on the next line were the words "by Nathaniel Ariss." She began to read what looked like the beginning of a story written in a boy's sloppy letters:

Chapter 1

The sun beat down on the field in it's cold winter way. The grass was brown and the trees were bare. The field was a dull, drab ocean of cold wind with a ♡ on each side and was surrounded by a gravel oval. The sun brought a little life to the field by glinting off any shiny object it could find. There were bottles brought by a caravan of cars and discarded when empty. There were cans left by the audience after the show was over. And off to one side there was a star shining more brightly than any of the assorted litter. The star was shining with a purpose to be discovered. It gleamed so brilliantly that it seemed to break free of its faded metal casing. Then a hand folded around the star and forced it back into its prison.

D. stopped reading and took another bite out of her sandwich. Holden walked through the front door and smiled when he saw what she was doing. "You'll get hooked," he said. The pants that he had been trampling

in the dirt were slung over his shoulder, and D. could see the leather label that said, “Versace.” *Expensive pants to be dragging around in the mud*, she thought.

“I just wanted something to glance through while I ate,” she responded, somewhat laconically.

“Oh. Which one are you reading?”

Taking her time, D. chewed and swallowed the bit of sandwich that she had in her mouth. “I guess it’s called ‘History.’”

Holden thought for a moment and then informed her, “I don’t think I ever read that one. It might be from when he was younger or something. I like to read the stuff that he wrote later. I think it was Jake who told me once that the better educated somebody is the more value is in the thing that they write.”

Though attempting to appear as if she weren’t initiating a conversation, D. told him that she didn’t think that was always true.

“Of course not,” said Holden. “Nothing’s always true.”

They both looked as footsteps on the stairs turned out to be Martin’s. Holden waved his hand. “Hey, Martin. How was your goddam winter?”

Without answering, Martin offered an incomplete wave and nodded his way into the kitchen.

“He’s the type of guy that never likes to answer you when you ask him a straight forward question,” Holden explained, turning back to D. “You know,” he began, “I was thinking about you leaving, and I was wondering if I could give you my address or something. Or if we could set up a place where you could write something or like scratch it into a telephone pole or something.”

“Why?”

“Well, what I wanted to know. I mean, what I’ve been thinking about is whether as you’re driving away you’ll feel like you’re disappearing or something every time you turn onto a different street. What I’m trying to say is, I always think that even though you keep taking smaller and smaller roads when you come here and the trees get thicker and all, at least you’re coming someplace and not going away, but when you *leave* a place... well it’s kind of spooky, but you feel like

you're not going anywhere, just sort of... well... disappearing."

"Sounds like you don't need me to write anything to you."

"I don't. It's just that... that I've never asked anybody here, because I always think that they'll think that I'm doing everything backassward and not according to the rules and all. But since I'll never see you again, I'd kind of like to know if you feel the same way. All you'd have to do is write a 'yes' or 'no' in a special place that I'll know to look."

"I don't think so."

"Oh. OK. I was just asking." Holden pulled out a chair and threw the box that was on it under the table. He sat down.

D. started eating her sandwich again. *Weirdo*, she thought.

After a moment, Holden started talking again. "If you leave, you know, you might get all depressed because you'll keep wondering what's happening to us all."

Looking at him out of the tops of her eyes, D. told him that she'd take the risk.

"If you're into that sort of thing, then I guess you could do that. It's just that, if you don't stay here and meet everybody, and get to *like* everybody so much that you plan to come back, you'll always be wondering where the hell we all go when it's winter. You'll know that we couldn't just stay here and *ignore* the rest of our lives and all. I mean, we don't just *die* or hibernate or anything, and you'll start to wonder if we don't die or hibernate or something, or stay here, then we must be somewhere doing *something*, and you'll wonder what it is. It won't be like a funeral where you can get in your car and never come back and always know that whoever it was that you left there will always be right there because they're dead."

D. swallowed a chunk of bread. She often had trouble eating when people insisted on talking to her while she ate. As she bit into the sandwich again, Nick strode through the front door and across the hall.

"Hey Nick," called Holden.

Nick waved and started up the stairs, but turned and walked to where he could see D. "So, are you leaving us?" he asked her.

"Yes, I'm just waiting for Huck to show up."

Nick nodded. “Well, it was delightful to meet you. I don’t suppose I could charm you into staying?” His smile was debonair.

Smiling back, D. told him that she didn’t think so.

“Well, then. Have a safe trip home,” he said, bowed, and sprung up the stairs.

Holden waited until he could no longer hear Nick’s footsteps and then said, “He’s always in a big goddam hurry. It’s like he’s runnin’ away from something. He’s probably only going to go fix himself up or something, like he wants to be all handsome as he runs away. And for who? For nobody, that’s who.”

D. ate the last of her sandwich.

“But on the other hand,” Holden started up again, “if you were to stay until you thought that you might come back next year, then its like everything stayed just where it was when you come back. I mean everybody is just the same, that is. It’s always like that. You don’t even need to put everybody in a glass case like they have at the Museum of Natural History. They’re the same because they *want* to be. It’s like that carousel in Central Park that always played the same music until somebody came along and *changed* it on everybody. Hell, that guy must have thought he was being pretty goddam funny or something. Certain things shouldn’t be changed.”

“I agree,” D. vouchsafed an answer. “Now if you’ll excuse me...”

“You can go if you really want to. Who’s going to stop you? Not me. It’s up to you. Just don’t be stupid and tell everybody or write about us.”

“Don’t worry,” she smirked, “your secret’s safe with me.”

“Oh. I don’t give a damn about that. You could draw a goddam map to the house if you wanted to. I’m just saying for you. Because maybe if you do you’ll start missing everybody.”

D. threw the notebook back into the box and stood up. “Excuse me,” she said as she walked past Holden into the entranceway.

“Hold on,” Holden stopped her. “There’s something I want to show you.”

D. looked toward the kitchen and then at the plate in her hand.

“What?” she asked tersely.

Getting down on his hands and knees, Holden began to crawl under the table, moving a chair out of his way. “It’s under here,” he said.

A “pfff” slipped between D.’s lips, and she said, “I’m not going to crawl around on the floor with you.”

“Why not?”

“I’m just not going to.”

Mumbling something about people never wanting to crawl around on the floor with somebody when they asked them just to show them something *interesting*, Holden told her, “Alright. You don’t have to if you squat down a little.”

D. shook her head with an annoyed look on her face, but she did as he had requested. The table was of an old sort, with intricate designs running around its edge and a veritable web of interlocking beams and supports. She remembered playing with her dolls under a similar, but smaller, table at her grandfather’s house when she was a little girl. She almost had an impulse to slip under the table, if only to better picture the strange look of giant grown-up legs from a child’s perspective.

“It’s right here,” said Holden. He was pointing to something carved into a crossbeam.

Squinting a little, D. could make out what it said. It said “Fuck You.” She stood up, not quite understanding her intense irritation, and stepped out of the room, sorry that she had been so soft as to humor Holden. “Lovely,” she said.

Holden scampered out from under the table. “Well *I* didn’t write it! That’s for goddam sure.”

“I’m not saying that you did,” said D. without turning. She was halfway to the kitchen.

Holden stopped at the edge of the entrance hall and shouted, “Glad to’ve met you.”

A few feet away from the kitchen door, D. stopped and turned around. “What did you say?”

Looking slightly flustered, Holden repeated himself and then added, “You know, you have to say that stuff if you want to stay alive.”

D. went into the kitchen.

The sun is directly over head and the wind has increased to a mild pitch. The trees sway, but in contrary directions as if there are several breezes all blowing their allotted acres in whichever direction they please.

The house groans as the front door swings open and two figures step out. The first is an older man, graying slightly, but dressed and smiling as if he were a boy. Behind Huck, D. glides down the porch steps onto the soft lawn. The growing grass caresses her ankles.

“Is’t this way?” Huck asks.

“I believe so,” D. responds.

Nodding, Huck holds a branch up so that D. may walk under it, and they disappear through the same bush through which John led her not so long ago in the opposite direction.

In one of the southern windows on the ground floor, a curtain flutters even though the window is closed and the breeze cannot reach it to set it into motion.

Chapter 9

“Aren’t you going to try and talk me into staying?” D. asked Huck.

Huck’s lower lip and eyebrows pushed upward into identical arches and he shook his head. “Yer mind’s made up, ain’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Then what’d be the pint?”

The silence returned softly to their walk. From her vantage point, D. could see mountains in every direction. The sun’s position, still very nearly overhead, distributed an even shadelessness upon the land. Not, as is so at extremes of the day, enlightening one range and darkening another, but laying smoothly over them all, at least from D.’s perspective. In the morning, she thought, the sun-tipped western mountains might come to symbolize a hope for the day, whereas the evening ascended like a flood up the eastern mountains. It was, however, also true that the day sprang from the east and departed to the west. Perhaps the lazy effect of midday came from the lack of these uncomfortable distinctions.

The time of year was such that the semi-plush foliage on the trees seemed to be the full stock, and therefore meager. For some, the effect that this has is one of longing for the past, when the Springs were greener. D. understood, however, that the next week or two would bring a storm and the next after that a wave of heat to urge the trees to produce their own shade. To justify her conclusion, D. had to cast her mind back to her pre-city days. Days when she was younger and not yet working. The working world rarely notices but short glimpses of change, and therefore they seem to be rapid and untraceable. This is especially true for those who work in the city where the collection of natural things that are affected by a change of season is far smaller.

But even though the leaves and the flowers and, hence, the pollen were not yet ample enough to compare to a memory of the previous

Spring, D. recognized a smell on the air that she had forgotten through the Winter, though she did recall intending to remember it. She wondered what else she might recall of the Spring and of the country were she to stay away from the city for just a bit longer. *That wouldn't, necessarily, mean that I had to stay here*, she thought.

A bird chirped from a nearby bush as if calling out a warning to the next bird on the watch line. D. looked toward a sound and came to a cautious stop to watch a bunny that was nibbling on something and watching the passing humans with some anxiety. Huck took a few more steps before he noticed that D. had stopped. When he followed her eyes to the bunny, he smiled as a country boy may be wont to smile at the amazement of city folk at something as commonplace as a rabbit. Much as a farmer must find it strange that a couple cows could cause spectator traffic. Huck would have to admit, if asked, however, that were they to come across a deer, he would be acting in much the same way.

At some inaudible signal, the bunny bounded off into the underbrush, creating a slight stir in the remnant leaves of Fall and some low hanging twigs, all of which rustled and seemed to pass their rustling up into the larger branches of the trees, which swayed and increased the general murmur. The movement and sound of nature grew into a wind which spread the hum and began to whistle gently. As the wind gusted, the whistle changed its pitch slightly until it sounded as if the mountains themselves were preparing to break out in song. When the wind subsided, D. could hear a continued whistle, as of an Irish jig, that was too precise to be natural. Huck smiled when D. looked to him for explanation.

Soon a young man, about thirty and moderate of proportion and height, emerged around a bend in the path that Huck and D. had been approaching.

“Huck! How are you?” the young man hailed.

“Not bad. Yerself?” The two men shook hands and then hugged as friends are apt to do after long periods of separation. After a few congenialities, Huck told the young man that he was just helping D. find her car and would meet him at the house in a bit.

It occurred to D. that she would not be hearing this newcomer's

story, whatever it might be. He had the scraggly beginnings of an unseasonable beard, which matched his hair — mostly light blond, but suggesting a red tinge. His nearly teal eyes twinkled, and D. thought that they alone might be full of tales.

“Oh,” said the young man, showing no inclination to sway the plans of anyone involved, “I’ll walk with you if you don’t mind.” Smiling at D., he explained, “Lord knows who I’ll get stuck talking to if I go to the house now.”

Huck interjected, “Well, the young lady’s had some frights, so it’d have ta be up ta her.”

“I don’t mind,” D. mumbled as if her mind were elsewhere.

The newcomer smiled and stuck out his hand. “I’m glad to be able to meet you, even if you are on your way away. I’m John.” Noticing a slightly curious look pass over D.’s face John added, “But everybody calls me Steinbeck so as not to confuse me with the old guy.”

D. shook his hand and asked, “John Steinbeck? Isn’t that against the rules?”

Laughing, Steinbeck said, “Well you might say that I’ve found a loophole. It was the name that I wanted for myself, and it was not a little pleasing to see how much Nathaniel enjoyed figuring out why it wasn’t against the rules, of course I didn’t tell him, and then considering all the implications. Unfortunately, he decided that one of those implications is that I’m not allowed to speak directly of myself often, and that is one of the few pleasures that I’ve always tried to reserve. On the other hand, it has made me a tremendous conversationalist because, as my namesake wrote, ‘if a story is not about the hearer he will not listen.’ Huck, didn’t you say something along those lines?”

Huck smiled at the game, “Maybe sump’n like that.”

Feeling that she had missed something, D. let her mind return to the seasons. “What is the date?” she asked Steinbeck.

“Early May is the most exact that I know.”

D.’s thought escaped as incredulous words, “That means that I’ve been here for almost two months.” Funny, but D. almost felt as if somebody should have come looking for her after so much time. She

knew that, even had somebody searched, she would have been exceedingly difficult to find, but she also knew that there was something important about the fact that she didn't believe there to be anybody who *would* look for her.

“What’s your thinking on that?” Steinbeck asked her.

D. stepped out of her thought, “Excuse me?”

“I gather that your disbelief at the span of time that you’ve been here means that you didn’t think it had been that long. So was it *eventfulness* or *eventlessness* that made it seem so short?”

D. thought about it. “It’s been a little of both. Now that I think about it, though, it seems like I’ve been here longer but that it’s gone by quickly.”

“That sounds about right,” Steinbeck responded. “When you’re busy time flies by on wings of occupation, but when it’s past, a length of time seems as long as the number of events that happened within it. The real John Steinbeck called them posts on which to drape our conception of time.”

D. looked around. The season had changed enough that she did not recognize the path that they followed, but somehow she felt that it was the very same one down which John, the elder, had led her in the opposite direction. It seemed only a short time ago, yet she felt as if something had changed within her, as it had around her, that created a crevice between her arrival and this moment, her departure.

Steinbeck broke the silence. “That’s how it was my first and second years. There were some days that felt as if they would never end and others that I prayed without hope to extend, either because I was enjoying them or because there was something that left the day crooked without its being done before a new day. Looking back, it seems that there were so many more of those that were too short and that they weren’t quite as short as they had seemed. But the days that seemed long seem now, in the memory, hardly to have existed. To tell the truth, the way those summers went, particularly the second, I could have done with more of the interminable dull days that I can’t seem to remember.”

D. smiled a little.

“I’m sorry,” Steinbeck apologized. “You’re on your way out, and I’m beginning my lectures.”

D. hesitated and then said, “No, that’s alright. It’ll pass the time while we walk.”

She was going to hear another story after all. And she wasn’t sure how she felt about it.

“I came fairly late in the season. I don’t think there’s anything remarkable about that, or about my reasons for heading out into the wild or the choices and ways that led me here, but I mention it because I’ve always felt as if I came into the middle of something, and I’ve never quite felt right about that summer. I’ve seen movies and missed the beginning and even later, when I’d managed to see the whole thing through, there was always an uneven feel to the film for me.

“So I came late, like a belated child, to this family in the woods. And it *is* like a family, with each person’s differences. We’re all kinds of people. Those who are running from something and those who are running from nothing. Some are well read and some aren’t. I like to think that we each bring something or other to the group, like one might bring wine and another pretzels to a gathering. But the individuality, that’s what’s kept me returning these past several years: the beauty of variety. I’ve heard it said that even the most brilliant colors need another color, or only white or black, to offset them, and I believe it to be true of people, too.

“Somehow, though, I remember remarking the unique fact that everybody here was kind in their own way of being kind. I suppose it is a self-screening crowd. We’re all lonesome for something, and lonesome people, because they feel for themselves, feel for others to at least a small degree.

“Of course, the loneliest, and the kindest, was Nathaniel. Some people, as I understand, think he’s crazy or full of bull or full of himself, but I think anyone who believes that is missing something. I think he’s desperately brilliant and brilliantly clear of thought, and therefore, since he is human and has his own secret pains, his are more pronounced to

the degree of his own capacity for understanding others and himself. Nathaniel has a view of humanity that is probably reserved for those great men who rise up once or twice a century and share a little of their own understanding with the rest of us in the hopes of changing the world. More often than not, I believe, such understanding is too disturbing for the common man, and we turn away from it after only brief periods of trial. We always keep a piece of it within, but I think that we tend to keep something nonessential like a name or a saying. We keep the face but not the style, and we go back to our lives vaguely feeling that the world doesn't have to be this way. Knowing this and feeling it to be true is why it must be an awfully lonely thing being great. And Nathaniel is perhaps the loneliest man that I've ever known.

"This is not to say that he is cold or aloof. He's just like a child who has discovered that his parents are not perfect because he knows more than they. When I first met him, I think that he was still in a sort of panic to discover if it was he or the world who was the blunderer. I got out of him, once, that one or both of his parents had recently and suddenly died when he first came here. I would have liked to have known his parents, or whoever the two were who must have formed him. And there must have been two: one bright and warm like a California sunset and the other all midnights and lines. You could almost see them struggling within him. And that might be why he came out here in the first place. Maybe he was trying to get away from the demands of the world, the money, the sex, the dealings with other and strange people. If all emotions and interactions between people come down to love in some way or other, then I think in his way Nathaniel was running away from love. But, as it always seems to go, love, well sex, anyway, found him. Even out here."

"So have there been women here before?" D. interrupted.

Steinbeck smiled at the innuendoed tone of her question. "But of course. You don't think that in a world of such diversity only men would find their way here, do you? Or did you think that we would turn women away to some other house in the wilderness with doors closed to men that would give women their equal due to solitude in the mountains?"

To my knowledge, no such counterpart exists. Well perhaps there is one, at that, because, though we have had women, we haven't had nearly enough of them. What do you think, Huck, should we send out a troop to find our female counterparts?"

"Not at my age, Steiny, not at mine."

Steinbeck laughed at a joke that he did not share.

"Well, old man, you remember Charlotte, don't you?"

"I ain't so old that my mem'ry can't go back that short stretch."

Steinbeck laughed again. "Not to discredit your youthful vigor, but I suspect that there are men who have taken a memory of Charlotte to the grave, no matter the disrepair of their minds toward the end."

"She must have been pretty," guessed D.

To this comment, Steinbeck responded with a quizzical look that conveyed perfectly the thought that women should not think so little of men that a pretty face will outlast, in the mind, loved ones and their names. "No," he said. "In fact, at certain angles and certain lights, she was downright ugly. Her eyes and hair were black, but of an ordinary sort, and her skin was sallow and a little too loose on her body. But usually there was something about her that made you want to look more closely. Something was just off about her appearance, and the same was true about her personality. I think men might remember her after all else has become shapes in the dust where something used to be because she caused a subtle disruption, like an ambiguous insult, or a puzzle that seems to have a solution that you don't want to figure out.

"Or maybe it was just that she was our first and only, at the time, woman and we didn't know how to react to her. Sometimes I've felt, and maybe you could tell me better, that it must have taken great courage for her to stay amongst a crew of men cut off from society for such a length of time."

"We're not helpless, you know. Besides, almost everybody's been friendly and cordial to me."

"Oh, believe me, I know. I often think that women are the stronger half of the species, almost to the point of being unstoppable when they've got their minds set on something. But I think that I'd be uncomfortable,

to say the least, in a detached mansion with a mob of strange women. Men may profess to fantasize about it, but it's a rare fellow who wouldn't avoid the chance were it to arise, I believe.

"But in our situation here, I guess it helps some that we're not *always* cut off from the world. Some of us, I'm sure, lead very productive lives when we're not here."

Huck chuckled to himself.

"It's never comfortable to be different," suggested D.

Steinbeck nodded and then responded, "That it is not. But Charlotte," he said, bringing them back to his story, "always seemed to enjoy the extra attention and the leverage that came with it. I don't know what she did in real life, but I don't think that it fulfilled her or made her feel important or significant. When she came here, she must have discovered something inside herself that she didn't know existed, and she let it loose with a fury.

"I wouldn't say that she was *bad*, but... well, wait a minute... yes I would. She was a bad girl in every way that title can be made to apply reluctantly, and I understand that some people find that very attractive. Not to say that she drank excessively, or anything of that nature, in fact, I think she might have been a little afraid of what might come out of her mouth if she did. I guess what I'm trying to say is that she overacted. She took a role that didn't seem to be a perfect fit and stretched it out and damn near broke it.

"Take her name, for instance. She chose it from some children's novel either out of laziness or a fine tuned sense of irony and took to calling Nathaniel 'Wilbur' and John 'Old Farmer Bill.' Only she didn't know if she had the right name, so she'd say, 'Old Farmer Homer or Joe or Bob or whatever.' John wasn't amused by her, but she must have hit some warm spot in Nathaniel, because he would blush when she called him names and would defend her name because the book from which it came often has a powerful influence on children."

"If it's the one I'm thinking of, I remember that it made me cry when I was little," D. offered.

"You're not alone in that," Steinbeck consoled, "but you have to

admit that from a certain perspective it can appear to be an easy way to hide from the entire name choosing process.”

“A little like yours?”

“Of course! But I’ll be getting to that in a moment.” Steinbeck brushed a strand of his chestnut hair away from his temple and pushed up the corner of his mouth as if deciding where to resume his story. “So it was a mystery, if not a surprise, when it became evident that Nathaniel and Charlotte, who was nearly twice as old as him and not half as good a person, were in the midst of a fling. I think it was Huck who said...”

“Oh it was, was it?”

“... that once the first bits of innocence are toppled, it’s difficult and maybe foolhardy to try to stop the chain reaction. Not that Charlotte began the process in Nathaniel, but perhaps she came to represent the next edifice blocking the flow of his progression, and the fact that she took away the need for him to overcome an inherent shyness made the advent of their having sex almost inevitable.

“From what I’ve been told, the love affair seemed to renew Nathaniel. He had been sullen and now began to cheer, as many of us do when we find ourselves in a new position, regardless of its virtue. Perhaps it was a sort of bravery that came from the promise of new stages and new experiences. It’s always a flashing moment when that happens, and it sometimes kills people who rush headlong in a search for a continued euphoria through newness. You can see it in our heroes: the live-fast-and-die-young waifs. It’s hard to not question whether they know something that the rest of us don’t. But since the rational far outnumber the impulsive, I wonder if there isn’t a certain wisdom in shrewdness.”

“So are the great people that you mentioned earlier the same as the impulsive ones?” D. asked.

Steinbeck seemed a little surprised by the question, so he rolled it around in his head for a while and then responded, “Great men are virtuous, and in our time maybe impulsiveness has taken on the mien of a virtue in popular thinking. I think they’re similar in that the majority never understands what drives either, but it’s a fine distinction. The difference is that great men act out of compassion for the others and

impulsive people are selfish and act primarily for themselves.”

D. noticed that Steinbeck used the word “men” in reference to greatness and “people” in reference to impulsiveness, but decided to put her observation aside for the time being.

“This distinction is very close to what happened in the minds of Nathaniel’s companions when the affair became public knowledge: everybody knew Nathaniel to have the potential for greatness, and they did not understand the impulsiveness of his actions. They were congratulatory and thankful that he had found something to bring him out of what had looked like a downward spiral, but they were also worried.

“More importantly, though, I think everybody, especially Nick, was a little jealous. Whether of her or of him I don’t think matters. It was the jealousy that friends feel when their friend becomes somebody else’s lover. Friendships can never come to those burning moments of intense physical passion. A friend’s passion is vague, cerebral, and thinly laid out across a spectrum of interactions. Perhaps a friend will last longer for this reason — a section of the blanket can tear and be mended by a hasty job of patching. Amorous relationships tear deep and long and often leave a couple disconnected. Who’s to say which is the better. Of course, at the time Nathaniel would have insisted that he had both with Charlotte because his strange feelings toward her prevented him from seeing her as she really was.

“I think the whole arrangement fell the hardest upon Jake. For some indiscernible reason Jake sank into a flaccid silence. It might have been nothing more than Jake’s tendency to be huge in everything, both vigorousness and morbidity; or maybe there was something more involved for Jake than the rest. But whatever his reasons, Jake hid behind his painting and took what solace he could from the company of others. But I can only attest to this as a guess, because he kept these two comforts so separate that they almost became contradictory. While he painted more, he hid his work from the world until Huck, who hates for things to be hidden as if they are shameful lies, found him out and hung the collection, really only two paintings, now that I think of it, in the northern hallway. Armed with the compliments of the rest of his ‘family,’ Jake

came out of the closet, so to speak, and back into the fold.”

Feeling that he had reached a cadence of sorts, Steinbeck left a pause for symbolic effect. D. could hear the gurgle of water in the near distance. “Mind you that everything that I’ve told you this far has been put together from bits and pieces of conversations that I’ve had, because this is the state of affairs into which I arrived. I told you that I’d get back to the ‘cheating’ of my name, and, as with greatness, I don’t believe it to be cheating if one has the well-being of others in mind when one acts. Remember that I was the first new stranger since Charlotte, and it might not seem fanciful that I stirred something in Nathaniel that he had put to nap when he allowed Charlotte to assuage his troubled thinking. In part, the name that I picked and the game involved in contemplating its implications were meant to break Nathaniel out of the slave chains of sex. He had been caught up in a bodily temptation and had transferred the authority that it had over him to the flesh of the matter rather than the soul.

“Of course, it wasn’t entirely my arrival that offered Nathaniel the pill of reality, but, in its entirety, it was a bitter medicine and a strychnine revelation for him. If he had trusted himself, if he had believed in his own virtue, he may not have been so ruptured by his conflicting emotions. He struggled between his potent desire to grasp for the headboard of vice and his disgust with himself for being so distracted. It was as if he had woken from a dream and didn’t know whether or not he should go back to sleep. Of course, we all were ready with pans, whistles, and shakes to pull him out to us. Well, not all of us. John seemed encouraged in a way by the turmoil that boiled in Nathaniel because it proved that he was not perfect. There are such men who can only be vindicated by the shortcomings of others.”

The churning of the brook was louder now, and D. was beginning to catch glimpses of the water as it rolled over stones and cast sparkles between the trees.

“Because I had come so late in the summer, it seemed as if the party dispersed soon after I had arrived, and I went home as well. The following summer, Nathaniel got here early and was restless for Charlotte’s

appearance. During the break, he had braced himself to look his demons in the eye and reclaim his soul, but the experience was stolen from him because his devil did not return. Maybe Charlotte had fallen back into the patterns of her life and forgotten our house in the woods. Or maybe when the expectation of those who knew her out there forced a recrudescence of her docility she shivered at the role that she had played. Either way, she did not make a dramatic, or any, entrance. Her failure to do this was another mystery to us all, but this time a welcome one for most. Again, Jake's reaction, I remember noticing, was sad relief. Perhaps he felt as if his friendship had won a battle by default or something. Despite his priming and the number of times he had rehearsed the scene, Nathaniel was also relieved that he did not have to discover his real visceral and emotional reaction to Charlotte.

"The house was in disrepair that spring. How John manages to make anyone believe that he does much more than sit in his chair and drink is what my namesake called 'a triumph of insinuation.' There were leaves and twigs everywhere, interspersed by animal droppings and a thick coat of dust over everything. But it was good that the house was in such a state because Nathaniel returned from his recovery needing something to do. Most of the late spring that year was spent fixing things and cleaning. It gave Nathaniel time to think productively, just as he was doing productive labor. He and I were finally wiping the last pane of windows in the ballroom when Nathaniel turned to me and said, 'I should have seen her for what she was and shielded my mind from thinking more of her than she deserved.'

"'You've hit the mark there,' I said. 'But you've grown tremendously from the experience.'

"'I know. But I often wonder if growth must always be so difficult. It doesn't seem to be true for everybody.'

"When he said that, I realized that, while I was younger than him, if only by a year or two, my own maturation had been simple. In fact, I hardly knew that it had happened at all. But then, compared to him, I only had to climb to a slighter level. Perhaps that is why he's always seemed so much older than me."

Almost as if Steinbeck had been subtly pacing their walk, just as he spoke these last words, the trio broke out into the meager river bank. D. thought she could make out in the distance, down the gradual slope of the hill, the rock from which she had fallen to begin her adventure.

From behind her, Steinbeck, watching her follow the stream with her eyes, said, “Well, here’s our grand river. It’s not much of one, but it’s all that we have, so we make it fill whatever pridefully symbolic purpose we need. Since everyone else has declined the privilege and shirked the duty of naming it, I’ve decided that it should be called Philus.”

“Why?” D. asked.

Steinbeck laughed and Huck said, “He won’t tell ya. Seems ta me he thinks it’d ruin the game.”

“Yes, it would,” Steinbeck confirmed.

D., having thought of something similar, changed the subject, but only slightly, by asking Steinbeck, “What do you think of that stained-glass window in the entrance hall?”

“I haven’t worked it out yet,” Steinbeck responded with perfect seriousness.

Huck glanced down the brook’s length. “Will ya be able t’say where you came ‘cross the river?”

D. nodded, “I think it was at that big rock in the distance. And it took me about forty-five minutes to get there from my car. Of course, it may be very close because I was just wandering that day.”

“Well, we’re just wand’rin now.”

They decided to take a short break and sat on the grass of a shaded area by the stream’s side. Steinbeck waited to see if anybody else had anything to say, then resumed his story.

“I think Fate must have some mechanism of sliding balances because that next summer another woman came, and it must have seemed as some twist of fate to Nathaniel, who had watched so many years pass bringing only men. The impression must have been doubled by the fact that this next woman was almost an exact opposite from Charlotte. She was quiet and reserved. She seemed to have one of those codes of conduct that dictates that anything fun must disguise some evil impulse. I can’t

say whether her morals were religion-based or not, but if they were, it's likely that she saw our lifestyle as a prime point of entrance for the devil and herself as a kind of missionary saving us through conversion. At least that's the only way that I've found to explain her remaining here for more than a day or two because she was humorless and uninterested in philosophical discussion. Her age was difficult to determine. Her behavior bespoke a woman preparing for the grave and its posthumous rewards during the latter half of her life, but, on the other hand, she was gorgeous, and that made her look very young since we tend to attribute beauty instinctively to youth as we attribute truth inherently to beauty until we are proven wrong."

"Well the young do, anyways," interrupted Huck.

"Perhaps the elderly do as well," D. defended the idea. "As one ages, youth must become a broader category, and beauty in an older person must make those who match his or her age feel younger by association."

Huck ceded the point. He was outnumbered.

"So while Nathaniel had been entirely prepared to deal with a whore, he was ill-fitted to handle what he got: a saint," Steinbeck continued. "It would be a lie to suggest that there were any of us who didn't have our secret fantasies about this newcomer. Men will often brag about lascivious intentions that they don't really have, but, when faced with apparent purity, they will usually dream quietly of tearing it down. Very few will admit to this as a goal, perhaps, because it hides a jealousy and a malicious will to destroy that which they do not feel they themselves have. Or perhaps this is another lie, and they are taciturn because they desire purity themselves and in their obtuseness feel as if their natural impulses make them inferior.

"Whatever the case, we all played our little games of flirtation, with the possible exception, again, of John, who seemed uninterested in the whole affair where it went beyond the benefit of persuading everybody to leave him to his business. Nathaniel played his hand by becoming quiet, almost pious, himself, but, because that state of being was new to him, his behavior seemed surreptitious instead. He would often find

excuses to break his silence to chide her about one thing or another. One day he found her alone in the central garden, and said, ‘Well, it seems apparent that you intend to stay for a while.’

“To which she coyly responded, ‘I thought I might.’

“‘Then you’ll have to choose a name.’

“‘Why? It’s silly.’

“‘It is not silly,’ Nathaniel justified the tradition. ‘It is an opportunity to pick a name that suits you. It can be a chance to be different, maybe even to finally be who you are.’

“‘Aren’t I who I am regardless of my name?’

“Nathaniel thought for a moment. ‘It’s hard to tell if a name affects who you become or if who you become affects what your name is thought to represent. Or maybe the two really are independent. But I believe that you can never know for sure unless you sample other names and other personalities.’

“The woman smiled a smile which, though it may have been a trick of the light, seemed a shade sinister. ‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Call me Lolita.’”

Steinbeck grinned at a chortle from D.

“Despite, or perhaps in the face of, her new name, and I can tell that you appreciate the irony of it, Lolita became even more constrained around Nathaniel, almost to the point of coldness. Needless to say, this conduct infuriated and further intrigued Nathaniel until he seemed on the verge of insanity with it. Maybe he saw Charlotte’s absence as a rejection and, since he had somehow come to expect lust and rejection in that order, felt that Lolita was unjustly rejecting him without the benefit of the lust.

“‘Why did she choose *that* name, damn it?’ he would often say. To tell the truth, the majority of us came to believe that the entire charade was no more than a game and that Lolita would eventually succumb to Nathaniel as we all, in our own ways, had done.”

Standing up and brushing dirt and grass from his bottom, Huck suggested that they get moving. Without a significant break in the story, Steinbeck and D. agreed and followed him.

“With Charlotte, Nathaniel had convinced himself that a slut was

pure and honest, and now in honesty and purity he heard a sensual promise. And, because when the situation is taken in this way, the futile games become just so much waiting, Nathaniel grew impatient.

“‘I wish we could just skip all this crap, regardless of the ending,’ he said. ‘I could handle not having her if it weren’t for the rejection after so much teasing. I wish she wouldn’t play these games.’

“‘Maybe she isn’t playing any games,’ John suggested.

“‘Oh she is. She’s hiding something, and I think she’s being untrue to herself.’

“John didn’t agree, but he was sick of the topic. The whole situation was an annoyance to him. He walked away, probably to find himself a bottle, and called back, ‘I knew there would be trouble having a girl that pretty in our small community.’

“But none of it mattered to Nathaniel. He had written the story in advance, and came to believe that he could hurry the inevitable climax if he could only better play his part, and for his part he took that of the doting courtier. He took to following her around and servicing her, which, to a woman who saw herself in the service of a higher morality, must have seemed either to represent one successful convert, to be a reward for good work done and a helper toward a more rapid success, or simply to be inappropriate.

“There are events in our lives that, no matter how we try, we can never quite follow back to their beginnings. Sometimes the progression from one stage to another is so subtle that the climax comes before we’ve noticed the accumulating pressure. Sometimes there might not have been a gradual acclimation, and an event comes as tornadoes do, unpredictably because we haven’t the perspective to see their beginnings below, above, or around us. One such event thrust out of Lolita and slashed open wounds which may never heal in any of us. I don’t know what turmoil inside her spun its way through to her actions. Perhaps her purity had been a disguise or a method of suppressing a part of herself that she did not like. Maybe she discovered that, despite the sinfulness of it, she enjoyed the power that she had come to have over the Pequod, especially over Nathaniel. I believe that it is just a mild

shift that turns an angel into a devil because any true opposites must pivot lightly on one idea. And to ask why the change took place and why it went in the direction that it did is to wonder why a vast body of water swells out of season and picks its way randomly across a field, destroying one farm while irrigating another.

“It would be impossible for me to explain the circumstances that brought John and Lolita out into the woods together. I cannot fathom what he could have done to break her resistance or how she might have manipulated him as part of some secret plan. Nor do I understand how, with all these acres of trees to wander, Holden came to be napping against a nearby tree, concealed by bushes. John Steinbeck thought of virtue as a constant across the human spectrum and sin as something that every generation must learn or invent. Perhaps it is learned by accident through misdeeds that adults consider themselves to be too late to suppress and that are discovered by the young, or perhaps the young misconstrue the significance of virtuous acts and invent sin in that way. I cannot pick and choose between these options because I do not know the thoughts of any of those involved. It is possible that Holden had stumbled upon a vile act that John and Lolita wished to conceal deep in the forest. Or it is equally possible that John and Lolita’s lovemaking was as pure an act as can be, and it was Holden who, peering through the bush at the two naked bodies writhing against each other, witnessed an act that he did not understand but that both titillated and disgusted him.

“If this last is the case, then it would seem that so much time of obscurity among the ranks had made him eager for a chance to stand out, even if in a negative way, and to effectuate a change. He sought no council but snuck away from the scene after he had taken what enjoyment he could from it and brought an anthill crashing down by telling Nathaniel what he had seen. But he couldn’t have expected Nathaniel to react the way that he did. I imagine Holden thought that the news would bring him into Nathaniel’s consciousness and that Nathaniel would wait and take out whatever aggravation he had on John and Lolita. But Nathaniel was gone before the couple had returned. With a terrifying look at Holden, he stormed off, and none of us saw him for several days.

“The rest of us, having seen only Nathaniel’s reaction to something Holden had told him, accosted the young man with our minds already set. We told him that it had been a cruel thing to do. Nick blamed Holden and asked him what it was he had hoped to accomplish. But Holden chastised himself the hardest, and none of us were inclined to exacerbate his pain. Perhaps that is the reason he took on so, taking the blame entirely upon himself and pleading with us all to search for Nathaniel because the look on his face when he left would haunt him forever if anything disastrous happened.

“Martin was the first to exonerate Holden because he was not used to being near somebody who was more vulnerable than himself. Huck, here, pointed out that Holden was only confused and fumbling between choices. Just as we had all calmed down as much as was possible, Huck went off looking for Nathaniel and John and Lolita returned. For Jake and Nick, the fire rekindled, and they raged. ‘You knew how he felt about her,’ said Jake to John. John merely shrugged and was wordlessly helpless. Holden looked at them as if ashamed. Martin stood in the corner watching the whole spectacle with detached interest.

“Again, the energy drained from those who were expending it. Huck returned after dark saying that Nathaniel had disappeared but would come back when he was ready. Late in the night, Lolita dressed in a white shroud that she had found somewhere. She walked barefoot down to that lake, filled the pockets with stones and swam out as far as she could. It must have taken a tremendous force of will because, though the stones in her pockets kept tugging her down, she wanted to make sure that she was far enough out that a spurt of indecision would be insufficient to regain the night air. As she died, she was thinking that she hoped her sacrifice was enough.

“When Nathaniel came back and was told about the tragedy, he began to cry and then forced himself to smile as if to reserve at least a little victory over death. To him, death was an enemy that he would one day defeat in a fair wrestling match, and he could not comprehend why somebody else would simply roll over.

“‘You know,’ he said to no one and everybody, ‘it would have been

possible for Charlotte to screw every man here, and I wouldn't have suspected or cared because I didn't love her. I thought she might, and as far as I know I was wrong. I wish I had been wrong about Lolita, too.'

"He started to walk toward his room, but Jake called his name. I think Jake wanted to say something beautiful and reassuring, but he just dropped his arms and put his chin to his chest. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

"We all knew that Nathaniel blamed himself, but I don't think that the fault lay with *any* of us. I think Lolita had been disgusted with herself long before any of us had known her, and now that others knew her shame, she knew that she had been correct all along — she was transparent and would never be able to hide her vain sinfulness."

The three came solemnly to D.'s rock. The afternoon had taken on a cool demeanor, and the woods were silent. D. regarded the stone and then turned to look for something familiar in the surrounding trees. "This way," she said. "I think."

When they had broken through the line of shrubbery that bordered the stream, D. turned her head to Steinbeck and asked, "So how does your story end?"

Steinbeck considered the question and laughed. "Well it hasn't ended yet, I'm still alive." Then he added, "And relatively young, as well."

"You know what I mean."

After nodding, Steinbeck confessed, "This story doesn't have a very satisfactory ending. I guess the only way to end it is with the end of that summer. It had ended quickly, but with the sweetness sucked out of it as with murky water at the bottom of a lake. I guess we were all anxious to turn the page and begin a new chapter. That's the real Steinbeck's sentiment, not mine, though I believe it's a good metaphor.

"Nathaniel's problems that summer were not so simply abated. They had seeped through the pages, as it were. Nathaniel, like many of Steinbeck's characters, and probably the author himself, was struggling with greatness. Steinbeck once wrote that 'a man's importance can be measured by the quality and number of his glories,' but 'glory' has always seemed to be too subjective and broad a concept by which to define the value of a human life.

“In Nathaniel’s mind, he had caused Lolita’s death. I don’t know how he came to that conclusion, but he did come to it. Those last days of the summer, he thought with all his might to discern what sin Lolita had thought she had committed because he believed that he was the one who had made an innocent impulse on her part seem sinful. Nathaniel had always been inclined to try for the larger picture of life, believing it to be dangerous to consider only specific aspects, but, now, without knowing it, he was doing something exponentially more dangerous: peering only at one thing. One act. One line in what can only be handled safely with a view to the intertwining of many lines. No matter the path one takes, if that path is followed as far as it can be, we end where we began: with the choices made by the individual in a world of interaction. And none can shoulder the blame of others or fully understand their faults. We can only choose for ourselves.

“Huck once told me that it is too easy to follow the course of a group, be it society or religion or political party.”

D. looked to Huck, but he showed no inclination to contradict Steinbeck this time.

“And as individuals, we are all responsible for our own lives, at the end of which we must look back and decide whether we labored for good or for evil. But we all want it to have been good, and here is where we must account for the group to measure how our conceptions of good and evil compare to those of others. There will always be somebody to contradict anything that we can possibly say, and since this is inevitably true, we have no string of constancy to which we can hold except to be honest always: to ourselves and to the world. To lie is to be destructive and to contradict any purpose that we could possibly believe that we have. Perhaps this can be the only test when we return, as we always do, to a heterogeneous society. No matter what we do, it cannot be good unless we are willing to share it with others. If we wish to hide it, we cannot truly believe in it ourselves. Maybe this is why so many are miserable in these days: too much time spent trying to justify a lie so that we can never do anything but good in our own eyes. I think that it was the lie, whichever way it was directed, that killed Lolita. We’re all

suicidal in a way. How else can we explain modern society?

“I believe that this was the devil that Nathaniel battled for so long, and I think that at the end of that summer he came to a point in his reasoning at which he thought he realized that all of his reasoning and logic were the problem. One option is to struggle through it, thinking that it is just another of an endless series of problems to be worked out. Another option is to drop the whole thing by believing that finally your current conviction is the correct one. Nathaniel’s conviction at the time was that humans can’t choose to know everything, they can strive for it, but they’ll never achieve it. But he believed that you *can* choose to know nothing. The former is to question why we are alive, and the latter is simply to live. This is the option that he chose for himself at that time.

“The day before I left, he said to me, ‘I never saw either Charlotte or Lolita because I created them. I used to be able to see through my expectations and see what really was. I have to find that again, and I think the answer might be to not look so hard. I never saw either of them. They were only ideas in my own head.’

“And it must have been a sad moment watching them go, his ideas, as he closed the door on them. But, like death, it is only a momentary pain, for once you’ve turned the bolt, you forget why you had opened the door at all. Nathaniel built a wall in his head that could not be passed in either direction, and only time would tell if the wall would prove to be a tomb or a cocoon.

“For my own part, I disagreed, and I told him as much when I said to him that perhaps the only thing to which we have an undeniable right is experience and asked what value there could be to experience without learning.”

As Steinbeck voiced this question, a glint of light came through the shrubbery and D. gasped. “I didn’t realize that it was so close!”

They pushed through a final thicket, and there, where she had left it, was D.’s car. She walked around it and inspected the outside of it, then turned to Huck and Steinbeck with a look of childlike joy.

“Well,” said Steinbeck.

“So I s’pose this is it,” said Huck.

“Yes,” D. told him, “I guess it is.”

She took her keys from her pocket.

“How ‘bout a g’dbye hug’n’kiss?” Huck requested.

Tearing, but not knowing why, D. complied. Then, without a word, she turned back to her car and put the key in the lock on the door. There was an unreasonably loud click as the door unlocked. Steinbeck and Huck looked at each other, waved to D., and turned to leave.

“Wait!” D. called after them. “You haven’t finished your story yet.”

Steinbeck, taking a moment to realize that the call was to him said, “Yes, I think I have.”

“No, you haven’t. You have to tell me what words of wisdom Nathaniel offered you in response to your question.”

Steinbeck smiled. “Oh.” He shrugged the implication that they hadn’t been significant words. “Only that he would get well. Then he repeated it, ‘I will get well. I haven’t the right to do otherwise.’”

With that Steinbeck, then Huck, turned and walked back toward the grumbling of the brook. D. opened her car door and felt the warm, stagnant air rush out to greet her. On the passenger seat was the duffel bag full of the clothes that she had told John negated her need to follow him home.

The wind has picked up, and the sky is darkening to the far west, bringing the brook’s children so they can fall to earth and cause her to overflow and grace the legs of the trees. The trees will brighten at the renewed youth of their company and Summer will begin.

We feel the earth under our feet and we know that there are those among us who are glad that we have been distracted from our slumber. Who can sleep in the heat of possibility? And now that we have missed our window of early Spring we are eager for stories of morning, of rebirth, and of hope.

Let’s stay a while. Let’s linger a while longer and watch as three forms return toward the house in the woods at dusk. Two men and a woman, and she with a bag and a suitcase as if heading out for a

restful vacation. But we never leave our routines in the simple hopes of breaking our routines. We leave for the promise of difference, in the hope of something new, and, ultimately, to increase our store of stories.

Chapter 10

D. unpacked her cloths into the empty drawers of the desk in her room in the evening. She felt listless, as if now that the time that she spent in the house and the activities with which she filled that time were at her discretion, the ability to do anything left her unable to find any one thing that she actually wanted to do. To this day, she had merely been filling time spent primarily in waiting for the ability to leave. She had returned planning only to meet the man who was so intriguing that nearly a dozen fully grown men would return Summer after Summer seemingly for the sole purpose of telling stories about him. Of course she knew that there must be more to it than this, so she left her plans after Nathaniel's arrival ambiguous. Now, with the end of her current situation indefinite, she felt listless, as if she needed a project to intersperse with the reading that she intended to do: some sort of goal.

She heard Jim barking somewhere outside of the house, and it occurred to her for the first time that he had been strangely absent from their walk that afternoon. Whatever the reason for Jim's absence, she had had Huck to protect her, and then Steinbeck as well. She noticed that she had somehow forgotten, at some indiscernible time, that she was in need of protecting. She didn't want to admit it, even to herself, but the idea that there was somebody out in the forest wandering around and concentrating solely on frightening her kept a titillating tinge of excited fear in the atmosphere. She scoffed at thoughts of her impending boredom because she still had, at least, the specter of Alex to cast a shade of danger upon even the most mundane of activities, especially when she did them alone. Her heart picked up its pace just a bit. She was alone at the moment. In fact, she had been standing with her back to the door and her senses dimmed to the world, and, with her senses keyed up once again, a tap at the window made her jump a little. It was

a branch reminding her of the wind. She giggled at herself and put her hand to her chest with an inwardly laughing smile, but the heart under her hand was unsoothed. Tilting her head to discover other sounds of which she had been unaware, D. felt a rising discomfort because there *were* no other sounds. She held her breath, feeling silly for longing so much to hear Jim bark again or John snore or someone talking.

Silence.

After a long moment of near, and largely self-inflicted, agony, she heard feet shuffling toward her from the eastern end of the house. She strained her ears to determine the number of steps, but couldn't tell if it was two or four feet making their way down the northern balcony. Panicking whimsically but with real anxiety, she slid backwards toward the window, planning to open it as a means of escape. She glanced about for something, anything, that might be used as a weapon, feeling a little ridiculous about herself for being so nervous. She had hardly seen Alex during the past month, and the other seven men in the house were no apparent threat to her, and they were all nearby. Surely, it would be Huck coming to offer her an evening snack. Or maybe it was Holden coming to petition for her approval. In fact, she felt as if the fact that she had just been considering the danger of Alex meant that it could not possibly be him. Fate seems always be bent on disproving itself, so the appearance of Alex now would be a too coincidental proof that Fate existed.

It was Alex. His sly looking green eyes slipped around the door frame and his head and body followed. D.'s heart stopped. She would scream. He wouldn't dare attack her here, now.

As Alex's shoulder came into view, D. saw that there was a large hand on it. Jake stepped behind Alex.

"I found this young man pinned against a tree by Jim this afternoon just after you and Huck left. We've had a little talk."

D. breathed deeply but struggled to not show it. "Oh, I had been wondering where he had gotten to," she said, not sure, herself, which "he" she meant.

"Well, Alex here has something to say to you, don't you, Alex?"

Alex shuffled his feet and grunted something barely audibly.

“What was that? I don’t think she heard you.”

His face was toward the floor, and his sneaky eyes crept from his feet, to the side, at D.’s feet, and then back to his own. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Jake squeezed his shoulder, “Speak up!”

“I’m sorry!” Alex jerked at the squeeze and looked at D. His voice had cracked over the “o” in “sorry”, and suddenly his entire impression on D. had changed. Suddenly the dangerous and unpredictable young devil was replaced by a kid in his late teens, perhaps no less dangerous, but infinitely more overt.

Jake smiled at D. “He understands that he’ll be asked to leave if he can’t manage to be more cordial to you. And you don’t want to be asked to leave, do you?” Alex mumbled and looked away, but not before D. caught a look that slithered across his face begun by a slight snarl of upper lip and culminating in an undulation that passed across his eyebrows. In a fancy of imagination, D. thought that she had seen something, not an impression, but something tangible and manifest slip past the black holes of his eyes and D. knew simultaneously that there was more to the threat than being asked to leave and that there was still something in Alex of which she ought rightfully to be afraid. She hoped that Jim had become accustomed to sleeping in her room at night.

Even so, despite any lingering uncertainty, D. felt safer. Safe enough, in fact, to marvel at the fortuitous timing of the day’s events. If it were a script, or a game, a line had been drawn in her favor, and she hoped that the extra work to which Alex would be put in order to harass her would dissuade him from trying. It’s much harder to see that sort of activity as a game when the odds are more heavily stacked on the victim’s side, and D. thought that, in his consciencelessness, Alex had merely been playing the game of the youth of his day.

After dark, the whole crew was gathered at the house, and it seemed to D. that the vacation atmosphere was becoming more defined. She was leaning back in the grass of the courtyard, twiddling the leaves of a

nearby weed between her fingers listening to the rhythmic undulation of Summer night bugs, and she looked around for the first time as a guest, not haphazardly and in glimpses between other, more immediate, thoughts, but thoroughly and carefully as if creating a picture in her mind. The light in the courtyard, she observed, was not merely the ethereal glow of the moon overhead, as it had previously seemed in a vague sort of non-thought, but was largely provided by candles that were placed sporadically around the yard and the balcony, each flickering unevenly with the occasional breeze that managed to sift its way into the yard. She supposed that somebody along the way had figured out that putting candles in different spots and at varying altitudes would prevent any but the strongest and craziest winds from blowing them all out simultaneously. Occasionally, if enough candles had flickered out to make a palpable difference, or merely in passing, one of the party would relight the more easily reached of the candles. Looking at a candle that balanced precipitously on a balcony overhead, dripping its wax down a banister until it hung down over the grass of the yard like an opaque Summer icicle, D. wondered if anybody ever worried about fire. She asked and received as answers a varying bunch of looks, some suggesting a mildly agreeing concern, some indifferent, and some offered through knowing smiles as if to say, "That could never happen here."

She wondered how much time John, who was presently asleep on his chair, might have to spend during the Winter scraping wax from wood. Then she detected several banisters that were unusually thick with darkened wax and decided that that particular demand on John's time must be limited.

Apparently in reference to something that he was reading, crouched over the book on the piano bench with a candle so close at hand that D. worried for his hair, Steinbeck spoke, "I wonder why it is that we as a society have acquiesced into giving so much recognition and money to superficial entertainers."

Martin, who was flipping idly through his dictionary, casting sidelong glances at everyone and smiling nervously at D. when she caught his eyes on her, nodded in agreement, "The money would be more decently

spent on essentials,” he said, and everybody understood that he meant those essentials that he provided.

“I think its valuable as hell for people to distract everyone or something,” said Holden, apparently thrilled to be able to hold up his end of a conversation. “I mean, who wants to give all the money that they have to work so goddam hard for to somebody who’s only going to do something that doesn’t distract them. Not me. But I don’t care. Really, I don’t. Because just because a person makes alot of money and all doesn’t mean that everybody thinks they’re more important than them.”

“You’re wrong, Holden,” Jake told him matter-of-factly. He had been fingering the books against the northern wall. “We give the most power and money, and they’re really the same thing these days, to those who give us the most in return, and if the person to whom we give the money and power has more of it than we do, then we are admitting that they provide us with something with which we can’t provide ourselves. We don’t always think of it that way, but maybe we should.”

Sitting up from his book to better parry the idea, Steinbeck suggested, “I agree. Certainly, one does not need money to feel important or even to keep one’s self occupied, but it would be in ignorance of the facts to claim that it isn’t a method of approval that makes life much easier. And I agree with you, too, Holden, that distraction is a valuable commodity. What I can’t seem to understand is why we manage to pool so much of it for people who distract us for such a short time and do *that* poorly. It just seems that, if we were to consider our own thoughts to be the finest of distractions, then our distracters would have to work harder at their creations in order to give us more to consider. I believe that we can choose to enjoy less obvious means of entertainment.”

Huck spoke up from his position under the willow. “Take Nathaniel. Such a mind in his head and a c’ncern fer humanity, but I don’t ‘magine he makes what ‘mounts to a spit on a bonfire ‘pared ta well regarded actors an’ athletes. I re’lize that he don’ need as much reward from de money givers, on account of it comin’ from elsewhar fer him, but are th’others really worth a hun’red times him in th’world’s eyes?”

Although none of them seemed to be talking loudly, a breath of their

conversation had apparently wafted its way up to Nick, who stood sipping champagne in the southern tower, because he called down an answer. “I’ll tell you why they’re worth so much. If you work at a desk or at doing some otherwise useful but uninteresting task, who would be willing to watch you work? What distraction or story could an everyman offer? That’s why celebrities make so much: people want to watch them work. I bet that I could name a greater number of frivolous celebrities than any of you could name great thinkers.”

Steinbeck turned toward Nick’s voice. “That’s only true in two limited senses,” he said, raising his voice to be heard. “Only athletes are paid for their process. Otherwise it is always the final product that earns attention, whether it be a painting, a book, a movie, or a harvest of wheat. As far as renown is concerned, if you’re talking in terms of current or recent celebrities, you’re probably correct, and that is exactly the reason for my objection, but if you look over time, even the last fifty years, then you remember the thinkers, who are also the creators. I doubt that you could name more performers in *any* field from over one-hundred years ago than even you yourself could name thinkers. So in a grander scheme, you will lose that bet, and the area in which you might win would only prove me right in my original suggestion.”

“Well I don’t care either way. Long as I get my kicks, the rest of the world be damned.” At first D. thought that Alex had finally spoken from the shadows of the corner in which he lingered, but then she noticed that it had really been a stranger standing over him in the southern balcony. She couldn’t see much of this new face in the darkness, but what she could see looked scraggly. He continued, “You can sit here groaning about society all you want, but it’ll all go on without you. Better to just slip through it and dig it all while you can.”

Steinbeck said something about indifferent complicity, but the newcomer wasn’t interested. He just slipped into the second room from John’s and shut the door.

“Well Sal’s here,” said Steinbeck. “Bang the drums.”

Brrooaahh!

D. woke up late at night to a screech from somewhere out in the woods. Jim was standing on his hind legs with his paws against the sill of the half-open window. He barked.

Brrooahh-dee!

It sounded like some kind of horn not far off to the north.

Brrooahh-dee-didilee-op!

It was a saxophone in the night, and Jim barked again. D. got out of bed and looked out the window.

Brrooahh-dee-didilee-op, doodoo-ahh, doodoo-ahh-dee-didilee-op!

From somewhere out between the trees D. heard a voice call out, “Dig the American night! I’m back in the soft cooing eastern mountains!”

She listened for another blurt of the sax, but the chirping of crickets rose up and silenced the horn. An owl seemed to take up the tune in a softly fading refrain. After a while D. went back to bed and fell asleep.

D. had been reading for several hours when she decided that her eyes and her mind needed a break. Breakfast had been a mess, with hungry morning scavengers tripping over each other in the large but cramped kitchen, so she thought that she might see how much work would be involved in straightening out the dining room enough to use it.

She looked up from her book. Huck, Steinbeck, and Jim were her only company in the courtyard. An occasional tap of typewriter hammers served to remind everybody that Martin was still in his room. She leaned over to pet Jim. “Where is everybody?”

Huck finished a paragraph and looked around, saying, “Well, Jake’s a-fishin’, John’s off wherever ‘e goes in the day. I think Nick went into town fer more champagne, an’ Holden’s prob’ly off mopin’ ‘round the forest.”

D. counted the bedroom doors of the opposing balconies. “What about Alex and Sal?” she asked.

“Don’ know. Guess there ain’t no ‘countin’ fer those two, seein’ as Sal’s al’ays off travlin’, ‘s he calls it, or sleepin’ in the day time, and Alex ain’t seemed ta be ‘round much anyways.”

D. scanned around at the doors again. The only rooms that were

still vacant were Nathaniel's and the one between her room and Steinbeck's. "Looks like there's only one more vacancy," she observed. "I'm not taking anybody's room, am I?"

"No," Steinbeck told her. "You and Alex took our last two rooms." Then he added, "And we've an extra if Othello doesn't come back."

"Mightn't he?"

"It's hard to say," Huck took up the thought. "It'll only be 's second year."

All had been said on the topic, so D. returned to the thought that had originally raised the question, "I thought that I might straighten up the dining room."

Huck nodded and said it was such a good idea that he'd help. Steinbeck concurred, following them through the door to the eastern side of the house. Most of the papers and notebooks in the dining room were already in the boxes, and the majority of the boxes had lids nearby or already on them. "Where should we put all these?" D. asked.

There wasn't any storage room of which any of them knew, so D. suggested the adjoining hallway, considering, in the back of her mind, that it might make for a good time passer to find some way to store them there attractively. "No," said Steinbeck, "that hallway is generally understood to be Sal's domain, and I think he'd object that the boxes dampen the acoustic echo of his saxophone or something along those lines."

"So was he the one who woke me up late last night?"

"Yes. He always gets me out of bed, too. I think that he's trying to begin a tradition for himself, always playing the same tune and shouting the same line at the same time his first night here. That's the only time that he's discourteous enough to be so loud so late at night."

"I guess I can live with it just this once," D. smiled.

"Well," responded Huck, "'ts been two 'r three a season. He al'ays disappears, into the nation, he says, an' comes back a coupl'a weeks later. But he does spend a consider'ble 'mount of time in that there hallway, so we oughtta find some'er else fer the boxes."

They decided that it wouldn't upset anybody terribly if they put the

boxes in the ballroom against the wall that it shared with the courtyard. D. had expected to see some type of expression of Sal's personality when she first entered the southern hallway, to coincide with Jake's paintings to the north, but she found nothing but dust and a few dried leaves of the last Autumn swirling around in the wind that squeezed through the partially opened French doors. The boxes had nearly all been moved when Jake returned with a basket full of fresh water trout.

Saying, "Damn, Jake! I ain't never caught but a fish 'r two anywheres 'round here," Huck snatched the fish and began preparing them while Steinbeck and D. dragged the grill and a bag of charcoal to their usual place in the east and Jake took a shower.

The congregation of northern balcony dwellers ate contentedly on the lawn, and Jim trotted from person to person for scraps. While D. sifted through the remaining bones and flesh of her trout, she heard the muffled sound of Sal's saxophone seeping out into the early afternoon. "Should somebody ask him if he'd like to join us?" she asked, gesturing toward the music.

"It would be a friendly gesture," said Jake, "but he'd turn down the offer."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"He like's ta keep his gut lean, he says," Huck told her and then added, "fer the spahrs pickin's he gets on the road."

"Well that's silly," said D. unassailably.

She walked through the front door and the sound of the sax belched out a blues that bounced and bumbled around the empty hallway. She lingered in the dining room to wait for a break in Sal's playing. When it became apparent that no pause was forthcoming, she slid one of the few remaining boxes from under the table and dragged it to the door as an excuse. Turning the knob and propping the door open with her left foot, she hoisted the box and pushed through into the hallway.

Sal was leaning back against the inside wall with one heel against the baseboard and looking through the French door. When he saw her move through the corner of one slit eye that was barely visible behind

his dark glasses, he stopped playing and asked her, “D’ya like a hand?”
“Sure.”

His black hair shot out from his scalp in curly commotion and slid down his head as bushy sideburns leading to a youthful scruff that ran in patches across his cheeks until it broke into an overgrown turmoil around his mouth and chin as if pulled, magnetized, to the saxophone that was so often at his lips. From his neck down, splotches of stains were scattered across his well worn, and in places torn, t-shirt and jeans, as if the hair on his head and face were disposed to falling off in liquefied languish to the music, and the dirt leapt from his flaking leather sandal shoes and held parched and dry to the white strands that hung from the cuffs of his jeans.

He swung his horn on its strap around to his back, swaggered over to D., and slipped the box into his arms. D. was trying to place the name, “I feel like I should know, but what book are you?” and added, “If you don’t mind my asking, that is.”

Sal smiled, a long sly smile that pulled back farther on the left side, “What book am I? or what book is me?”

“Well which is it?”

Sal’s smile grew, now showing the top row of teeth that were not old enough to be an unpleasant yellow. “The book is me, and I am Sal Paradise,” he said, drawing out the “ise”. “I always have been, and *On the Road* was a book about me written before I was born.”

Satisfied with his answer, Sal asked D. where she had been bringing the box and started loping down the empty hall, sliding his toes, heels, and feet irregularly so that the hard soles of his sandals reverberated with a varying rhythm of tap-shsh-tap-shh-tap-tap.

“So I’m told that you like to travel,” mentioned D. to fight back the silence that swung down like a grand pause when Sal flopped the box on top of another and came to a stop.

“Yass. Since I was old enough to leave my house I haven’t been back for so long that my home is one big club under the sky where the night life is just to dig the world and the world’s creatures and the crazy cats who share the bed of grass and take the endless commute across the

country with a job that's never got to 'cause it don't exist."

"So I imagine that you've accumulated a huge number of stories."

"Well there's one difference 'tween me and Kerouac's version of me: I ain't a writer; I'm a musician. But I can pass a long haul on a train and entertain from the passenger's seat well enough if it's what the company wants. Dean's always askin' me to give him the ballad tour, but I say, '*Man*, you got to *Go*.' 'Cause the road is pictures and a song, and no words can make the pass."

"Dean?"

"Yes, the man himself who everybody seems to think is called Nathaniel. But I know they're wrong, 'cause I know time and so's he. And I know Dean, and he's eternal, and he won't be captured by a word or a bunch of words."

To emphasize the ineffectuality of words, Sal swept his horn under his arm in one fluid motion and blew a short melody.

"Is that the Dean theme?" D. asked humorously.

Sal parted his lips from the mouthpiece, "He ain't got just one, and ain't none of them ever exactly the same. When I first came here it was the winter and all I wanted was to find myself a little warmth because I was used to bein' gone on the west coast or down Mexico way when it's cold 'round here, but I hadn't seen snow in a while and it's no good to only have the heat all the time, and what do I find? The *craziest* cat with the wild grit of the city out in the country. I guess his sound woulda been something like this..." and he rasped breath of gravel in a swinging jig through the saxophone... Boowaahh-da-da-dyadada-boowee... "and he'd play the piano soft and low with a melancholy chord and an out there rhythm like this..." this time the music turned minor and almost painful to listen to for all the disjointed sadness of it... Dae-dae-dy-dy-dyee-dy-twee-doo. "I thought that he must be grappling with something and that it was *no* good for him to be millin' 'round a sad silent castle like this in these mountains and I dragged him out into the world."

D., who had been looking out the long row of windows while she listened, trying to picture the snow swirling through the trees and into

the courtyard while Nathaniel sat at the piano shivering at what he played, looked up. Except for John, and Nick to an extent, she had yet to hear of Nathaniel outside of the Pequod.

“You traveled with him?” she asked.

“Oh yeah. He wanted to hoof and hitch it all the way across the country, and I didn’t see any reason to disagree. Like two mad hermits on the side of the road, one with a horn and the other just bein’ a melody.” He played a series of forceful and shifty blasts... Blaahh-blaahh-droo-blalabla-eee. “We caught some rides and even insane Dean took the wheel and cracked us most of the way through the original colonies on his way to warmer weather like he was spinning the earth faster to spring screaming down the road so fast that the teeth of the car’s owner chattered as quick as the pistons and then stopped ‘cause he saw that Dean had it under *control* and there was nothin’ to do but sit back and dig the feel of it all. But the guy was heading to Pittsburgh, so he made Dean pull over on Route 80 because he didn’t know the way and lit out *fast* when we stopped for drinks at this little bar halfway into town, where we stayed long enough to realize that there wasn’t nothin’ to dig in Pittsburgh but a few college chicks who hadn’t gone home for the holidays. They let us crash at their house for the night and drove us to the train station off this old brick road where we caught a train with some money that Dean had on him. We chose a train that headed southerly to get to where standing on the side of the road wouldn’t be so painful and so Dean could see the Mississippi where Mark Twain must have gone up and down in a steamboat.

“We killed the time on the train just groovin’ with the factory workers and some down on their luck farmers and even a kid who’d been let out of jail in Jersey and been headin’ home to Harrisburg, PA, but decided to keep going. In Louisiana we got off the train with the kid and had a few drinks. Dean pulled me to the side and said, ‘Dig the kid, man, he’s talkin’ about snagging a bottle or two for the trip.’ And the kid did get one bottle so that it barely showed in his pants leg, but when he tried to slip one down the other leg he was so gone that he did it upside down and had a big dark wet spot on his thigh that some girls we’d been

talkin' to saw and made a big fuss which got us caught. But we were lucky, because Dean smoothed it over with the bartender so he just threw us out without callin' the cops so that the kid wouldn't go straight back to jail. On the street Dean went wild and ran up and down in a hound-dog sweat lookin' for the sound of jazz that we heard floating on the lukewarm air.

“We found the bar with the jazz goin' on and the band leader was this old black fella who played the piano like Monk and sang the blues in this deep voice. And we dug him until a trumpet man with long hair and sunglasses stepped up and went way out and off on a solo that got every foot stomping to keep the distant beat. Well the guy jumped down off the stage and waved his horn from one side to the other like a weapon and people swayed back but didn't move 'cause the guy had *it* and when he came to us, I spun my sax around and he laughed and blew at me and I returned it, and there was Dean right between us pointin' back and forth egging us on to go and go and when we got to where there wasn't any farther to go he started bangin' his hands together and stomping to get us farther and we went right along with him until there was nothin' to do but squawk back and forth with a” Sal spit wind into his horn bourh-bourh-bourh “and out of nowhere, the trumpet man and the old soul at the piano smacked back into the tune like they had never left or had some secret communication goin' on, and before he hopped back up on the stage, the guy with the trumpet played with one hand while he shook my hand and slapped Dean on the back while Dean smiled goofy like a kid whose just done something really right for the first time in the presence of a master.

“Next we swung down into Arkansas and hitched a ride with this wacky old hick in a rattlin' old pickup truck who told us stories of a whore named Cheryl-Lynn who had moved two states over and that he just *had* to find, but he wanted to get some rest so he let Dean take the wheel while he slept in the back on this ratty old mattress that he had brought just for the occasion. I don't know how he slept, but he did, and we had to be honest and stop where he told us and he took an awful long time to get him up when we got there. He thanked us and told us that if

we waited for an hour that really turned out to be about twenty minutes, then he'd take us as far as Nevada because he had come into a little bit of money that he wanted to turn into a fortune. And Dean told me to dig the guy and remember his face, and I still do, because he had the look of freedom, but with a shadow that knew he was fooling himself and didn't have much farther to go.

"While we waited we talked about the universe and folks and how the key is to just go with the current and leave nothin' undone. And when the guy came out, Dean took the wheel and was quiet and went slow for him, and in the middle of some big empty field, he pulled over and told me to take the wheel. I didn't want to leave him out there in the middle of the country with not much money and it had been a while since we had seen another car going the other way, but Dean just swung down from the seat and smiled. 'See ya soon,' he said and began walkin' away. I watched his back in the red brake lights, and when he disappeared into darkness, I tapped the breaks to get one more look, and he was gone."

"Where?"

"Don't know. He just went," was all that Sal could say. "I made it out to California and swung in the Sans for a while, and took my time gettin' back across the country in the spring, and late in July I got back here and found Dean had gone farther than I could follow, 'cause he had *it* and he knew *time*, but he slid down to where I could understand and we dug the summer together, but he had changed altogether and I knew that it had only been a short swing for Dean and would never happen again but in a dream that I love to have. I guess it would be sad if it was anybody but Dean, but at least I had that quick run with him as he was when I could still get to where he was. I'll never get far enough now 'cause I don't have it in me. And I know me. Sometimes I think it'd be better just to go and see if I can't get out there myself and not come back ever, even if I found it 'cause then Nathaniel and I would know each other *too* good."

"So what keeps you coming back?"

Sal looked like he was thinking hard for a long half-a-minute and

said, “Well alackaday. I just want to see what happens *next*. And besides, its a good place to stop when I’m in the east.” He stamped his foot on the ground of the east like a man amazed to be home after a long hard trip. The sound ricocheted from wall to wall and even seemed to jingle a spiral up the two staircases. “And I *dig* this echo!”

He made his saxophone sing for a moment, then strolled across the ballroom. When he got to the line of windows he spun, appearing to smile at D. from behind his glasses and his instrument and slid sidelong to the last window to D.’s left. Leaning against the glass, he shoved with his shoulder and almost fell through. D. gasped and tensed up to run to his aid before she realized that the window had been built to swing open with nearly no signs that it should. Sal stuck his horn into the warm afternoon air and blew.

Broodelyaaa-didly-didly-broooooaa-de.

“I...” D. began to offer the lunch of which she had lost her memory in the sweeping jump of Sal’s story. She stopped and smiled inwardly, turned, and went through a door into the courtyard.

The sun radiates down from high in the western sky and heats the towers and the treetops and the tiles of the roof. It reflects at obtuse angles from the western windows of the house, illuminating the underside of the trees that loiter at its edge. The nearest trees, those that are always in shadow, seem to stretch to the warmth. The light sifts into and out of the wrinkles of bark and undulates as the wind blows and sways the trees. Across this stage of flowing lines a spotlight swings from left to right as the sun is reflected more strongly by metal. And as we squint our eyes to the brass light it is impossible to tell from whence the music comes.

Chapter 11

D. felt a distinct change in the atmosphere that afternoon. Everybody but Alex had returned to the house by the time she meandered through the front hallway after talking to Sal, and the people who were standing on the lawn to the east of the house eating fish and drinking emanated a feeling of vacation that wafted lazily on the warming air with the smell of burning charcoal. The slight rumble of chatter mingled with the rustle of the surrounding leaves. Huck slapped John on the back after a friendly joke and the entire company laughed at the consternated look that passed over John's face until it infected the man himself and he laughed, too. Holden lingered by the steps of the house until Nick called him over into a discussion to offer his opinion and he happily obliged, telling D. as he passed, "Nick's always asking me to give my opinion on everything." Jim, feeling the picnic, perhaps, trotted from one person to another with a stick dangling slantwise between his teeth and returning with a new stick each time somebody wrested the old one from his mouth and hurled it into the woods. Sal crept around the southern corner of the building and stood smiling at the festivities breathing, "yes, yes," at something, maybe the camaraderie. D. even spotted Alex in the shadows behind some bushes and, though she might have projected the feeling onto him, she thought that he felt some longing to join the group.

Eventually somebody got the idea of going for a swim in the lake and a general murmur arose in concordance. Then the hustle to get dressed and to fill a couple coolers with drinks and people rushing to not get left behind. D. excused herself partly for lack of a swimming suit, to which Huck tried to dismiss her concern by suggesting that they were all "goin' to swim nek'd anyways." D. insisted that she'd rather stay around the house and read; Jake decided that he had had enough water for the day. And the expedition departed, leaving a mist of expectancy,

which was what D. had decided that the atmosphere really implied: expectancy of time away from life, of leisure, of conversation, and of the coming of Nathaniel.

As D. reclined in John's chair with the book in which she was currently in the midst, Jake called down from the balcony outside of his room dangling a net, "Badminton, anyone?" They set up the net and flicked the shuttlecock over it from racket to racket with D. winning by a slight majority then returned to the courtyard with a pitcher of water and their books.

Just as the sky began to dim with the evening, the swimmers returned, and the bustle of them all falling over each other to shower and preparing for supper and sunset from the towers raised the pitch of lazy excitement until they had all eaten and leaned, divided between the towers by hallway, against the parapets, gazing to the west and the sinking sun. The slow burn of a thrill ran through them all with the slow light show of the departing glow, and D. half expected a cheer as it reached a colorful climax behind the mountains and a wave of wind shuffled through the trees far off in the distance. "It's *all* going to *happen*," she heard Sal shout from the other tower, and in the silence that followed a short burst from his saxophone, all ears perked up at the sound of the eastern door squealing open, and all eyes glanced around in inquiry and D. thought, *Nathaniel*.

The gazes turned from west to east, and D. felt as if a gust of wind might bring with it something momentous like the return of day, and in the twilight they all leaned over, at varying angles of anticipation, and listened as footsteps crossed the floorboards of the entrance hall and mounted the stairs. D. saw a shadow pass the stained glass window and then watched a head appear at the top of the eastern stairs. The young man who materialized as if rising up through the floor, though barely distinguishable across the dim courtyard, wore jeans and a shirt that was too dark to be white, so D. thought that it must be a tan that was light enough to disclose by contrast that the young man's skin was mahogany, and a boisterous greeting was offered by almost everybody present, "Othello!"

The evening light show was over, and the stars began to sift through the lingering light and fall into place across the sky. Euphoric from the convivial opiate that they had all somehow and suddenly ingested, perhaps with the trout or the lake water, or perhaps because their number had surpassed some critical mass that forced spores of affability from the floorboards of the house, the inhabitants of the house floated down to Othello's room with hands outstretched and smiles and expressions of cheer that he had returned, and questions and answers were volleyed from one to the next through the several who stuffed themselves into the room to those who were still on the balcony outside. Yes, the year had been pleasant. No, Nathaniel had not arrived as yet. Yes, the weather was lovely.

D. trailed behind a distance that she felt appropriate for a stranger in the midst of such warm familiarities, and she noticed Martin holding back as well on the other side of the crowd, trying to look as if he found something amiss in the sky and down the hall and in the yard where Alex stood, giving him something to examine. Then, as if the earth had tilted in the other direction, the group poured out of the room and toward the stairs on both sides of the house and down to the first floor, some toward the kitchen and others spilling onto the yard. At the back of the exiting surge, Othello halted at his doorway and said, "I'll be down in a moment."

D. had held her ground against the banister and smiled at Othello. He was very handsome, she thought, with his close cut hair and brown eyes.

"Hello," he said. "I'm glad to see that I'm no longer the new kid in town."

"And I'm glad to see you," responded D.

"Why's that?"

"Because I was beginning to think that this was some sort of boys club or something."

Laughing and looking a little confused, but mostly for decorum's sake because he had an idea what she had meant, Othello inquired, "Why

would *I* change your mind about that?”

D. flustered. She didn't have the words to voice what she said in her head. “Well, you know what I mean... this place doesn't exactly have the widest range of demographics.”

“Maybe there's more of a variety than you know.”

“I...”

“Or maybe we're all more alike than you've been able to see.”

“I only meant that...”

“But either way, you're still the only woman.”

D. didn't know how to respond to Othello's reaction to her friendly insinuation of connection by difference. She stammered on the syllable “I” and sped her mind to find an answer, or at least decide what class of stance she would like to take, but Othello relieved her of the need by smiling widely and with humor and saying, “But I know what you mean.”

The evening passed in much the same manner as many previous evenings, and there was still the fine coating of anticipation over everything, making conversation seem a little awkward, although there was more of it because everybody was waiting for that something else, that something more, to come, so that each exchange was characterized by revelatory beginnings and quickly fading interest, lending the night a choppy, antsy feeling.

Perhaps having spent so much energy in excitement, or perhaps because the members of the evening congregation had been much more active in the day than was usual, their numbers thinned rapidly as individual members drifted off to their rooms. Wishing good nights to Nick, Sal, Jake, and Huck, D. strolled past John, asleep, as customary, in his chair, toward the stairs and her room. Othello, she saw as she strolled down the hallway, was still awake, removing sundry objects from a leather suitcase that he closed and slid next to the desk at which he sat when he saw her deciding to enter, his motion causing the candle at his elbow to flicker.

“Is this a working vacation for you?” she asked him.

Othello glanced at the various items around him to which D. must

have been referring: some pens, a yellow legal pad, a package of computer disks, and several other items that can be found more readily in offices than in mountain mansions with no electricity. “Well, the world will go on without me, no doubt, but I don’t know how these other guys retain their places in it without keeping pace while they’re here.”

“I guess it depends what they do.” D. leaned against the door frame and the sound of one stalwart member of the remaining few in the courtyard opening a can of beer wafted up to her. “So why aren’t you downstairs socializing?”

“I will; there’s plenty of time for that. I just wanted a little quiet at first.”

Smiling amiably, D. asked, “So does that mean I have to wait until tomorrow for your Nathaniel story?”

“Hmm?” Othello asked as if he had not understood the question. “Oh, I don’t really have one.”

“Really?” D. was significantly surprised. “I thought everybody had some tale about Nathaniel’s exploits. Or some of them have been more about their own. Didn’t he do anything crazy and amazing your first summer here?”

“Nathaniel? No, not really. Last summer was very pleasant, but I wouldn’t say that anything exciting happened. I guess I could embellish some things and make stories out of them, but I’m not much of a storyteller by nature. How did Shakespeare put it? ‘Rude am I in my speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace.’”

Giggling, D. asked, “In whose mouth did he put those words?”

“Well, mine, I guess, if you want to think of it that way.” Othello snickered to himself as he thought of something. “I guess I just haven’t been here long enough to have worked up a plot.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, before I could tell a story that’s in keeping with the game, I’d have to figure out what role to assign to everybody. I guess I’ve already started, in a way, or at least some characters are just easy to parallel. For example, it would sound like Huck to say something along the lines of, ‘the robbed that smiles, steals something from the thief,’ only with

an accent, and Nick has certainly alluded to his reputation as the ‘immortal part of himself.’ And for you... well, I guess the fact that you want me to tell a story means that I can say that you’ve got ‘greedy ears’.”

D. blushed faintly. “Would that make me Desdemona?”

“For me, at least. Have you betrayed John, yet?”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, no matter, we’ll find another way to fit it all together.” Othello took the opportunity to tell D. that she could sit, if she wanted. She looked around the room and noticed that, though it was very much, in style and content, like her own, Othello had managed to procure more chairs, in one of which she now sat down.

“So what made you choose the name Othello?” she asked, by way of making conversation.

“Who should I have picked?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just thought that you might rather...” and she shrugged the end of her sentence.

Othello finished it, “pay homage to an author of my own race?”

“I suppose that’s what I meant.”

“Hmm. I don’t know entirely. I do know that was one of the reasons I didn’t choose a Faulkner as Nathaniel hoped I would (I guess he’s been waiting for one to come along), although, as I recall, I just couldn’t find anybody in his books that I wanted to be, but I guess race must have played a part in that. Sometimes I think that the one thing that we all have in common in this country is that issues of race are so constantly aroused that they are inescapable for everybody. In differentiating between fictional characters, though, I choose not to believe that the color of the author *has* to make all the difference either way. I prefer to focus on what makes us alike than what makes us different. All writing in modern English is descended from Shakespeare, anyway, so even black characters created by black authors still aren’t pure blooded.”

“Perhaps, but why Othello? He was a fool.”

“No, he wasn’t. He was incredibly strong. In the end he takes responsibility and sees the world clearly enough, and is courageous

enough, to see that he has become the enemy of what he believes in. It wasn't an issue of race for him, but one of faith and honor."

"Some might say that he only did what the people who ruled him wanted him to do. A white man tricked him into killing a white woman, and he was going to have to answer to a white society. He had to have known what was coming."

"I think that's too easy an answer. If that were true, then his suicide would have only confirmed the instincts, as some might call them, that he thought he was rising above by killing himself. His suicide wasn't an act of passion, self-loathing, or even fear. In fact, in the end, he requests that his actions not be exaggerated *or* extenuated. It was honor and duty, a return to civility and reason. It's a vague point, but consider Iago. Throughout the play he seems to be the wisest, or at least the most clever, character: he's got all the best lines, and the things he says ring the most of truth, but he ends up looking hollow and cowardly when he runs away like a common thief, is easily caught, and is denied the poignant ending. He just lives. There's no great death scene, no moment of proof that his cynicism was right or justified. Quite the contrary, actually. He hedges and tells a half-truth about believing what he had told Othello to be true, and shows himself to be a worm when he reveals his true self by killing his own wife because he is powerless to stop her from speaking her mind. He isn't even a devil, which would raise a question of higher purpose to his actions; he's just a pernicious man who leaves in his wake a bed full of dead bodies. It all comes down to honor and the strength to follow convictions. When Othello says, 'Speak of me as I am,' he is confirming that he is a human with the ability to reason, choose, and take responsibility."

"Well, you've obviously done your homework, and I have to admit I don't know enough about it to contradict what you're saying, but I'm still not ready to agree."

Smiling, Othello told D. that Nathaniel had said much the same thing during a similar conversation, "'But it doesn't matter,' he told me, 'because your name is justified if it gets us to think and talk and respect what the other is saying enough to defend our own opinions.'"

“Strange way to show respect.”

“Do you think? I think it shows tremendous respect because it requires a cool and egalitarian mindset. As long as defending your own opinion doesn’t mean dismissing others, you have to listen with at least a little credulity before you know how best to argue. As Shakespeare had Othello say, ‘I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove.’”

“But Shakespeare’s Othello was fooled.”

“Well, now you’re making it harder for me to come up with a plot for my own story.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because it would be your line to suggest that ‘we must think men are not gods.’ Instead you blame Othello for being only human. Nobody is immune to being deceived. But, as I’ve been saying, the proof of conviction comes after, in our reaction: whether we say, ‘yes, I have been fooled, but I take responsibility for what I’ve done,’ or whether we backstep and try to excuse ourselves.”

“Well,” D. laughed, “I can see that I’ll have to give more thought to what you’ve said.”

“Good. But don’t seem so surprised.”

D. seemed a little abashed, “Oh, I’m not.”

Othello just smiled at her.

Huck stuck his head into the room, “Night all.”

“Goodnight, Huck,” Othello reciprocated.

“Glad ta see you back.”

“Glad to be back.”

Huck nodded to D., who smiled in return, and disappeared toward his room. The house was quiet and sleeping. The faint light of a candle, left lit to guide John should he wake up before morning and desire his bed, glowed dim and red against the doorways across the yard.

“I’m sorry that I seemed surprised.”

“That’s alright,” Othello consoled her, “I don’t think you really were.”

After a break in the conversation, D. changed the subject, “So who would Nathaniel be in your story?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that’s why I don’t have one yet. He would

have to be someone important, but...”

“Not Iago?”

“No, that wouldn’t work. Maybe if Iago had managed to end better. Nathaniel’s certainly clever, in a brilliant way, but he’s also compassionate and dependable.” He laughed, “Maybe *he* should be Othello.”

“Who would that make you?”

“Nobody important, I guess. I’ve only been here a year. Maybe the sibyl.”

“Who?”

“The woman who was supposed to have sewed Othello’s handkerchief. But the gender’s all wrong.”

“And I’ve assumed that Nathaniel is white.”

“Well I’m not going to hold that against him.”

“Neither will I,” D. said, feeling that she was playing along. “You know, your picture of Nathaniel is quite a bit different than the one that I’ve gotten from almost everybody else.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I’ve heard all those stories, too, probably, and they all lead up to some huge event that seems to have happened in his life the spring before I got here, but nobody knows what it was. It’s all a little too dramatic if you ask me. Maybe he just grew up, but I think something in between the two extremes must have happened to him.”

“After he left Sal in the middle of the country?”

“Well it would have to be.” Then he mused, “Has Sal developed his story much, do you think?”

“Well, I’ve never heard it before, but it was pretty short.”

“Yes. It would have to be.”

D. thought that there must be more to this comment than she was perceiving, but before she could ask Othello to elaborate, the sound of flapping wings, seemingly at her ear, startled her. The willow bristled, and D. heard an owl calling out its one question through the door.

“So do you know the answer?” Othello asked her.

“To what?”

“The owl’s question?”

D. didn’t understand the question, and she must have lost herself in listening longer than she knew because Othello roused her, as if out of a trance, by standing and unzipping a piece of luggage that was on his bed. “Well, if you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go brush my teeth and go to bed. It’s been a long day.”

“That it has,” she said and left the room with him. Her door was open, and Jim lay with his head sticking out onto the balcony. Othello stopped to pet Jim fondly on the head, to which the dog stood in order to better wag his tail.

D. watched and found the edge of a thought which she uncovered in time to call out to Othello as he turned the corner to the bathroom. “Othello.”

“Yes?” he said, stepping back into view.

“What do you think of Jim?”

“He’s a remarkable and very friendly dog,” he said, realizing that he wasn’t answering her question.

“No, I meant...”

“I know,” he interrupted. “I see what it might be meant to signify, but do you think Huck named him out of malice or affection?”

“Well Huck is about as far from spiteful as anyone that I’ve ever known, but I don’t think it excuses him that he didn’t realize the significance.”

“Oh, I think he understood. So what do you think of Jim?”

“He’s great,” she said petting the dog affectionately. “I don’t know what I’d have done without him. But...”

Othello interrupted her again. “Well,” he said, approximating Huck’s accent, “if virtue no deli’ted beauty lack, then that there dog is fah more fayer th’n black.”

Othello said goodnight and stepped out of view. D. watched after him for a breath and then shook her head once to the side with a quizzical smile. Squatting down, she asked the dog, “Well, fair Jim, are you sleeping in my room again tonight.”

Jim wagged his tail and licked D.’s face. She reciprocated the favor

with a hearty laugh, and the pair went into the room.

The moon has begun its slow decent into the end of night. It is not yet full, but bright enough to send a sliver of light into every room of the old mansion. The rooms are quiet and the moonlight is free to play about the windows and caress the sleeping faces without fear of protest, for each eye is closed in sleep. And we may peep in on eleven silent forms in eleven rooms where all is still, for the wind seems sleeping, too, save for where human wind shivers the edge of a sheet or a hair. And though the twelfth chamber has no form in its bed, still the silken veil sweeps slowly from side to side as the pendulum of some expectant clock counting out the moments to the arrival of some great substance and a revelation.

Chapter 12

It wasn't early when D. opened her door the next morning. The sky was no longer the gray of early morning, and the mist had lifted, leaving a fine layer of dew over the trees, courtyard, and even the books. The warmth was beginning to seemingly seep from the earth, causing the little eddies of tender smoke that twirled in places above the ground.

But it was not late either. The fingers of the sun were just beginning to slip over the eastern rooftop, and the light was trickling down the towers toward the ground. The courtyard was still enshadowed, making it appear earlier in the yard than in the sky, and D. stood midway between waking and sleep. She yawned.

When she stepped out of her room the feeling hit her as might the first hot and muggy prenoon air of Summer: the anticipation and the vague excitement of the coming. She inhaled the smell of breakfast already fading on the fresh air; she heard a broom sweeping beneath the chirp of early rising birds; she stepped to the rail and watched Steinbeck, wearing shorts and a polo shirt, drag a heavy old manual lawn mower out into the courtyard (this made her laugh); and the wind of somebody slipping past her on the balcony fluttered her shirt and made her jump. It was Othello walking past with a towel over his bare shoulder and a basket full of toiletries, "'Scuse me," he said and smiled, "Good morning."

"Morning," she breathed, but Othello was in his room already. Her mouth was sticky with the taste of dreams, so she decided to dilute them with coffee.

On the front stairs, Holden was wiping the stained glass window with slow dilatory strokes. He smirked guiltily and explained, "It's old glass, you gotta be careful as hell."

"Mm-hmm. Good morning."

"Yeah," he responded and returned to his chore.

In the kitchen, Huck was wiping down the counter by the sink. He turned when he heard the door swing closed with its thwump-ump, and said, “Mornin’! Yer up. Y’hungry? I been keepin’ yer bre’kfast warm, but I wanna clean the stove.”

“Starved,” D. told him plainly, retrieved her eggs and bacon, poured some coffee, and sat at the kitchen table to eat and dismiss the haze from her drowsy eyes. “So what’s all the commotion about?”

“C’motion? Oh, nothin’. Just stuff needs doin’, and won’t a body do it ‘till ev’ryone’s here to share the labor.”

“Nathaniel’s not here yet,” D. said, her voice midway between observation and question.

“He always ends up with th’ lion’s share a the work, anyways. Workin’ now keeps us busy fer a while, though; winds us down from our life-work so’s we can enjoy our time after, too.”

Jake came through the swinging door with an arm load of fresh cut wood. He smiled broadly at D. and inquired after her sleep. After he had thrown the wood on top of a dwindling pile near the stove, he wiped his hands and then his brow, swinging one foot onto a chair and leaning his elbow to his knee. “Whew,” he exclaimed. “It’s too early in the day and in the season to be breaking a sweat like this. I must be out of shape.”

“Er outta the will ta work,” Huck said amiably without turning to show his slanted smile.

“Well, we aren’t all robust young men like you, Huckleberry,” was the rejoinder. Jake winked at D.

“Y’could least be ‘s robust as that wine you was drinkin’ last night. The sweat’ll do ya good.”

Jake laughed. His eyes were red. “Give the bugs a buzz, as well. I saw John slinking off,” said Jake, not entirely to change the subject.

Huck chortled. “When’ve y’ever known a king ta work harder’n the verm’n?”

D. asked, “Is there anything that I can do?”

“I wouldn’ bother,” Huck told her. “The steams prob’ly b’ginnin’ to wane. I’m sure the king ain’t the only d’serter.”

D. passed Martin on the stairs after she had helped Huck in the kitchen for a while, and he made a great show of yawning and mumbled, “Morn’ m.” Looking around at the empty entrance hall seemed to clear the drowsiness from his drooping eyelids, and he said, “Oh, it looks as if I’ve missed the cleaning party.”

D. suggested that Jake would not likely mind sharing the sport of chopping wood.

“Certainly,” Martin agreed. “Perhaps after I’ve had some breakfast.”

The crowd came together for lunch, and D. put aside the book that she had been reading idly. For some reason she was having difficulty keeping her mind centered for very long. It kept wandering from the book to some varied topic or other, returning to the book, and floating off again, the result being that her spurts of reading overlapped, sliding back to regain context and loping forward to the next passage. Perhaps it had been the book which thrust her so from thought to thought. But now she closed the book and arose from the new-cut grass by the willow tree, her ascent progressing much like her reading, slowly and with many motions repeated. Throwing the book onto the closed lid of the piano, where it slid and nearly toppled from the opposite end, she stretched, her arms up in the air, and noticed that spaces between the limbs above her were filling in quickly with the season.

After lunch, D. passed the early afternoon by participating in a liberal badminton tournament, played loosely because the contestants could not agree on the rules, and the boundaries were more felt than drawn so that they shifted as if blown by the slight breeze that rippled the grass. Once the game had attracted the attention of nearly the entire house, the teams were split between north and south. D. had just been eliminated by Nick when Jim accosted the shuttle and led the congregation in a fruitless chase about the yard before disappearing into some nearby thickets. Nick grumbled about a conspiracy, but even he shared the general opinion that all was just as well because the boundaries of the court had apparently become too diffuse for any of the players to make any sense whatsoever of the game.

As D. made her way inside on a quest for some type of pursuit, she noticed, from the corner of her eye, that a single box remained under the dining room table. Swinging it into her arms in one motion, D. overcompensated for the swing, and one notebook fluttered to the floor. She slid the box onto the table and bent to retrieve the outcast. Noticing the black and white flecks of its cover, D. realized that this was the notebook with the rebirth of a stick figure drawn in its lower corner. She sat on a chair that was close at hand and watched the figure prance around in its near contortions as she flipped the pages. As she stood and returned the book to the box, she remembered the story that she had begun to read before her trip into the woods. She looked around, as if to confirm that she had had no other plans, and sat to resume the story where she had left it, which really wasn't that far along at all.

He looked at the medalion as if he had found a religious implement. He examined every curve and every edge, until it caught the sun and threw it into the face of its captor. He covered his eyes, and the world changed to black. After wiping the pain from his eyes, he took another careful look at the star, and smiled as he slipped it into the pocket of his black designer trench coat. He paused, and felt the cold wind play with his hair. He wished he could just float away: each and every partical of his being just permeate into the air. And he might have done just that if it had not been for the slamming of a car door. Awakened, he looked up towards the school. He looked at the windows which reflected the light because they refused to accept it. For a moment he thought it was beautiful. He looked at it as a prisoner might look at a jailhouse from which he had just escaped. Again he smiled. Hesitating no longer, he turned and ran, his legs beating at the hard, frozen ground as he took long strides. When he turned the corner, he raised the sides of his trench coat and ran

faster as if he thought he would take flight. At the street corner he stopped, leaned over, and laughed. He was out of shape. He was out of season.

He remembered his books. They were still in his locker, maybe he should go back for them. He didn't want to go back there. Besides, he might get caught. What was it his friend always said? Wasn't he always having more fun because he had the guts to just say, "fuck it"? Well, it was easy for him to say that because his parents didn't care. When your father chased you into the bathroom and banged on the door with a gun, you saw life in a completely different light. You could afford to say "fuck it" all the time. But right now he thought it would be best to say it just this once. He didn't have to go back into the school, he just had to take the long way around so he could get to his car.

He turned left, and took his time walking the five blocks to his next turn. He had forty-five minutes to kill. He looked around. He saw the traffic. Cars were driving by at fifty miles an hour in a twenty-five zone. People are always in a rush, he thought, wouldn't it be so much better if everybody took forty-five minutes off every now and then? A flock of geese flew over his head. They must have been disoriented by the man made modifications of their earth. If people had their way, they would probably heat the bitter Winter air and air condition the beautifully warm Summer breezes outside their houses so they would be comfortable from their doors to their cars to their offices. He longed for Summer. He longed for bees, he saw himself swimming in the lake, he wished to hear the lawnmowers and the cheers of the parents of little league baseball players and the ringing bell of the ice-cream trucks and the dreamy giggles of girls in bikinis.

He turned the corner and saw the line of cars parked across the yard from the school. He passed a red convertible sports car. How could a kid afford an expensive car like that? Then he was relieved when he passed a dilapidated station wagon. A good old American-made station wagon. How could a kid afford to feed that car with gas? It was just like the American dream that ate the very space that it needed to be believed in. Then he came to his Honda. He stopped by the drivers side door and reached in his pocket. Pausing for a moment to fondle the medallion, he found his keys, and put one in the lock on the door. It was the wrong key. It was the key to his fathers car, but his father didn't drive his car because he didn't have anywhere to take it. He put the right key in the lock on the door.

He sat down in the comfortable gray seat and immediately put on his seat-belt. Chuckling, he unlocked his seat-belt and let it slide back into its hole. He tilted the rear view mirror and looked at his eyes. He saw nothing, and so turned the key to the first notch and turned on the radio. After he had checked all of his preset radio stations, he opened his glove compartment and carefully selected a tape. The decision about the tape was difficult, because he had to find one which would suit him and his soon to arrive passenger. He found one and put it in. Finding the lever at the bottom of his seat, he reclined his chair as far back as it would go. He closed his eyes and listened to the music:

Trouble

Oh, trouble set me free

I have seen your face

And it's too much, too much for me

He wondered what excuse he would give for not being in

History. He wondered if it mattered. He decided it didn't, not right now, maybe not for a while. Maybe not after a while. He looked at the clock: seven more minutes. So much for his forty-five minutes. No, it didn't matter, not right now anyway.

There was a knock on the window. He smiled and opened his eyes.

The handwriting had become closely packed as she neared the bottom of a page, but the smell of baking cake wafted D. out of the thick text. She wondered what the occasion might be. She heard the birds calling out a rumor from tree to tree in the still afternoon, and a lone cicada contradicted the gossip. She rearranged herself on the chair, placed the notebook on the table, and leaned over it to continue on the next page.

Chapter 2

"Hey you! Open the door, it's freezing out here," she said, knocking on the window. He sat up and unlocked the door. She threw her bag in the back seat and flopped down into the seat next to his. Looking at her now, he was struck, as he always was, by the incredible beauty of this girl. Her hair flowed in golden waves past her shoulders, where it fell as if it had a life of its own. Her eyes were the color of a warm cloudless August evening, and her lips were like the horizon where the sun had decided to set for its evening rest. Her skin was light, yet it wasn't pale. He remembered going to a ballet that she had a part in, and how remarkably she was set apart from the rest of the dancers by the glow of her skin as compared to the drab white of theirs. He understood why she haunted his dreams so often, but he did not know why she took so many forms: once being a lovely sprite, and once being a demon enveloped in thick black smoke. She was wearing tight blue jeans,

and a short sleeved shirt which fell on her shoulders in such a way as to not darken the earth by removing the view of her soft skin.

"Are we going to sit here all day?" she interrupted.

"Sorry," he always made sure to acknowledge her when she spoke, because he feared that if he didn't, she would be bored and deprive him of her conversation. He turned the key, and the car rasped at it's awakening and then roared to life. He checked his mirrors. He locked his seat belt into place, and heard a chuckle from next to him. Putting on his blinker, he looked over his left shoulder, and pulled out onto the road. The red sports car pulled out in front of him, then stopped at the end of a long line which ended where the crossing guard was directing traffic. He thought the crossing guard must have felt very self-important, because there were no children crossing the street, yet she continued to keep the traffic from flowing its natural way.

"I didn't see you in History today," said Sybil as if she didn't know where he had gone, "where did you go?"

"Nowhere," he said as his mind struggled between its own longing to be free and its need to tell her everything, "just for a walk." Just for a dance in the fields, he thought.

When she had appeared on stage, she was so amazing that she could have just stood there and eliminated the need for dancing or other dancers. For that moment, it was just her, surrounded by a circle of light, taunting him as she floated away. Then the male dancer came, and he was surprised not only that it wasn't him, but because it couldn't be. It was for that reason that he so frequently told her he loved her, and was hurt by her response, stopped talking to her to try and save himself, and then he called her again

because he couldn't take the distance from her.

She shifted in her seat, and he looked up to see the crossing guard waving him onward. He turned left.

"Do you want to do something tonight?" he asked tentatively.

"I've already got plans to go to Lisa's house and hang out with some guys she knows," she said. He wondered how long these guys would last. She was always finding a guy she thought was cute, and imagining how perfect it would be to go out with him. After a week or so, she discovered that the guy was not who she thought he was. There was always him to go back to anyway. Good old dedicated him, who was every bit what she knew him to be. Or was he? He had often wondered if Sybil truly knew him. Did she understand the many sides of his mind, the thick black smoke that seemed to cover his light at will. He knew her completely. She had once told him that if she started to like him, he would be the first to know. He didn't believe this. He thought it was him that had to tell her. After all, hadn't he had a running relationship of some kind or other with her for three or four years? What could it be that kept them together if not mutual attraction?

He turned left onto what was the most traveled road in his town. The road started in the town south of his and continued up to New York State. During the hour long trip, a person driving up the road would see its name change several times, but it was always the same road. No matter what the size and condition of the homes on the road, it was always the same road that started one town south of the town in which he lived.

The sky turned cloudy. It was still bright out, and the sun was still shining down, but except for the hole

through which the sun shone, it was cloudy. Sitting in a heated car, he almost thought he could roll down the window and it would be late August. Maybe in August he would have convinced Sybil that she loved him.

She said something about ballet. She said that the cute guy who had danced the lead two years ago was coming back. He had heard her telling a friend that she wouldn't mind if he saw her changing costumes. He hated him, whoever he was. He wished he could dance, almost as much as he wished she could love.

D. laughed at this last line. It seemed almost too easy and almost too perfect: exactly what she would expect from a bright but young writer. She also found it humorous that the young Nathaniel had been so concerned with the layout of a scribbled story in a black and white flecked notebook, scrunching the lines together to end Chapter 1 on a right hand page then over-spacing the letters toward the end of Chapter 2, as distantly as sense could cohere, to force “almost as much as he wished she could love” onto a page of its own to enhance the effect of a draft that nobody would ever see as if it were the final product. D. wondered if anybody else had ever read this story. She shuffled through the pages looking for the red marks of a teacher or the unconcerned wrinkles of a watching-over friend. Nothing. Perhaps this *was* the final product.

She stood, partly to stretch her legs and partly because a strange, unattributable feeling akin to giddiness had come over her: perhaps she had finally absorbed some of the seasonal excitement that had been loitering about the house for the past day. So she stood, in part, to clear her head and fell back into the chair lightheaded. She giggled. Standing more slowly, she walked into the entrance hall for a change of perspective and squinted. The sun was just breaking into the large circle of the

stained glass window and glittered into her eyes. She was surprised that it was so late in the afternoon, even going on evening. She had thought it was... she stopped to finish the thought... “three o’clock,” she spoke softly and giggled again. Suddenly the sound of a horn spilled out of the dining room and kitchen doors with uneven echoes. “Dismissed,” she said and laughed more loudly than she had expected herself to, the sound coming to her ears as if somebody had snuck up behind her to make it.

Feeling the need to rise, D. climbed the sweeping stairs to the top and peeked down into the courtyard. She saw John skulking toward the northern door to the ballroom. He passed Alex, who had finally appeared before everybody to play a clear but moody piece on the piano. A sound from below urged her to lean over to see Huck squatting to wipe his hands on his overalls. Jim slid between his legs playfully, and Huck shouted with glee and chased after him. The tap of Martin’s typewriter tapped on monotonously as if stuck on the same letter, over and over. Above Martin’s room Nick stood on the southern tower with his back toward her, looking to the west. In the opposite tower, Jake watched her turn her head toward him and waved. Holden sat on the fresh grass with his legs crossed and his knuckles pressed under his chin, looking down at the endangered black king of his chess battalion. Steinbeck sat across from him smiling over his untouched brigade. A blast from Sal’s saxophone jerked D.’s eyes through the willow tree. He stood in the far left corner appearing, through the slender hanging branches and his thick sunglasses, to be smiling at Alex. The music intertwined as if it had been intended to be played in this way. A phone rang perfectly at a cadence point, and Othello stuck his head through his door and looked around guiltily. He saw that D. was the only one who appeared to have noticed and pulled back into his room, smiling at her for the promise of keeping a secret, though they both knew that it could not be one to which only they two, alone, were privy.

“It all seems so contrived,” D. whispered to herself and chuckled. “But its right.”

She fled down the stairs before the moment had a chance to dissolve. The sun had already fallen halfway to the hole at the stain glass window’s

center. Perhaps the two circles would consummate this evening. *Well they would have to*, D. thought.

She returned to the fiction in Nathaniel's notebook quickly, as if to either erase the surreal reality around her or explain it.

Chapter 3

The tape reversed itself in the tape player, but he didn't notice. When he dropped off Sybil, he had expected, as he did every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, a good-bye kiss. He always expected her to stay seated in the passenger seat as he leaned over and kissed her. But instead, there was always that intermenable awkward moment when they both felt like they should say something, but didn't know what. Then she would flick her hair back and, in one fluid motion, grab her bag off the back seat, open the car door, and be gone. He had sat there for a moment not knowing what to do, and then pulled away.

He threw a stone at the river. It fell and fell, and he couldn't see its splash. He might have missed. The sky was dimming around him but he couldn't tell because the lights of the city were coming on. The bridge lit up like a chain of slow burning firecrackers. He slapped his arm at a mosquito. Turning off his portable tape player he looked through his eyes down at his feet then past them to the beaten up wooden boards far down below that once had been a dock. His eyes swam across the water to the rippling city that seemed to be under it. The buildings all blended together in the water like they were just one big church, with the steeple of the Empire State Building jutting out at him. A car honked on the bridge.

He liked this spot. Some girl had shown it to him, but he had only wanted to neck with his eyes open so that he could look at the big lonely island behind her. So many people, he had thought, Maybe she's in there somewhere crying to get out. He had come back often since that night when the girl, whatever her name was, had gotten mad and made him drive her home. It was his dad's car that night, he thought. His had been in the shop.

But he hadn't wanted it to be that way. He wanted it to be here, he knew that, but not her. But he would never get Sybil here, not until she realized what they were. Maybe they could get married out here. Nobody would come, but that was alright. They would throw a rope over a tree that had one thick branch hanging over the edge and make the priest swing out on it like a frightened angel.

He knocked his radio off the edge and laughed at himself for doing it. He listened to it squawk all the way down and then crash and die. But it wasn't true. It wasn't company. He stood and leaned to look strait down the rocks. Sometimes he thought he would get some kind of pick and hammer to chip them away, and everytime a peice fell, he would recite she loves me she loves me not. And if the last rock of the cliff fell off to she loves me he would use them all to build a bridge across the stinking river and begin knocking down the buildings piece by piece until he found her.

He shouted loud and nobody heard him. It didn't even echo.

"Sybil! Sybil!"

D. turned the page for more, but the rest of the notebook was blank except for a poem on the inside of the back cover that she didn't manage

to read because the house shook as everybody ran in a great push to the eastern door. “He’s here,” she heard somebody say, and she thought that it had been in a reverent tone.

Nine men stood in an imperfect circle, with a boy and a woman being drawn prudently toward it, around the door as if they hoped to preserve a picture of *his* entrance. *Or maybe we’re a little afraid to find out who’ll walk through the door*, D. thought and didn’t know why or what she meant.

The door squealed sublimely open, and D. scurried to an opening in the circle to catch a glimpse. But just as the man stepped through into the house, the sun crowned the clear circle in the middle of the window and pooled for the blink of an eye before it burst through like a single beam of light through a multifariously shaded cloudy sky and engulfed the man at the opening across the hall. D. blinked as if she expected the sight to burn only the shape of the figure on her eyes forever.

“Hello,” a melodious voice called out from the center of the beam. The crowd of men rushed forward with only slight variations in enthusiasm and grasped for the two outreached hands. D. and Alex lingered slightly behind. “So we’re all here,” said the voice. The figure’s glowing eyes seemed to take in the entire room at once, and the voice said, “And two new guests, as well.”

He stepped out of the light, *it can’t still be shining*, thought D., and looked at Alex, who smiled as if for the first time, for it was an awkward and nearly sickening smile. “Would you be Alex?” Alex nodded.

“And who have we here?” Nathaniel asked, turning toward D. “A pleasure to meet you. I’m Nathaniel.”

D. stepped forward, surprised that she was almost amazed to not be overwhelmed beyond speech. “Sybil,” she said. “You can call me Sybil.”

The wind gusts with renewed fervor through the trees and the mountains and laps at whatever water there is to be found. A new chorus breaks out among the bugs and the birds, and even the deer seem to utter a phrase under their breaths. So should we raise our voices. Call out! It is Spring, and the world has awakened once again,

and so must we awaken fully now for it is Spring, and the world will rain down tales of its absent adventures, and the leaves will whisper of birth and rebirth. And all of it converges now in a fresh first call of the evening as the sun dips down for the final time on the lingering Winter. Call out! Nathaniel has come!

Development

Chapter 13

It rapidly became Sybil's opinion, if not immediately after the initial brilliance of the moment that sprang, along with the sunlight, out of its limited circle, then certainly as the entrance hall, which none had, as yet, found cause to leave, began to dim, that Nathaniel was intensely, nearly terribly, ordinary. Oh, he was handsome in a friendly neighborhood boy type of way and had a spark of intelligence emanating from his face, but whether or not this intelligence, which is the sole saving grace of he who can only boast modestly about an appearance that lacks notable faults because it evinces no noticeable risks toward radiance, would prove to be the brilliance of genius, was a question about which she was skeptical.

His hair was a lively, entangled mass of bronze locks that seemed to have pretensions to a golden hue; his lips were thin, tending to evaporate entirely when he smiled; his chin neither projected strongly forth nor sank weakly beneath the rest of his features; the whole of his face, in short, was unextraordinary in every way: a face that might pass in a crowd without eliciting more notice than a dull leaf in the midst of Autumn.

Nor did his attire, consisting of a dark, collarless shirt and beige slacks, seem intended to do otherwise than accentuate Nathaniel's plainness. From the short period of Sybil's observation, she found only his eyes to have intrigue enough to merit more than a moment's consideration. Even with these two windows of the soul, though, she wondered if it wasn't some process of reflected light, culminating in its contact with Nathaniel's glasses, that imparted the twinkle that might be mistakenly assumed to exude from within rather than be impressed from without.

However, it would have been unfair of Sybil not to admit to herself

the part that she played in her own perception of Nathaniel. She hadn't realized the extent of her expectations of this man about whom she had heard so much. She would, it must be owned, have been less surprised had he walked through the door and pronounced the most profound words ever uttered. And so, she realized, now, that it was more the petty conversation that had followed his appearance than his plain visage that left her in disappointment. Whether he were extremely handsome or terribly unbecoming, had his mouth released words of great truth and import upon his materialization, she would not likely have noticed his appearance at all. Moreover, moderately inspired ideas issuing from the very face that she could plainly see belonged to him would have propelled that face into gorgeousness. But even on this count she had to admit that her hopes had been too high when it was considered that he had made his way not twenty minutes ago into a society where all conversation must be based solely on either the whole grand world itself or the limited company present in the circumscribed sphere of the Pequod. No matter her reasoning, however, she was unable to shake the feeling that some vision that her recent acquaintances had managed to create of Nathaniel had been done irreparable harm.

Just as these thoughts had found voice within her mind, Sybil began to suspect that she was not alone in her feelings. Despite many interactions with him, every inhabitant of the Pequod had had three full seasons to build up an image of Nathaniel that was, to varying degrees, disproportionate to the reality of the man, and only a handful of the guests seemed to understand the emotion: having either become accustomed to being similarly indifferent or sagely realizing that Nathaniel was, despite what tricks the memory might perform, only a man. Perhaps it was by reason of a general lack of this realization that the crowd in the hall began to disperse as mobs are known to do when some calamity has been too efficaciously averted or some promised boon had been given without the ostentation that had been the true impetus of the gathering.

Whether or not Nathaniel, the center of all this inadequately recompensed attention, was cognizant or understanding of his failure to

make an impression, he seemed content to postpone any sermon that he might have intended to muster and excused himself from his few remaining auditors in order that he might reacquaint himself with his surroundings and rest from his long journey. After Nathaniel had passed into the courtyard, Martin leaned toward Sybil and whispered:

“Isn’t he even more exhilarating in person?”

Whereas the others, as they had arrived, had quickly divided into their own cliques or casts and filled their time with their own interests, Nathaniel spent the first week of his visit allotting his days so evenly that his schedule was nearly curricular. Sybil observed as Nathaniel unobtrusively approached each man in his turn and joined whatever activity had been in progress, giving her to fancy that she was a child in day care and Nathaniel the dutiful instructor, or, more appropriately, she thought, she was another guest in an asylum and he, in his evenness and closeness to the human norm, the therapist, imparting what lessons he could subtly while he kept the inmates distracted.

In the evenings, after a charitably prepared dinner, usually courtesy of Huck or Nathaniel himself, or the random self-fending meal-time gatherings in the kitchen that were more common (once Sybil had cooked for the others, though the impetus, she had to admit, had been found more in boredom than in goodwill), Nathaniel made himself available to all in the courtyard, where he gently played the piano or quietly read, offering brief and noncommittal Socratic rebuttals to the inquiries or statements of discussants. Overall, Nathaniel had brought with him a pervading sense of calm and indolent relaxation that seeped into the habits of everybody present. Partially due to the stories that she had been told, and, in larger part, by the demeanors of her companions, Sybil thought that Nathaniel’s tranquillity was out of character and that some of the others kept their peace, as it were, holding back issues and emotions that they secretly hoped would need not fester for much longer, out of shock that they should feel inclined to be restrained at all.

Martin and Holden seemed to be at a loss as to how they should be acting, if not what to consider proper truth. Sal restlessly hovered over

Nathaniel at the piano with his horn poking about futilely for a way in which to make an entrance into the ethereal music. But the darkest mist that seemed to be lingering just out of reach of the sunlit atmosphere, could be felt swelling and churning itself into a thunder cloud between Nick and Jake, who scowled furtively at each other with each passing. Sybil was probably not alone in her belief that Nathaniel might at any moment sweep in and disperse this cloud with a quick gust of mediation. Still, he had been, thus far, successful both in holding the storm at bay and in staying calmly out of it.

Sybil was quick to assess her situation and realize that Nathaniel, though among the most courteous men she had ever met, would not be of any use entertaining her until it became her turn to occupy a handful of hours of his time, and, perhaps, for all she could tell, only for her apportioned time. She decided that she would wait until Nathaniel had come around to her so that her departure would not be entirely anticlimactic, and then she would simply leave, an act that this diluted reality of the folklore Nathaniel would probably quietly accept, if he noticed at all. In the meantime, she began to occupy herself in much the same way she had before she had had an end in sight: she talked to Nathaniel's other guests, wandered around the house and surrounding forest, worked her way lazily through a book, and explored what crevices of the house she could make of moderate interest to herself.

On the third day, it rained like spittle dribbling down from the sky in dreary mists. The house was closed up and stagnant, without the benefit of howling winds or claps of thunder. Sybil felt stifled and sat in her room, restlessly watching the words on the page in front of her undulate with her boredom. Tossing the book on her bed, she stood and said to herself, "I need some fresh air."

The courtyard, though occupied by several of her fellow loafers, had a vacant feel and seemed only the more silent for the slight patter of rain on its canopy. Through the house, she could hear the occasional echo of Sal's horn as he idly bounced dischordant toots off the walls. She made her way to the entrance hall.

As she crossed from the stairway to the doors, she heard the murmur of voices on the portico.

“So what do you think?” somebody said in a calm voice that had sunk into her consciousness, though she knew not when or how, as Nathaniel’s.

Following a brief moment of apparent thought, the slinky voice of Alex answered, “Why are you asking me?”

Sybil tiptoed quietly toward the door and peeped through the old fashioned keyhole. Alex was facing away from her in a posture that bespoke a confident haggler, while Nathaniel, with an uncommon, to her experience, look of anxiety on his face watched him.

“Because it is the solution that lends itself.”

“To what?”

“To it all, Alex. Don’t you see, it would tie it all together perfectly.”

“But why? And why me?”

“Look, I can’t stick around forever, and you just happen to be a perfect fit.”

Suddenly, without waiting for an answer, Alex simply stated, “I’ll think about it,” and slid down the steps, entering the mist of water on his way south. Nathaniel walked after him. Creeping stealthily into the dining room, Sybil separated the closed curtains just enough to allow one eye to peer out into the dark green leaves. The two men walked into sight, and D. thought how strikingly they looked like brothers. Nathaniel caught Alex by the arm to stop him and made what appeared to be an offer in too low a voice for Sybil to make out but that exhibited an unprecedented amount of vehemence. Alex smiled and looked at the window, behind which Sybil shivered. With a dismissive glance toward the house, Nathaniel led Alex through the thicket and out of sight.

Very curious, thought Sybil, as she slipped into one of the creaky chairs to imagine some possible implications of the scene that she had just witnessed. It was, after all, a dull and dreary day. Finding no crags of reality around which to swirl her bouts of emotion, Sybil quickly tired of the sport and glanced around the room. The company ate an occasional meal here, but it was more often empty or occupied by a lone

diner. Nonetheless, given that she was the only female on the premises, she was surprised not to find crusted dishes spread across the table. In fact, without an exhaustive inspection, the single box of Nathaniel's writing that she had not moved was the only aspect of untidiness. Intending to finish the task that she had begun some days ago, Sybil hoisted the box off the table and was preparing to prop the door that led to the southern hallway when the topmost notebook in the box caught her eye. Someone, whom she could only guess to have been Nathaniel, had torn the cardboard cover from the front and sketched a tree, very much akin to their willow in the courtyard, on the first sheet. Looking more closely, Sybil noticed that, interspersed with the hanging branches of the drawing, there were cleverly wrought letters that read *The Value of Breathing*. Uncurling the bottom edge of the page, which had been folded indecorously, likely by being shoved haphazardly into a box, Sybil could make out the smeared attribution of "by Nathaniel Ariss" and an extemporaneous "Volume One." Sybil, merely for the sake of passing time, grabbed a handful more of notebooks from the box and laid them on the table. Before her now were Volumes Three, Seven, Four, and Ten. In all, she found that *The Value of Breathing* consisted of twelve handwritten volumes, each of which filled its respective notebook entirely, except for the twelfth, which ended with several blank pages remaining, yet still ending definitively, with a script "Finis" after the final paragraph. Taking into consideration the height of the lines and the width of Nathaniel's letters, Sybil guessed that the twelve volumes would probably make for three moderately thick printed paperbacks.

She sat in the chair at the head of the table and sorted the notebooks by volume; then, and only to discern what genre of writing was contained therein, she opened the first volume and began to read. The language was simple and direct, with none of the extravagances of the other piece of Nathaniel's work that she had read. "Oh to take a breath!" it began and broke into what appeared to be either an introduction, an invocation, or both at once. By the end of the first page, Sybil decided that Nathaniel had written an excessive essay. *Too bad*, she thought, *this type of essay doesn't sell anymore*. But reading further, Sybil found herself forgetting

that she had been taking a purely academic interest in the work and became drawn into forgetfulness by the words. By the time the house began to rumble with hungry stomachs, one of the men who were making their way at intervals toward the kitchen might have heard Sybil gasp “Brilliant truth!” or some other words of praise such as authors solicit for the backs of their books. Before she had truly realized that she had begun to read, Sybil was interrupted in her reading by the sun tearing away its light from the room.

Though she had not reached the final page of the first notebook, she spread several of the other volumes on the table in front of her and flung them open, as if one of them might exclaim on its first page, “You Won!” Each had been given a different title concerning some aspect of life. With the rare excitement of a college student uncovering a potential thesis, she looked back at the volume that she had been reading and saw the purpose that united them all. Nathaniel had written a complete guide to the art of living. Without the pretensions of a self-help book or the complaints of a dogmatic doctrine, he had first put forth, in broad and simple terms, a series of general observations and theories by which the most dim of minds could be enlightened, then he had followed his idea through every walk of life. Nathaniel was suddenly gorgeous in her mind. He had voiced every vague thought that she had ever been unable to congeal into a concrete idea. It was honest; it was easy; it read like fiction; but, most importantly, it rang true. It was that ingenuous answer to every question that seemed unanswerable. It was the simple ingenuity against which every thinking person had at one time or another jostled. It could be separated into versions, with different prospective readers in view, each beginning with that first, marvelous, essay, and each enabling every reader to understand everyone else because they had all begun with the same basic Truth.

Sybil had to find Nathaniel. Even out here in the middle of nowhere, she had a desperate need to discuss this idea with him. It was as if the world had opened up in truth before her and any moment lost in chasing that honest and beautiful world down was like a suffocating moment before true life begins.

When Sybil dashed onto the north tower, breathless, less from exertion than from excitement at having found Nathaniel, she realized that she hadn't a thing to say. Compliments are often thus, most difficult to give to strangers, and more so when they are honest. When the beneficiary of a compliment, or affection for that matter, stands shadow-like in the distance, even if only the distance from the Pequod's eastern stairs to the sunset profiled northern tower, the compliment's giver is free to imagine scenarios of warm reception, but in the face of the actual giving, rejection rears its head along with an impersonal reality against which the imaginary connection of an admirer seems but a specter.

So, when Sybil had risen to Nathaniel's position, she found herself unable to do otherwise than delay by feigning an interest in the spectacle of the setting sun. As the last rays of the sun slipped across the land, Nathaniel spoke, "I don't know how many times I've watched the sunset from this house, but it's never dulled."

Once Sybil realized that Nathaniel had initiated a conversation, she asked, "But do you ever see any change?"

"Only in me," Nathaniel responded, a strange look coming over his face with a reflective smile. He looked magnificent. Then he began to talk to Sybil, to explain, though, at first, she thought she understood already. "The sunset is a quick change as far as the earth is concerned. In the time it takes most people to commute from work to home or to take a bath, the sky can change from daylight to night. But still, if you stand here and watch the sun slip behind the mountains, the change is hard to notice. You have to look away for a while to see any change. In a way, it's like watching a child grow: the only way to appreciate the difference is to give up a fair claim to a gradual miracle in order that you may return to it as if it has already happened. A man released from prison after a long sentence must feel the same about the changes of history. But then even history is nothing when compared to nature. The change about which I think you were asking. We have no way to watch that incrementally, so we feel that it doesn't change.

"But we do see changes. Otherwise we wouldn't have the word,

change, a word that only makes sense when we add perspective. No, I haven't seen these hills change, even if only because the city hasn't reached here yet, but I've seen me change. When I used to prefer the other tower, I used to see faces in every mountain side. I don't see those anymore. Even with just the slight change from there to here, images that stood out so clearly that I thought they must be real, even intentional, just disappeared. But even if I could see them, I don't think they'd be the same. Instead of monsters or women, they'd be animals or children. What about you? Do you see any change?"

"Yes," Sybil told him. "In everything."

They both looked out at the mountains, only sprawling shapes against the darkening sky, with sporadic shadows where the moon had begun to delineate what the sun had left obscure. Then, with no forethought or intention, Sybil blurted out, "Why haven't you published that book?"

"What book?"

"That 'Value of Breathing' book. Any publisher who you could get to read even the first few pages would probably jump at the chance to attach her name to it."

Again that sadly pensive look crossed Nathaniel's face. "What makes you think so?"

"It's fantastic," said Sybil, blushing a bit at her forthrightness. "I mean it's amazing what you've managed to do with it."

Laughing a bit sardonically, Nathaniel explained, "A long time ago, I wrote an essay of the same name and with basically the same ideas, but as masterfully put as I had language to manage. But I might as well have burned it for all the change that it effected. I have a feeling the first few lines may have been read by some editor, somewhere, but the edges never creased, and it was never accepted. At the time, I fancied that I had tried to do too much and had left the door open for misunderstandings, so I decided to make it a challenge, mostly for my own amusement, to refine it until it was so simple that it could not be misunderstood, even by the greatest fool."

"I think you've done it!" Sybil assured him. "You should get it out there."

Nathaniel hesitated. “I guess I feel that whatever is good about it now was good about it then, and that, no matter what tricks I may have imparted accidentally to make it passable literature, if the intelligent version wasn’t good enough to be published, then this one isn’t either.”

“Well that’s just silly,” she wasn’t sure why she was suddenly so agitated.

Seeming a little ashamed at his first answer, Nathaniel made another excuse, “I guess what I’m really afraid of is that they’ll still misunderstand it. I can’t do any more than I have. What if they still don’t get it?” he asked somewhat plaintively, then, under his breath, “Or what if they do?”

At this last, puerile comment, Sybil felt her admiration for Nathaniel slipping away: how could his neuroses coincide with the altruistic, open beauty of his writing. It couldn’t. But it was not long until Sybil changed her mind yet again.

Nathaniel continued, “I’ve written the thing, and I know for myself that it is brilliant! Why should I either purpose to seek or avoid confirmation from people who would never take the time to *really* understand it — who have system upon system of logic by which to pervert its meaning into whatever their preference might be? They will make of it what they want, even if it is the exact opposite of that which I meant to say. And what I wanted was to give an answer, a simple answer, as it must be, an incontrovertible truth, as all answers should be. As a society, today, we want answers but we don’t want them to be unarguable. We want ambiguous truths.”

“So we don’t want answers at all, then.”

“Exactly. Don’t you agree?”

“I don’t know. I certainly don’t want to agree.”

“I don’t either. But it’s true that we don’t really want answers. We just want to think that we’re getting them. If answers are never impregnable, then any will do. We can decide what we want to be true before we think about it. It becomes a faith. Therefore, we layer complications on our answers after we’ve decided what is to be true, adding infinite rules and variables to force anomalies to fit. From here

we observe that only that which is complex can be true and that the simple answers are too obvious or attractive to be right. Maybe we go through all this because we don't want to admit that somebody who seems simple to us can know better than we do. But if this is our reason, it is mistaken. *The* answer must be simple, but the work to find it, difficult. It is the work that reveals the answer, and it is also the work that keeps it hidden. Furthermore, believing that a complicated or difficult-to-accept answer must, intrinsically, be more true is easier than realizing that your question never had to be asked. So when it comes down to it, I think the world will make a conscious effort to not understand me. Just as they make a conscious effort to misunderstand each other."

Sybil tried to take it all in but felt something pulling her away from the conclusion to which Nathaniel was headed. "So how have we managed to keep it together for so long?"

"But we really haven't. Humanity, maybe, but there's always been somewhere to which it could spread."

"America?"

"Yes. But now there's nowhere left on Earth, and we haven't found anywhere else to go. America itself is but the blink of an eye in the life of history. But our country is starting to have a past, and a hectic, fast-moving one, at that, and we haven't a clue how to accept it."

"But I think you do, so I still don't understand why you don't want to clue the world in. It wouldn't cost you anything. In fact, it'd probably pay you dividends."

Nathaniel laughed, but cordially. "No, that's where you're wrong. It would cost me everything and benefit the world nothing. Suppose the world understands every word. By my own argument, the world can only be saved by some change that is contrary to that on which we've come to build our very definitions of self, which are exactly the center of our new philosophies. So again, I would be contradicting the basic subject of 'the faith,' and would be dismissed. But, purely for the sake of argument, suppose that I'm believed. Imagine that great masses of humanity break their recent pattern of narcissism, suddenly, on the basis of my ideas. Then imagine the despair and hopelessness when they've

got nowhere to go from that shift! I almost didn't live through it, and I had the relief of having made the discovery. I've been down that road: thoughts of suicide, a need to lay blame on somebody. What if I was only saved because I had nobody to blame but the whole of society? What if they blamed me?

"No, I can't help enough to make up for the risk. Humanity must change, voluntarily, at its core, and if it does so, it will be with or without me... it will be a natural inclination. But I've little faith in that. Or, rather, I've too much faith in the potential with not enough faith left in me to handle watching myself proved wrong. I really do care and feel too much for humanity. I vastly overestimate them. I couldn't bear to admit that I've been wrong to do so because, to me, that would mean that all the horrors of society are voluntary."

Sybil felt as if there was some hole, some missing explanation. "If its true that the horrors of society bring with them a reason for personal growth, then maybe it shouldn't matter why they exist."

"Of course! But I think the rules have changed. I can't say for sure whether it happened for money or if it's been marketed for some other reason, but the horrors have become all the rage. They sell, whatever it is that they sell. What I'm saying is that sin and sorrow can teach us nothing if we revel in them... without repentance or, at *least*, a struggle to overcome them. Sin and sorrow have become the too simple and too attractive truths. It pleases quickly and comes as easily as the ability to slip from a high wall. Paradoxically, we allow this to be by believing that a harsh reality *must* be more real. Once we accept the unacceptable or, more likely, drive it from our minds, we are free to do anything; the two conflicting pulls of this paradox, the excuse for simple sin and the faith in the more-reality of a harsh world, begin to tumble over each other, making transgression the easy pleasure that makes life harsher, making it more real and excusing more vices. Eventually, though, we'll corrode the foundation of belief that allowed us to consider options at all and not go mad."

Trying to push the conversation from abstract philosophy to the real book that she had discovered, Sybil asked, "But you don't even

want to try warning them? Are you so sure that you're right in some beliefs that you'd have to be wrong in others?"

"Well," said Nathaniel, apparently drawing the conversation to a close for the time being, "wherever I'm right and wrong, I have come to value those things which are now deemed antiquated. I feel, in my heart, that, if we do not have to turn back from the path that we've taken, we at least have to tread more carefully, meaning slowly, and I am too young yet to be falsely accused of unthinking conservatism. Besides, I am no longer the only person to consider while designing my future. I really have enjoyed our conversation, but it's getting late, and I'm very tired. Good night."

He smiled in such a way as to assure her that the reason that he had given for excusing himself was an honest one and began climbing down the spiral stairs.

There's something that doesn't fit, Sybil thought. She wrinkled her forehead and looked toward the western mountains, then called after Nathaniel.

"Yes?" he asked, his head rising above the floor.

"What happened to you after you left Sal?"

"Pardon?"

"On the road. When you hopped out of the old man's pickup truck and started walking east."

A quizzical look sunk into his face, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about. I've never gone anywhere with Sal."

"Oh," said Sybil, and when he saw that she had nothing else to say, Nathaniel went back down the stairs.

The following morning was bright and cheerful, with the birds chiming in their chirps and an airy mist slipping between the trees and pouring into the dells. The mist would, on occasion, spill onto the portico of the Pequod and swirl around but, for the most part, splashed up the stairs only to dribble down. Sybil watched from behind the French doors of the north hall as the grass became visible from obscurity and then dimmed again. After-breakfast kitchen sounds penetrated into the

corridor along with the occasional murmur of masculine voices, not yet entirely awake.

She had strolled idly into the hall after she had eaten to compare her impression of Jake's paintings with that which she had after her first viewing and now strolled away from the scene of nature across the porch to look at the rest. It occurred to her that she had not yet looked at the one in the decorative frame, so she skipped the others, perhaps with the vain hope that she could view this last once, step away for just a few minutes, and then return to it as if for a second time.

The painting disturbed her. It was dark and eerie, yes, but it was also the spitting image of Nathaniel, perhaps looking more like him than a photograph would. But, even so, it seemed to Sybil that this picture bespoke a time past. The gauntness and despair were more dull in the actual man, like lingering phantoms of a person that once was or could be. But the bumps by the ears were grotesque and out of place. *If anything*, she thought, *there should be pointed ears or a wreath of twigs around his head.*

She reached out to touch one of the bumps but stopped when the spiral staircase in the ballroom began to clang. Nathaniel descended and said, "They're not real, I've tested them myself."

"I didn't think..." Sybil began, as if covering for an indecorous act, but let her words spill away. Nathaniel crossed to her side and, with his hands behind his back, looked judiciously at his portrait.

"Now that I've met you, I see Jake has done a marvelous job capturing your resemblance," Sybil told him.

"Yes, a greater likeness I have never seen of a man who is not me," he replied.

The pair stood taciturnly, inspecting the painting as if it might change before their very eyes. The wind whistled through a crack somewhere, and Sybil felt herself shiver despite the warming season.

As if he had noticed the shiver, though he appeared to be immersed in the image, Nathaniel quoted, "We hear not the airy footsteps of the strange things that almost happen."

"And what almost happened?"

Nathaniel seemed to think for a breath then switched his gaze to Sybil. "I don't know," he confessed, then walked to the French doors and threw them open. "Come with me, I want to show you something."

Pausing irresolutely, for her feet had already begun to move, Sybil asked, "What is it?"

Nathaniel didn't answer at first but cast his hearing off into the distance. He shushed her, though she hadn't been so much as breathing heavily, and told her to listen. Sybil humored him but didn't hear anything. When it became apparent that Nathaniel was not going to tell her what she was listening for, Sybil asked him.

"There is a moral whispering through the branches," he told her, "but I can never quite make it out. What do you suppose it's saying?"

Sybil tried to listen but heard only the wind, tranquil and calming. "I don't know that it's saying anything."

With a short, amused laugh, Nathaniel bade her follow him.

"Where are we going?"

"To show you why I don't want to publish *The Value of Breathing*."

The Catskills looked mysterious with the undulating vapor lapping at the feet of the trees and flowing over bushes. It slid beneath high-arching roots of trees that were struggling to keep together the soil of a landfall and fell like a waterfall down the hillsides. It swirled around the legs of Nathaniel and Sybil as they waded through it as through a warm-weather snow drift. Though the mist made the path even more veiled than Sybil had found it when she marveled at Huck's ability to find his way, Nathaniel strolled casually along as if by intuition. Rambling over knolls and between trees, Sybil found herself tripped by dim obstacles, but Nathaniel seemed to be walking beyond their reach. Sybil, realizing that this illusion must have owed its power to the early enchantment of the rural morning, began to watch vigilantly for some sign of a stagger as Nathaniel led the way and thought that she had caught him when he stooped into the vanishing moisture.

"Here it is," he said and dug his hand into the soil.

Sybil squatted down, causing the lingering moisture to waft away,

and watched as Nathaniel, dirt under his nails and trickling down his arm, lifted what looked like a nose. They stood, and, looking at the increasingly visible ground, Sybil could make out here a finger and there an ear. They were the broken pieces of a statue.

“Who made it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Nathaniel confessed. “I only know who destroyed it.”

“What’s it doing all the way out here?”

“Does it matter?” Hunching over, Nathaniel scanned the ground and picked up a large chunk of rock. Sybil could see that it was half of what had been the head. She took it in her hands and ran her finger down the gashes that ran along the cheek. Nathaniel found a hand.

“Well I don’t think that it was any great loss to the art world. Some idle amateur probably made it. I doubt that it’s the work of an important artist.”

“Of course not. But that makes its destruction all the worse,” Nathaniel chastised the unnamed assassin, “because it wasn’t made for money or fame. It was done for its own sake and with the hope of an amateur.”

Sensing Nathaniel’s darkening mood, Sybil tried to provide a modicum of light heartedness. “Look at it this way,” she suggested, “some day in the future people will find it and think it evidence of the arts of an ancient era.”

“Destroyed in the Dark Ages,” Nathaniel joked blandly, little consoled. “But it’s not just the statue, the terror is what it represents: the shattered shards of callous memories that I’ve piled up as ruins on all the thoughts of my life.”

Tossing the stone hand to the ground and pulling up the sleeve on his own left arm, he pushed on, headlong and with no preamble, toward his real and honest confession as if he had prepared a speech but hadn’t the patience for the build up, “This cold inanimate body is not the only one that I’ve scarred.” He held out his arm, and Sybil saw the faded white scars of burns along the underside of his forearm. She’d heard and experienced that brilliance in an author often comes at a price. “I’ve

chiseled my innocence away with less care than the wind does a temple and stained my past, my life, with the stupid acts of feigned insanity. Sometimes I feel the past swelling up inside of me in waves of nausea, and I must stop what I'm doing and choke it back with shivers and twitches."

"Everybody goes through the same to varying degrees," she excused him, though she wasn't positive what she was excusing. To be sure, his extemporaneous confessions struck her as common enough in certain company. "More, I imagine, in people who have some great talent. But it can be turned into something rewarding. It's nothing to feel guilty about."

"Guilty? It's the only thing to feel guilty about. It's a poison voluntarily drunk. All humanity might take of it, but not all do; and of those who so err, for many it acts as its own nepenthe, heaving out in violent waves that purge as they go. But for others, it settles in slowly, causing only the ill temper of the discomfited, but, in that way, seeping into every part of life. And it's all so silly!" he exclaimed suddenly, his eyes glassing over and flashing at the same time. "I feel guilty for the smile of a girl in New York when I was a young boy in the hugeness of the city, bridging the gap between my bustling mother one city block ahead and my woolgathering father reveling in the human drama that passed him in a river behind. And in one of those waves, as it passed me before it broke and circled about my father, I spied the gleaming eyes of a young girl performing the very same task for her own family, and she smiled at me like a glimmer of light from a distant mountain as I waded through the crowd. It's so damn silly to feel guilty about it all! It could not have been love: I was too young, and the moment too fleeting. But, though I'd never hope to recognize the face, I sometimes long for a glimmer of that very smile. And the glimmer of hope that I harbor as to whether or not I had a similar effect on her is a source of guilt. The disloyalty implied by being such a selfish dreamer is guilt. I've amassed this and other faces of lost opportunities in my memory to view like sculpted nudes kept by excuse of artistry because nothing real has ever been good enough for me. Oh no! Selfish, selfish as I've been! I've

only wanted to be good, to earn what trust and affection people have given to me, to justify the pain for which only I can take the responsibility of inflicting.”

He paused and set his jaw for composure. This sudden flood of emotion urged Sybil to step closer to him, and she was about to put her hand on his elbow as she told him that “It only shows that you’ve got a tremendous imagination. Turn it to profitable ends.” But he stepped away and put his own hand on a knot in a nearby tree. In his position, he was perfectly engulfed in the shadow of one of a pair of nearby birch trees. The birches looked out of place among the other trees. He went on:

“I cannot take away their lesson by turning them to profit. These memories and the deeds that they bespeak are mine, and I must face them as with a shiver and let them pass for the time being. The man who says that he regrets nothing has never truly lived, and I’m so full of life and living that I would purge myself though it meant my death.

“It’s funny, y’know,” he said, turning toward her. “You fight with your emotions and your impulses. Then you nurse them and revel in them. And then, if it doesn’t kill you, maybe you become wise, but it’s a tenuous wisdom, threatening to break into recrudescence. Just as nobody is ever an alcoholic until they’ve lost themselves to drinking, and then it’s too late, they can never drink again. Or that’s what we tell them. Though the whole drunken world might always be tottering on the edge, once you’ve fallen, even if you prove by clawing up the raw cliff face of sobriety that you have beaten it, you will never be trusted to stand among the others again.”

“But it can be cathartic to voice it, as you have, and share it with other people who might feel the same.”

Nathaniel chuckled and sat down on the arch of a fallen tree. “Yes, I’ve considered that. But I chose to overcome my weaknesses rather than excuse them as illnesses or creative eccentricity. I think I’ve found the answer, and it nearly killed me to find it, but I’ve read that ‘the truly wise will be led into the common path,’ and I believe it. I know the answer and that I could not help but find it. We take the wrong path too

quickly in our impatience to take the right, so I now choose not to look. I had thought my happiness late in coming, but now I realize that it was just unable to keep pace with me, and displaying the journal of my discovery would only be an excuse for the world to push me off on another jaunt. Postponing my life again.”

“But wouldn’t it be living to publish that book and put yourself in a position to be noticed in the human drama?” Sybil asked, sitting beside him and crossing her legs.

“I can live just as much in the life that I’ve built already. They are all shadows —there is no difference between the world in the mind and that outside of it. If we feel it, it is real. If I am recognized by people whom I want to recognize me, then I am recognized by the whole of humanity. We can feel just as successful in our smaller ways if we believe them to be all that matters. And, for myself, I know of no more satisfying moment than that in the evening between the shower by which I have refreshed my body from its long day’s toil and the dressing for the evening that still lies before me. Naked and exhausted and basking in a knowing smile. I will not relinquish my part in life by making myself into somebody else’s unreality. I know it may sound as if I’ve struggled so very hard only to gain the ground on which I had already been standing, but I want to live, to feel, to... live.”

Sybil leaned, almost imperceptibly, toward him, as if to listen more closely.

“And what would make you feel like you were living?” she asked.

“To be real for somebody else because she realizes a dream for me and because I am able to enjoy her fantasy of me.”

Sybil’s eyes turned up to him, her head leaning to one side. “So how would she do that for you?”

Nathaniel wet his lips and stood, returning to the knot in the tree and the shadow of a birch. “I think I’ve found my destiny,” he told her. “And I now think that there is no moral, or, rather, that it would be wiser to ignore it.”

Sybil moved to his side, finding for herself the shadow of the other birch, and said in a low, raspy voice, “So what do you propose to do?”

“To have this last Summer here and then never return,” he replied, bowing his head. “We are all playing dead men alive, and here I am but a dream of the dead. I have to live, and I have to leave what I’ve done here behind. I built this dream to have an inbetween, and now the inbetween is all that links me to the before. It’s all been temporary and unreal.”

“You’ll be able to wake from it like a dream?”

“Yes. I considered burning it down when I left, to leave in a brilliant flash, but it was here before I came, and it should be left for someone else to find. There are other ways to say goodbye.”

“So you’ll forget it all. No regrets.”

Nathaniel looked at the stone face that Sybil had dropped on the ground. “There is always one there to remind me. I can’t forget. I can only mitigate what I’ve done before and allow myself more, though never total, periods of simple feeling.”

“What kind of feelings?”

“Pleasurable feelings. We are the things of a moment. Every moment must have been worth living when it’s over.”

“And let the moments find you, like when the sun welcomed you when you arrived.”

“Maybe I just knew when to walk through the door. Other doors I can’t even open.” He blushed as he spoke.

“Maybe I can open some of them for you.”

“As if they were opened by the wind, unlatched by a dream.”

The wind rushed through the trees and set them to swaying. The shadows of the two birch trees swayed toward each other and seemed to intertwine into one, embracing into an uninterrupted column of shade, smooth and unknotted.

There was a moment, once the breeze had passed, that found the world held in a breathless pause, then the shadows of the birches separated, revealing two smaller shadows between them that had not broken their embrace as quickly.

Nathaniel stepped out of his shadow. “I’m getting married,” he told Sybil. “That’s one of the reasons that I’m giving up the Pequod.”

She remained silent.

“She’s my door to life. She’s my hope for the future.”

Sybil spoke, “What’s her name?”

Nathaniel thought that it was a strange question given their circumstances. “What does it matter?” he asked and began walking toward the house.

Nathaniel kept well ahead of Sybil on the walk back to the Pequod, taking care, however, to keep always within her view so she would not get lost. It was a strange pace at which he found himself meandering: slow and melancholy, but feeling as if he were rushing. He felt the weight of his guilt pulling him back, but pushed on.

“Why do I do these things?” he asked himself. He felt as if he were an addict who had proven his precarious position by failing to fall, but who knew by the seductiveness of the drop that he had not yet cured himself. “Why can’t I stop myself?” he whispered.

Nathaniel knew, somewhere deep within his confusion, that, were he to be truthful with himself, he would realize that he had shown more control than his society expected, even mandated, but, still, he wanted to hold himself to a higher standard because he wanted to believe the theories that he had contrived so that he might call them Truth. Again, a part of him understood that he was closer to being correct about that elusive Truth than he was willing to admit, even more so, perhaps, for his near undoing, in reality, of all that he had pieced together in his mind. A voice echoed within his head, as if from within a deep gorge, to turn back toward Sybil. *It may not be too late*, he thought without thinking, unable to suppress the idea as he felt it rumbling through his head, as if through a crowd, and chastising himself for the thought almost before it had been articulated.

Damn me! He whispered to himself again, “You save yourself no accountability by keeping your body from doing what your mind readily acted out. You don’t undo what you’ve thought by cursing yourself for it.” And he believed this to be true. It saddened him that for all his effort he continued to feel on no more steady ground than he had been at

his worst.

I might as well have done it, he thought. Then, carefully selecting words, For I took it far enough to layer my already unbearable guilt without offering a wicked pleasure for my iniquitous moods of the future.

“It may not be too late,” he said out loud, punishing himself instantly with a slight shiver, seizure-like. He made a conscious effort to not turn around for fear that Sybil would be close enough that he would get the better of himself. His fingers twitched in empathy to those mental fingers with which he shuffled through his murky brain, and he looked at his hands. Then he came upon an idea that shimmered through the grime, *Perhaps the temptation was just a desperate attempt of the man that I used to be to foil the man that I am becoming; I haven’t relapsed. In fact, I’ve just survived a crisis, the rejection of which has exiled me from all that I have been.* He smiled. *Of course! No matter our resolve, it’s a difficult task to relinquished a habit or manner of being, no matter how mournful, to which we’ve become accustomed.*

I ought to head off for home today and stay as near her always as I possibly can. His lips moved, his breath barely giving voice to the words that they shaped, “First, I should go through with it just to prove to myself that I didn’t really want to do it.”

He glanced over his shoulder. Sybil was well behind him now, somehow managing to move more slowly than he was. His muscles seemed to be moving him in contradictory directions. The voice in his head stated again that it might not be too late, but he cut that voice off with the guillotine whisper, “Remember Lolita.” He stopped and looked at the ground in front of him. *I wish I could cry,* he thought. And the lack of tears set his eyes to a desiccated flame. He wasn’t stupid. He knew what he had been trying to talk himself into doing.

“It must be difficult to fail forever,” he reasoned, “but I think I might succeed.”

Just then a nearby shout in front of him made him realize that he had been moving more quickly than he had thought if he was already within earshot of the Pequod. He heard another shout, angry and raging. He broke into a run and was soon bounding across the familiar portico

and through the French doors.

The courtyard was in an uproar when Nathaniel burst upon the scene from the northwest entrance. He took it all in as if he had had the opportunity to leisurely scrutinize a room of sculptures, all within a momentary evaluation. Everybody was present, though Martin and Othello were on the balconies, Martin looking eagerly and lasciviously down into the turmoil, Othello looking concerned and perhaps a little aghast. Below Martin, Sal stood in the corner, and, though his eyes were hidden by his sunglasses, he gave the impression of a man trying to avoid being pulled into an argument but willing to toss in indiscriminate blows should the opportunity arise. John was standing before his chair, as if he had been jolted to his feet but frozen upon rising, and behind him, barely visible within the shadows of the doorway to the entrance hall, Alex lurked, wearing, as it seemed to Nathaniel, an amused smirk. Under the willow, Huck stood with a restraining hand against Jake's chest, though the position seemed an unnecessary gesture because Jake stood coolly, though he was obviously agitated, a drop of blood seeping from his lip. In a statement both of preventative concern and friendly consolation, Steinbeck had a hand on Jake's shoulder, glancing beyond the tree at a laughing Holden, who held back Nick, disheveled and flailing to break free.

“What's going on here?” Nathaniel shouted.

Nick was undaunted, redoubling his efforts to get away from Holden, who looked as if he was willingly losing the struggle. Nathaniel walked determinedly across the grass until he stood before Nick, looked him in the eye and pointed a finger in his face, and said, “Stop it!” in a commanding tone.

Nick's eyes flew open with a frightened outrage, then his fury gradually relaxed into a frustrated anger.

Nathaniel turned around and asked the opposing trio, “So what's going on?”

“Ask him,” said Jake, meaning Nick. “He just up and swung at me.”

“Hit you pretty good, too!” Nick snarled from behind Nathaniel, who spun just in time to push him back and tell him to keep his mouth shut.

“Why?” he asked Jake.

“How the hell am I supposed to know why his kind acts like they do?” was the reply. Jake was hiding something.

“You know damn well!” Nick shouted, and Nathaniel had to wrestle him to the ground to stop him this time.

Trusting that Jake was no longer a threat to the general peace, Huck helped Nathaniel up once Nick had ceased his writhing. “Seems our boys ‘a brung somethin’ from the outside in,” he explained. “Be best ta let it simmer down, an’ come back to it when we’re all cooled.”

Nathaniel brushed himself off and looked around. Everybody had closed in. Martin and Othello had come down from the second floor, and Sybil walked into the yard.

It’s because of me, Nathaniel thought, and then said out loud, “No. It’s over.”

He felt as if they had crossed some line that he had always known existed, just as he had always known it would be crossed. He was in the company of strangers, in a situation that had changed irreparably.

“You can’t just let these things fester,” suggested John, still standing by his chair. “I think it would be best to resolve it right away.”

“No. It’s over,” Nathaniel repeated. “All of it. Go home.” And again, “It’s over.”

All eyes glanced at all eyes, not understanding the import of the moment, or not believing that it was resolved and uncompromising.

“What’re ya tryin’ ta say, Nat?” Huck asked, the idea that Nathaniel would throw them all out being unanticipated, even unthinkable.

Nathaniel kept his eyes focused on the spot where the willow entered the ground. “I mean exactly what I said. It’s over. It’s all lost its meaning and its usefulness. Get out.”

“But...” somebody began but never finished.

“Get out!” Nathaniel screamed, glaring around at them. “All of you. It’s finished. It’s ruined. Go live your lives. Leave everything

here. Or come back for whatever's yours after I've left, but just go."

Having said all that he intended to say, Nathaniel walked past Sybil.

"You don't have to do this," she told him quietly.

"It's been coming," he said and walked on.

Martin shouted, pathetically, up to Nathaniel, who had reached the door to his room, "How will we keep in touch?"

"We won't" was the answer.

They all heard the door slam shut, and then the other. And for the first time that any of them could remember, they heard the rusty locks being turned. Suddenly they all realized that, for whatever reason and despite the capricious speed with which Nathaniel had altered all of their lives, it was over and that they had no option but to do as he had commanded.

Amazing the bewilderment that keeps these friends silent as they look around at each other. But it's not an unfamiliar scene. Some of them begin to voice questions to the others, but the answer is just a shaken head, intended to say, "I don't know." One of them seems to make a decision and starts to walk toward the stairs, planning to make an appeal for reparation, no doubt, but another stops him and shakes his head. Another makes the attempt but needs no stopping.

Some of them think, perhaps, that if they wait long enough it will all be put back as it was. Others think that some time away will make repairs and that the following year will find that they've all forgotten and forgiven... and returned. Still others begin to realize that, though they cannot fathom the reason, the decision has been voiced and can never be amended. A few of these might resolve for themselves that, even were the act to be repealed, the scene would merely be a disappointing shadow and begin the process of letting go. These are the first to walk from the courtyard, initiating the relief of movement. The rest follow, one by one.

Eventually they have all but one said their goodbyes, some even secretly giving phone numbers and addresses, and they leave with time enough before the sunset. There is nothing else to be done, and none

of them have traveled with such a burden that it cannot easily be taken up. The words have been spoken. Nothing will ever be the same, some of them think as they take their last looks at the house. But we know that that is mistaken.

As the sun begins to fall beyond the mountains, a rusty lock can be heard turning, and Nathaniel descends to the courtyard. John is waiting for him. His eyes tear as he tells Nathaniel, I've nowhere to go. Nathaniel puts an arm around him and offers him hope.

Nathaniel breaks a twig from the willow, making an unbearable snap in the unusually still rural evening. He sits at the piano and plays a melancholy piece of music. He runs a finger along the dusty spines of a long unread book. And the two men walk toward the eastern door together, slowly, torn between wanting to breathe the air of the Pequod one last time and needing to make the break quickly.

Finally the door closes behind them. The house is empty. In minutes, a raccoon climbs the stairs onto the porch. An owl flutters into the courtyard and lights on the willow calling out for replies that do not come. A deer emerges from the underbrush and dines on the grass, not looking through the windows or the French doors. Not concerned with the paintings beyond them or the books behind the paintings or the piano beyond the books.

In an hour, night has come in all of its dark mystery. The moon is rising, past being full but still bright. Bright enough, at least, to cast a gray-blue glow on something white moving below. A woman sneaks stealthily into the house and emerges moments later with a burden of notebooks.

So what do you think? We had come here to rest. To sleep. But we chose, perhaps without the proper consideration, to follow these humans for a final show. Were we looking for a reason to stay or to go? Do we follow them back into the world that we had thought to have escaped? Or do we forget them all and sleep?

I say there is time enough for sleeping, especially when we've no inclination to awake. So let us follow. If only for the opportunity to

sleep without questions. For all questions have answers that can be found, as they must, if we insist on finding them. So now let us leave the tranquility and make haste to follow this last representative of the people that we have left as she picks her way through the trees and finds the brook. And from there as she looks for her forgotten automobile. Call out to her; lead her in the right directions so that we may be led, ourselves, into a world where we know only the answer to the question of where we, ourselves, will end.

Recapitulation

Chapter 14

The tree was ornate, with its intricately entwined branches and sporadic leaves scattered upon the branches like jewelry. Its many arms, like some Asian dancer, undulating in impossible stillness, intriguing, nearly hypnotizing. It fairly coiled about itself as if dancing in the middle of the wrought iron grate in the pavement, while the misty steam from a nearby manhole caressed its limbs incense-like, twirling up its trunk giving the impression that it was the tree itself that undulated. Perhaps a tree in the city lent itself to images of exotic life. It stood as a hope for those who passed it each day. It shaded the hard working pretzel vendor, whose fare gave the visitor a signature aroma as a memory, as he called out to the passers by in his friendly, neighborly tones during the steamy July afternoons. It likewise sheltered the homeless who sought its patchy shade as a respite from the heat, and who, in the cooler months of Autumn and Winter, would nestle up to it to be comforted, if not by any actual heat that it emitted, then by the more interior warmth of kindred life. The children played beneath it, running between the legs of the grownups who passed by on commutes and expeditions and pilgrimages. And the city tree surely lent a bit of cheer to the otherwise rushed and jostling rambles of those grown children, as they worked their way through the shuffling crowd on foot, because, at the very least, it forced the wave of people to part and allow a cooling draft to waft equally upon all. And likewise for those faces that peered out from the cars that passed by, must the tree have acted as a blur of hope for those being borne away by taxis, limousines, and police cars alike, because the honking and the gestures were noticeably hesitant in its vicinity.

But most of all, Sybil thought as she peeled her forehead from the glass of her lofty office, the city tree was a beacon on which those in the offices who were too high to partake of the rush of life yet not high

enough to see more substantial scenery in the distance might relax their souls during a brief repose.

Sybil stepped back from her window. She was glad to be back in her city, in her office, and in her place. She sat in her acrylic chair at her fake-wood desk and looked at her green-metal shelves and her accumulated mass of crisp, unread books. Some of these unread books had made their authors famous by placing their names on the fleeting heights of best-sellers lists. Others had spread their influence into movies, at the expense, to be sure, of more than a little artistry and integrity. But still others, those on the extreme upper and lower shelves, in inaccessible, uneven piles, could only claim to be representatives of myriad unread copies of widely unheard of books with forgotten titles and forgotten names: the authors having disappeared as if from the face of the earth.

Sybil looked at the piles of manuscripts on her desk and on her floor. “So much to do,” she said out loud. To her left and right on the desk were two piles of plain white paper, one labeled, in harsh red letters, *REJECT*, the other, *POSSIBILITY*, also in red but perhaps scrawled with a bit more of affection and hope.

Directly in front of her sat a pile of papers for which she had a more than common amount of affection and hope, and this not only because it had been her effort that had converted Nathaniel’s scrawled handwriting, however poetic and charming the writing may have been in that form, into a presentable, word-processed manuscript. Her optimism about Nathaniel’s work had, now, a better basis from the more full sense of the value of the thoughts that she had derived by typing them, racing to get from page to page, and the possibilities that it presented to all those who might buy and read it. She had absorbed the meaning as if through her fingers while she prepared it for the eyes of the men and women for whom she worked. It would not be relinquished, she was sure, to the forgotten piles of books on the extremities of her shelf — that required the would-be reader to either crawl along the grimy floor or risk the harm that might come of falling from an unbalanced stool onto the linoleum — despite the preference that Nathaniel might feign for such company.

Along with the words of Nathaniel, which she had transcribed with an almost religious adherence to the words (as well as she could make them out) that he had written, she had typed a few pages of her own ideas about those written by Nathaniel; and it had been these, her words, accompanied only by a handful of citations from *The Value of Breathing*, that had eventually been passed around the upper floors of the skyscraper, gaining stamps of heavier rubber than hers. So, in a limited sense, it had been her words that had elicited the two sheets of paper she had been reading and rereading alternately with her admiration for the city tree outside.

One of the papers in her hand was scribbled all over with illegible notes and signatures, but with the unmistakable message of “yes.” And that had been the word that she repeated to herself as the cars sped past below, though it was the other, smaller piece of paper that gave her the greater hope: a single rubber-stamped signature, the date, and a large number printed between them. All neatly printed in the name of Nathaniel Ariss.

But now she faced the daunting task of writing words that might explain what she had done and why, persuading, to the best of her ability, the receiver of the words that she had been in the right to do as she had done and that he should allow her to do more. She turned to her computer and thought, and typed, and thought some more.

By the time the sun had set out of sight in the west, the sky merely fading to darker shades from her side of the building, she held before her a work of the finest rhetoric that she had ever written. She read it over. *If only he understands*, she thought, *that the world will never understand what it is not given to see.*

She folded the letter in thirds and slipped it and the check into an envelope. She paused before touching the envelope to her tongue. She had on her desk, she truly believed, a writ of temporary manumission for all the world. They were good thoughts, as she had presented them in the letter that she had just written, which now lay in an unsealed envelope on her fake-wood desk.

“If only he understands,” she pleaded to the books on her green-

metal shelf, “that, even if nobody understands, at least the author will have a reward for his thoughts.”

It could only be an undue vanity that would stop him from seeing that her proposal offered more than any worldly man might expect out of life. She glanced at the extremities of her shelf. *And some don't even get the opportunity*, she thought.

She dropped the sealed envelope in the “Outgoing” bin in the hallway as she made her way from her office, down the stairs, and into the street. She looked up at the sky. The moon was hidden behind a building. She crossed the street, walked around the tree, and descended into the subway tunnels, believing, as she disappeared into the ground, that all that stood between the world and its sure solution was the time that it would take a letter to travel from New York City to Rhode Island and gather one signature more.

“Nate!” her call spread across the sand, sweeping over shells and sea-polished stone, seeking him on the towels that were spread under sunbathers and among the curls of the incoming waves where the few remaining swimmers bobbed with the tide, then clambered between the jutting rocks nearby and the thick seaside brush beyond them, and found him seated on the steps of an ancient house, or, rather, the ancient stone walls of a house that had mostly dissipated, as if washed away, and Nathaniel knew that Jen had found him. Nathaniel looked up from his palms and saw her skirting along the edge of the rocks where a path had been worn in the tall grass.

“Whatcha doin’?” Jen asked playfully, though she already knew. He saw the envelope in her hand.

He stood and wiped the mixture of sand and dirt from his pants. He didn't want to have the conversation that he had known was approaching when he walked out onto the sand. He had hoped that it would freeze in a white line on the horizon, but, realizing that it was inexorable, he had trudged here to watch the approach and to prepare, both to make his point and to cede it.

“I needed some quiet,” he spoke tentatively. “I've got a big decision

to make.”

And then it crashed upon him. “Is it really such a difficult choice?” she asked, though she knew the answer.

Nathaniel’s lips turned into his mouth between his teeth, a characteristic gesture for him when he knew what had to be done but wasn’t ready to admit it yet. “There’s more to it than the money.”

Placing her hands on his shoulder, Jen lightly urged Nathaniel to sit next to her on the steps. He couldn’t meet her eyes. His position was an untenable mass of unrealistic pretensions and childish insecurities when all of his external justification was removed.

“What is it?” she asked, tenderly.

He looked over the ocean. “I don’t know,” he began. “I guess I’ve just become comfortable with the idea that this would never happen, and now it would be like replanning the rest of my life.

“No,” he corrected himself, “that’s not true. It’s exactly the opportunity for which I’ve never stopped hoping. But it would bring such a terrible change to everything that I value in my life as it is.”

Again he took up Jen’s argument for her. “No. Half the people in my life wouldn’t even notice it, and the other half would be thrilled even that I’ve gotten this far with it and have no expectations, only modest hopes that more might come of it... but even that for my sake only.

“But what if it proves to be just a false hope and dissolves like a dream? Although, we have gotten something tangible already,” he continued, slipping the envelope from between Jen’s fingers. “Or what if the dream of it has become a basis for my reality without it? Now that’s just silly... but what if it changes everything that I’ve come to love for its own sake? No, that’s ridiculous. But is it silly to worry that I’ll get swept up in the dream and then be crushed when it fails? Maybe not, but what if it ends up being the only thing that I ever do, that I was ever able to do? What if it doesn’t even get past the first volume? Or what if it succeeds, but I don’t measure up to it as a human being? No, no, and no, again. I’m only lying to myself. I’m not really so insecure. I can take it for what it is. But I might be weak: what if I can’t keep control of it, or myself under its influence? What if it doesn’t change

anything around me, but changes me? Can I take that risk?"

"Hon, it's been your dream. And you don't have to make it into more than it really is. It can be just an extra experience in your life. And I love you, and I will love you no matter what, and I have faith in you. And we really need the money."

Nathaniel began to protest, "Screw the money."

"Well it's not the most important thing, but Nate, we don't make much, and we have to stretch it even farther now that you've promised to support someone else."

"Oh I've explained that all to you," he snapped, allowing himself the ease of becoming defensive.

"I know," Jen quenched his mood. "I'm sorry. If it was only the money, I'd end up agreeing with you. I just want you to be happy. You know that. But as it is, I don't see any reason for you to be afraid of taking this as far as it goes. That's the only way that you'll be happy with it: if you don't you'll regret it. And I can't think of anybody who would be anything but excited for you however far you get, including me."

Nathaniel knew she was right. He had known as much before she had spoken a word. They looked at each other, stood, and kissed.

"This is really exciting, isn't it?" Nathaniel asked, allowing himself, now that he had spoken and been told what he had wanted to believe all along, to feel the euphoria of success and the hope that comes with the overcoming of a seemingly impassable obstacle.

"Yes," Jen agreed and kissed him again, "it is."

So we follow the lovers along the path, with the grass tickling at our ankles, through the stones, feeling the soothing coolness as we press our hands against the taller rocks for support, over the hot sand, that burns at our feet even as we sink into it as into a field of down: crossing terrain that is familiar to us all to a degree. But already feeling, though we are but lookers-on, as if we have entered into an unknown world. Feeling the thrill of the coming days, days of excitement. So it is with change: we are wiled into believing that the

rules that we have learned, for all our resistance, may no longer apply. We believe, no matter how much we warn ourselves to not believe, that this feeling of propitious change will become the stasis so that we will be in a state of perpetual hope, that, having gained a stair, we will find the next as easy to climb, forgetting the increasing labor as we've made each previous lunge.

But let these two forget it for now. Let them hope for now. And let us do so, too, as we follow them down the sunlit street, walking on the grass of our neighbors' yards so that our feet will not be burned by the scorching pavement, passing over, alternately, spots of iridescent sunlit lawn and cool fresh shade. Let us look into the windows of our neighbors' houses, though we see nothing, and picture, there, tranquilly reclining folks in the evenings of their lives who have no need nor desire to do otherwise than reminisce about lives well-spent. And let us wave, as these two who walk before us do, to the families that play beneath curtains of water or sit on porches enjoying the way in which the breeze curls into their sleeves and the way ice cream melts on their tongues and over their fingers.

Now that the lovers have found their own house — no, not a house, but a cottage, suffice to say a home — let us peek through their windows, past the lazily undulating curtains, at a dream that seems too ideal, and perhaps too small of scale, to be contrived. We will be prudent, glancing only briefly at the quaint furnishings and the framed images of bliss and the wild flowers and the smiles, for many of us may have had this dream and found it too delicate to endure the throes of waking to reality.

But let these two believe it all — all of it — for as long as it is their good fortune to be able.

Chapter 15

August was a frenetic month in Newport, Rhode Island, and Nathaniel liked to keep to his own less frenzied neighborhood across the mouth of the bay, where he could walk the beaches, rocky and less refined than those that the tourists tread, and wander unperturbed, without the rush of a forced and expensive enjoyment. Newport in the Summer felt, to Nathaniel, like a contrived amusement, with merchants willing to supply all of those trinkets that tourists were compelled to purchase (t-shirts, Irish hats, and machine-made scrimshaw), with waiters bringing dishes that were considered seasonable and *comme il faut* (lobster rolls, sushi tuna, and uncleaned shrimp), and with bartenders serving up the frothy iced drinks and Summer brews that those who were old enough felt obligated to savor and those who were too young schemed to taste. Whether traveling on foot, more slowly by car, or even by the dinner train that punctually traversed the island, none of the village's guests, in Nathaniel's opinion, felt the impress of the ancient houses that lined the cobblestone streets unless, of course, they were of the obscenely gigantic type, to which travelers flocked not to feel a part of the string of kindred humanity, but to drool over and pine for the means to live in so opulent a manner that hundreds each year would pay of their own meager savings to be allowed just a brief glance at the uncomfortable furniture and the real, but plastic looking, gardens.

But August was cooling, and the crowds, though still suffocating, were thinning as they spread the country to their offices and practices and classrooms, so from time to time some service that only urbanity could provide or that only surfeit currency could attract would force Nathaniel over the bridges onto the cobblestone, or otherwise cracked, avenues. He found, on these trips, that Newport was becoming more and more palatable, never the traffic nor the hurried atmosphere, but in

a place that offers no pastimes save those that call for the draining of funds, having the extra supply that he was finding in more abundance after each month's bills were paid certainly served to allay his disgusted boredom.

Nonetheless, without fail he found himself quickly striding along on his errands as if to emphasize the fact that his use of the village was entirely utilitarian: he came for that which he could acquire by no other reasonable means and then left, refusing to partake of the inebriation of time wasted under the guise of not being wasted at all. If, for some reason, his chores called upon him to stroll the less crowded side streets, he would, it is true, slow down, perhaps even standing still and closing his eyes, and strain to feel the city as it must have been felt, even by tourists, a hundred years before; but on this particular trip, he had no excuse to divert himself thither, and so was bouncing from shoulder to shoulder along the sidewalk when his eyes met with those of a dark-skinned young man, who smiled at him from a patio table of a bustling restaurant, a disemboweled lobster strewn about his plate.

Finally managing to break himself from the flow of pedestrian traffic in front of the next store front, Nathaniel made his way back toward the restaurant and exclaimed with pleasure, "Othello!"

Othello stood and reached out a hand that Nathaniel shook enthusiastically over the metal railing that prevented walkers from overwhelming and toppling the tables. "What brings you here, Nathaniel?" Othello asked. "This is one of the last places in the world that I would have expected to bump into you."

"Oh," Nathaniel responded, feeling, strangely, a little ashamed, "I live nearby and had to do some shopping." The passing crowd jostled him against the railing. "How about you?"

"Well, I found myself with a great deal of unexpected free-time this summer, so I thought I'd come up here and see what all the fuss is about."

"Have you figured it out, yet?"

"No," Othello smiled. "In fact, I was about to ask you the same question."

Nathaniel laughed and gestured with his head to indicate the mob that fairly pummeled him from behind, “Do I look like I get it?”

“I have to say that you don’t,” Othello stated and suggested that Nathaniel sit down. Nathaniel, finding that the crowd had, impossibly, congealed even more behind him, chose, rather than struggle through it, to hop the railing. He sat down in an empty, green-metal chair at the table.

“Would you like something to eat or drink?” Othello asked cordially.

Nathaniel declined and leaned forward, placing his elbows on the plastic tablecloth, noting Othello’s ubiquitous telephone. Othello ordered another drink, and they talked their way through most of those topics that acquaintances might discuss when away from their common terrain: weather, world events, and the doings of each in the uncommon land in which they had now met. They commiserated over the banalities of their surroundings. “So have you been here since...” Nathaniel began, finishing with a look indicative of guilt.

Othello smiled so that Nathaniel would know that he, at least, did not feel slighted. “What? Since you kicked us all out?”

With a timorous attempt to return the smile, Nathaniel responded, “Yes.”

Leaning back in his chair, Othello told Nathaniel that he had returned to work for a few weeks before he had come to Newport, and would be going back again the following day.

“I’ve always wanted to ask what it is that you do.” Nathaniel stated, intending an inquiry.

“Wouldn’t it be against the rules for me to tell you that?”

“We’re in the real world now; there aren’t any rules.”

Othello looked around, and, with a chortle, asked, “Is that what you call this?”

Nathaniel, amused, merely shrugged and replied, “I guess it’s what you let it be.”

Nodding a sage affirmation, Othello answered the question, “I work on the stock market. Well, not actually on the stock market, but with it and near it.”

With his eyebrows raised in interest, Nathaniel informed him that he had been considering investing some of his recent prosperity.

“Money from your book?”

The corners of Nathaniel’s mouth twitched ambiguously. “Have you read it?”

“Oh yes. In fact, it’s become quite the topic for after-close conversation at the pub.”

“Really? How great that is to hear. Readers don’t mean as much when they’re only numbers.”

Othello nodded. “I can imagine that to be the case in your business, although in mine, of course, it’s all only numbers.”

“What do you think?”

“About investing?”

“No, about my book.”

“Well I think that it’s a very brave argument that you’ve put forth.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Mind you that I speak from a very limited intellectual sphere, but it’s a risky, albeit minor, stir that you’ve been causing in the world of money and finance.”

With a look of mild disappointment, Nathaniel asked, “So what do you think?”

“I disagree with what some are saying, that you’re a communist, or even just a socialist, as others are saying. But I do think that it’s dangerous to be known as either in our society. It’s a modern world, Nathaniel, and being known as somebody who even tangentially espouses philosophies that the world sees as defeated is as good as being called a minion of Satan. And there’s little doubt that the money machine has won. Just look around. You know what all these people are doing here? Some of them are doing what they enjoy, maybe, but more are trying to live up to what they consider their station. Still more are putting themselves in debt in order to pretend that they’re better, or at least in a better position, than they really are. I don’t know why, but then, as you’ve said, neither do you. Maybe nobody knows why. Do you think it’s some inherent human longing?”

“To an extent,” Nathaniel had to admit, not interested in this particular inquest at the moment and not positive that it was relevant to his book, anyway. “But what did *you* think about my book.”

Othello leaned toward him and said, in all honesty, “I thought it was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. I thought that your ideas are of the kind that might actually be able to save the world from itself, and I can’t wait to read the next volume. But I wonder if you realize that you’re dealing with humanity here — a group that doesn’t seem to want to be saved and that will find some way to mess you up no matter how brave or brilliant you are.”

Nathaniel’s smile was inexplicably broad. “Of course I realize it, and of course they will! But you liked it. And even if people are buying it just so that they can see what all the fuss is about, then at least they’re reading it. The ideas are getting in their heads anyhow. Maybe they’ll eventually forget me and think that they’ve thought of these things themselves, which, of course, would make them think that they’re good ideas, and that’d be exactly what I want.”

“Come on, Nathaniel, I know you’re not that naïve. I’ve heard you state the exact opposite.”

“But I have hope now. Since I’ve gotten that book out there, I’ve been thinking that perhaps my job could be no better performed than by giving people each a common question, a common friend, a common enemy if necessary, a common anything. Something to discuss after work at a bar or at a restaurant on vacation. I have hope that people want to speak to each other’s experiences, especially when those experiences are shared.”

“Well I hope so, too, if only for your sake. But I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

Othello’s phone rang and jittered on the tabletop. He answered it and scattered what seemed to be random “yes”es and “no”s into the mouthpiece while Nathaniel tried to look as if he weren’t listening, which was true to the extent that he was more concerned with guessing who was offering the questions to which he was hearing answers than divining the meaning of the answers themselves. Othello hung up with a short

“G’bye,” and Nathaniel asked if it had been important news.

“Oh, you know. It’s always petty and inconsequential, and it’s always of dire importance.”

“I know what you mean. It’s all a matter of perspective, I guess.”

“Yeah. Guess so.”

The conversation lapsed, as each sank into his own thoughts, until the waitress brought Othello his bill as if by some invisible signal.

“Why don’t you come over the bridges with me and meet my fiancé? You and I could discuss the possibility of my investing with you. We’re going to a great burger place for dinner, why don’t you join us?”

Othello stood and threw back the rest of his drink and slipped his phone into his pocket. “I’d love to, but I’ve got to get ready for my trip home tomorrow. I’ve been away too long, and as that call just showed, there are minor emergencies popping up every day that I can’t control over the phone any longer: they’re starting to pile up. I hope to come back this way before the end of the summer, though. Or maybe if you’re down in the city, you could look me up.”

Nathaniel looked at the interlocked fingers in his lap, then stood and shook hands with Othello. “Yes, I think I’ll do that.”

“Great! Here’s my card. Call or fax me with your address, and I’ll send you all the information that you’ll need to get started investing intelligently.”

Nathaniel read the card. He didn’t recognize the name that was raised in black ink across it. He looked up as Othello threw some money on the table and slapped him on the back. “It was good to see you,” he said.

“Same here,” Othello reciprocated and, smiling, wove his way through the crowded tables, calling back from the edge of the patio: “Nathaniel. Hope’s a good thing, probably the best of things, but don’t let it blind you.”

Then Othello nodded reassuringly and was swept away in the human wave on the sidewalk.

Jostling and plodding our way through the crowd, we follow

Nathaniel through the streets, losing him just once, but catching him again as he slips into a car. Now, riding along with him, we watch the passing rush of adults in sandals and children with eager, but tired, faces. We pass through the traffic lights and past a shopping center and a hotel to another traffic light. Then a cemetery on both sides of us, and we wonder if we are the only ones who question whether it was by some conscious design that all those who would escape their lives by means of a brief vacation must pass through the final drudgeries of the dead. Or perhaps, if it was meant at all, it was meant to frighten those who would leave and make them think that it might be best to stay. A nasty trick of mercantilism if it was meant for such a reason, but not surprising nonetheless.

And after the line of cars has passed through the final traffic light (which has given us time sufficient to consider the meaning of all this exploited death), we reach the highway and the bridge and shudder at the daring maneuvers of the middle-aged in their expensive cars. But the toll is paid and a more tranquil island calms the racers as they approach yet another bridge, the crossing of which seems to lead into an entirely different world altogether rather than just the mainland. With Nathaniel, now, we travel into the country, and into life as it should be, or, at least, as it really is for a larger portion of souls.

Chapter 16

Even with the approach of the final weeks of Summer, as August gave way to the less robust month of September, Nathaniel eagerly anticipated the cooler evenings during which he might stroll the beaches as if he were the last comber to ever shuffle through the sand, feeling the whip of the wind through his hair and the blood rising into his cheeks, his entire hue condensing there, they were still too warm and crowded for his tastes; he frequented, he realized, the beaches that seemed reserved by nature for the native inhabitants and college students who would drive the extra miles to partake of the sea without any cost of admission, so weather, not some artificial designation of months, dictated the end of the season. And, at least on the dunes that he crossed more and more frequently of late, Summer, being a local itself, had yet to resign itself to heated houses and cars.

The beach's clientele presented Nathaniel with another problem that seemed to be new to this year: acquaintances, most not more than casual, were beginning to seek him out and solicit, at the very least, advice on subjects on which he harbored no pretense of qualification to advise. So, it was more than a little forgivable in him that Nathaniel resolved to have done with his polite smiles and turn his feet toward the inland forests that were, now, more conducive to solitude and thought.

On occasion, Jen would accompany him on his strolls, but she, being less frequently accosted for council, except where it was asked of her how *he* might respond to any of a number of questions (but Nathaniel would admit, if pressed, that he was disappointed that the variety of these inquiries seemed so limited, attributing this acuteness of interest more to his own failure to cover universal ground than to the meager imaginations of those who knew him well enough to approach his fiancé, though it is, perhaps, more likely that the truth, as it always does, fell

between the two possibilities). Still, the friendly conversation that Nathaniel's newfound renown, at least among those of his community, elicited had yet to become onerous to Jen, partly, perhaps, owing to the joint facts that few knew that hers was the head that lay mere inches from his during the lullaby of nighttime lover-chatter and few among those who did had the audacity to intrude upon that sanctimonious moment with their paltry concerns. It may be more the truth, however, that the greater number of those who finally did approach Nathaniel or his fiancé wanted merely to offer congratulations in a sincere and neighborly way and believed, correctly, that the greatest compliment to an intellectual was to submit some bit, even of a trivial nature, of every day life to the scrutiny of the intellect.

And so it was, as Nathaniel came to feel that even the most benign of the requirements of his indistinct success were chores, that he also came to feel that Jen was the real beneficiary of Sybil's promotion. He did not, however, begrudge her the facility to enjoy the amiable local fame, nor was he jealous of her ability to see their improved position as no more than his just rewards. Thus, Nathaniel understood, he had all that he wanted, for hers was the only approval that he sought, and he had taken this route only in order that *she* might be happy and satisfied, a state of being of which he felt himself completely and forever incapable except in brief spurts or shallowly for extended periods.

He would never have ventured this far if he hadn't known from the beginning that he would only be related to the profit by proxy, as if laundering the ill-gotten gains of his success through her happiness and affection. In addition to this most valuable of services, Jen offered Nathaniel the chance, for which he always longed but would never go so far as to seek, of those simple social interactions that no human being can be long without because, he told himself, it was to satisfy her need for activity that they ventured beyond the minutia of their daily lives. Returning home in the afternoon, hand in hand with his love, Nathaniel felt that the gifts that Jen gave to him, that she had given to him throughout their courtship, were, rather than a payment for all that he provided her, the blessing that he did his meager best to deserve. This being the case,

the journey that they were to make one particular evening to the city of Providence would increase the debt that Nathaniel happily incurred.

Nathaniel was always amazed when they found *their place* in the city. Providence was a maze because it was a city rebuilding. And though Nathaniel, as a rule, preferred the image of cities falling into ruin from disuse, he could not escape the reality that there were opportunities to indulge in culture that the bucolic areas could only provide in small, amateur doses to the extent that they did at all. Ideal, to his way of thinking, would have been the reinstatement of the arts seeping into the country in search of audiences as it had been when the only entertainment, other than the Bible that is, that was offered to farmers and artisans was the occasional traveling show: minstrels, acting troops, and the grander but less artistic fairs and circuses (which, even though he knew he romanticized them, seemed to have been less ostentatious, but perhaps more authentic for their touch of darkness).

But Nathaniel realized that, for this ideal to become the custom, the artists of the world would have to return to the tradition of either utilizing their particular talents for their own sakes, in which case merely performing is the object and any available crowd, wherever it might be gathered, is as good as another, or to the idea that they were on a mission of some kind, whether educational or proselytic in nature; so he and his wife-to-be had found for themselves a restaurant, though few really went there to eat, that answered both Nathaniel's longing to see the reign of cities decaying and his need for culture because the restaurant (more properly called a bar) was host to jazz musicians, folk singers, spoken wordists, and any other performer who the clientele might fancy on the ground floor of an otherwise unoccupied, crumbling factory building. Nathaniel himself played there on occasion in the Winter months, less now than when he had made his go at stardom through other methods than he had stumbled upon now.

This being the case, the owner, the waiters, and a good number of the regular patrons knew him at sight, if not by name, and welcomed him with smiles and pleas for him to play. Often he would hop onto the

stage and sit at the old and furrowed, and always appealingly out of tune, piano while the hired band of the evening relaxed for a time among the audience and then drifted back to their instruments and joined him. On this evening on the cusp of Autumn, with Summer still beating through the open windows and the door, Nathaniel and his fiancé walked into the bar while the band was already away from the stage and indistinguishable in the crowded bar. Hands clapped Nathaniel on the back while their counterparts waved and pointed toward the stage. Nathaniel gave Jen a look of feigned reluctance, and she swished both hands at the piano with a laugh. Smiling demurely, Nathaniel kissed her and plunged into the throng of bodies. People looked at him and made way, some vaguely acknowledging him with nods, others sensing the general recognition. Jen spotted a friend and slipped through a break in the swarm.

Nathaniel stroked the keys of the piano lightly at first, recalling the piano's feel and personality. His playing was aimless and subtle, barely audible over the collected murmurs around him. Some of the people who had been pressed toward the stage paused in their conversations to ascertain whether the faint music was merely some indistinct reminiscence that only they could hear. As more eyes picked him out and lingered on him, Nathaniel felt the recrudescence of the old habits of euphoria and expanded his melodies, striking them out of the piano more forcefully. Talkers began to refer to him, *who is he?*, and nod, *oh yeah*. Heads could be seen floating toward him through the crowd. He settled on an idea and secured it, beating out the rhythm in chords with his left hand. Then he broke it apart in the melody and in the rhythm and brought it back, and unraveled it into simplicity and threw it open toward commotion. And the heads nodded. He skipped the rhythm of the pattern tritely and somebody laughed. He slowed and raced, finally bringing it down even and low with spurts of broken rhythm. He smiled at the drummer, who was taking up his sticks, because he knew him and they both took it on, hands together then clashing. Nathaniel softened and the drummer picked it up and took it out then back and Nathaniel went up high when the bass bellowed in. And the bass player winked and took off, with Nathaniel chasing after him and the drummer holding

them together. Then a saxophone growled on top from out of nowhere, and Nathaniel looked to see the blower but only saw his back. And he was quick and full of life. Then hurled out a line and it came back, and he returned it upside-down and it was changed and kept going when he picked it up again, and the two instruments beat it out against each other and in harmony and the drummer gave it up and smacked wildly at his drums while the bass groaned out long improbable sighs and the horn screeched and the piano crashed out walls of chords and nonsense runs. Then suddenly, everything was silent and the crowd was mute and breathless. A drop of sweat dripped from Nathaniel's nose, and when it hit the keyboard his original idea burst out of every instrument in unanimity and stopped. The crowd roared. Nathaniel stood and smiled. He passed a secret signal to Jen, who had joined her friend at a table. He nodded elatedly at the drummer and smacked the bass player on the back and looked toward the flash of the saxophone, which was raised in acknowledgement of the applause. The horn player turned, and Nathaniel saw that it was Sal.

"Mr. Nathaniel Ariss on the keys," Sal announced, pointing his sax at Nathaniel. "Piano player and author extraordinaire!"

And with that, Sal put his horn to his lips and signaled the band to swing into the next tune. Nathaniel, not sure what should be his response gave a final wave of his arm and hopped off the stage. Jen was sitting with a group of people whom he knew only slightly. They all complimented his performance.

"That was great, honey," Jen told him, asking, "have you played with all of them before?"

Without thought, Nathaniel responded, "All but the sax player," not knowing why he lied.

"Oh," said Jen, looking a little bemused. "How did he know your name?"

"I don't know."

Jen gave it some thought. "I guess he's read your book, and somebody must have pointed you out," she reasoned.

"Maybe," Nathaniel told her, relieved to escape the need to lie further

but more than a little concerned that it had been his first impulse to lie. Then the evening out came on suddenly and its opening scene was all but forgotten by everyone but Nathaniel, who kept it circulating in his mind despite the waves of music from the stage and the onslaught of people who wanted to compliment his piano playing or congratulate him on his having published a book; he suspected that none of these latter had actually read it, as evinced by their offering no evidence either way. Even his increasingly boisterous companions at the table were unable to divert his attention from the impassive figure on the stage who, whether burning up or lulling the keys of his saxophone, gave no sign of zeal or strain behind his sunglasses. *This is too random to be random*, thought Nathaniel.

When the band left the stage for another break, several people pushed through the crowd with a stagger in their step and urged Nathaniel to fill the gap at the piano. The suggestion was taken up by those at his table and nearly took the force of a chant, but Nathaniel blushed and smiled and kindly refused. He was still bothered by the man with whom he had spent more time than any of those around him but his fiancé, and who lingered on the edge of his vision until it was time for the final round of music to begin. There had to be something going on, Nathaniel reasoned, or else Sal would have come over to speak with him, even if under the guise of a stranger.

Distracted though he was, through the resumption of the jazz and the pulse of conversation and life and the occasional hush of the audience as the band swept into realms of virtuosity and ingenuity that bordered on brilliancy and the bells for last call and the push of the crowd to the bar and the ripple of inebriated laughter that floated the atmosphere all around him, Nathaniel still turned over and over in his mind his possible actions. Then, suddenly, it was out of his hands because the crowd, without his noticing, dissipated as if it had been half populated by figments of his imagination, and his table was emptied. As the final note was played and the final cue that the show was over was given by the slight reverberation of the instruments as they were laid down, Jen excused herself to the ladies room, and Sal, more ghostlike than even the now

evaporated audience, stood before him.

“How’s it goin’, Nathaniel?” the specter asked.

Stammering, Nathaniel responded, “Fine. Just fine. How about with you?”

Sal shrugged and pulled back his lips in an ambiguous line, and Nathaniel saw his eyebrows peak over the edge of the glasses. “Could be worse, could be better.”

Giving an unimportant rejoinder, Nathaniel fell into silence. The drummer came over to tell Sal that it had been a lot of fun playing with him and said goodnight to Nathaniel. Nathaniel turned to Sal when the drummer had gone, “So what brings you to Providence?”

Nonchalantly, Sal told him, “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, the bio in your book only said Rhode Island, so I figured I’d catch up with you if I played around Providence for a while.”

“Have you been around long?”

“Not long.”

Seeing that Sal was not going to offer up his intentions without being prompted, Nathaniel asked, “So, why were you looking for me?”

As if this question had been some cue in a script to which Nathaniel had not been privy, Sal flung himself into a chair at the table. “You’ve been havin’ some success with that book of yours, haven’t you?”

Nathaniel spoke cautiously, “I suppose so. Did you read it?”

“Yeah, some of it. Listen, what I’m wonderin’ is if you could help me slip into the big time.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Aw, come on, we both know that when yer in, yer in. I just need some help getting a shot. All you’d have to do is introduce me to some people or get me a gig at some party where there are important people. Or maybe you could just bring some of your literary friends to see me. Man, I’m good, I just need some exposure.”

Nathaniel wasn’t sure what he could do. “I know you’re good... really good, but I don’t have many friends period, let alone any with clout in the music business.”

“No, man, you don’t get in the club without someone opening the door for ya. You gotta know somebody. All I need’s a break. It’d be no sweat off your back.”

“I’d really love to help you, Sal, but I just stumbled into getting my book published, and it hasn’t made such a big hit that *I’m* anybody that people would come to for advise on music.”

“So how’d you get published?”

Nathaniel leaned toward Sal like he was going to tell him a secret, “The lady, Sybil, she snuck back to the house and took the manuscript. All I did was sign a form and cash the check.”

Sal leaned back in his chair, giving the impression, though with no particular gesture or facial expression, that he was disappointed and a little bit skeptical. “So you were just lucky is what you’re sayin’.”

“Exactly. I don’t know why she did it, but that was my in.”

Sal seemed to mull this over for a second, then asked, “Where’s she?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. I guess you could find her at the publisher’s office in New York. Other than that, I haven’t a clue.” Then he added, “I haven’t spoken to her since we all left the Pequod.”

Just then, with a woman’s perfect timing, Jen returned to the table. “Is he boring you with his literary talk?” she asked Sal.

Nathaniel stood, Sal following his lead, and motioned toward the horn player. “Jen, this is Sal; Sal, this is my fiancé, Jen.”

“Very nice to meet you,” Jen spoke first. “You were really great up there.”

Sal smiled, if only slightly, and said, “Thanks. It’s too bad more people don’t get to hear me.”

Nathaniel wished that he could see through Sal’s dark glasses. He didn’t like the idea that Sal might think that he was lying about not being able to help him with his career. He considered whether he might not be able to help Sal after all if they went to New York together. But Jen saved him from making a suggestion that he knew he would regret before he had decided to make it by announcing that she was very tired and wanted to go home.

She smiled at Sal and they all said goodnight. As Nathaniel walked out the door with Jen holding his arm, he was still bothered by the idea that Sal might think that he was lying, and he wished that there was something that he could do.

The house lights come on to drive away the few remaining stragglers, driving away only the darkness and with it the mystical atmosphere. The room is dingy and sticky. On the floor, the dust clings to spilled drinks like so many tiny, fiendish drunks. One of the waiters appears from the back with a mop, followed by another with a rag and a bottle of blue liquid. They hurry through the motions of cleaning so that they can leave, either to go home or to find some other bar that hasn't dispersed its magic quite so early.

As if the disintegrated dream and the odor of cleanser is enough to accomplish what the light could not, even the most reluctant patrons make their way sullenly through the door into the cool night. Then the staff, some tired, but most impatient to be elsewhere, begins to leave to the sounds of cash drawers slamming shut and chairs being thrown atop tables.

Soon the owner emerges from a door marked "Employees Only" carrying a locked metal box and checks the registers to make sure that they are closed. He gives a quick inspection to the large room that is now as clean as it ever gets. Together with the bouncer, he steps from his place of business into a city that is as quiet as it ever is, not even hearing the rush of cars on adjacent streets or the occasional honking horn or the rumble of a distant train. He locks the door behind them, shakes the knob firmly, and walks, a barely perceptible nervousness in his stride, to his car.

Chapter 17

Nathaniel looked out over the ocean, which had not yet turned the reflective, alluring midnight blue of painful waters. The rise and fall of the surface seemed mild and lulling, and he knew that it was still warm. He could, if he wanted, jump in for a swim. He looked down the side of the barnacled wooden boat at the lapping undulations that swept from the bow to the stern and then curled around themselves in swirling, playful hugs before slipping into the rhythm of the rest of the ocean. He felt, through his feet, the rocking of the boat as it drifted along at the slight urging of the tide.

In the distance, he heard the subtle ringing of that seemingly ubiquitous buoy that had come so much to bespeak the coastal ocean that its absence would change entirely the ambiance that nature had done so much to create on its own. It occurred to Nathaniel that the bell might be the perfect emblem of perspective's power: it was simultaneously the herald of a homecoming to society for the seafarer and an omen of endless solitude and inevitability to the landlubber. Nathaniel wondered, though, if it wouldn't take an awfully long journey at sea to reverse the import of the bell when first one has left the land, for the bell had become so much associated with solitude, for Nathaniel, at least, that even the similar timbre of metal rope-weights clanging against an inland flagpole in the night was apt to feel just as lonely, especially when the wind whipped through the flag as through a sail and even more so when an orphaned seagull cawed out miles from the shore.

Here, though, the subtle image was difficult to sustain, because the seagulls kept up such a racket that feelings of solitude were quickly dispersed. Normally, the seagulls' chatter was imperceptibly interwoven with the scenery, but the smell of fish that no amount of bleach or harsh scrubbing could dispel from the boat attracted entire communities of the

birds, which hovered in the air, occasionally dipping down to look for the carrion that they felt to be there. One gull was paying particular attention to a pile of knotted netting but darted into the air with a shout when Nathaniel swayed across the deck. He reached between the cords of fraying rope and peeled loose a dry and tacky fluke. It made Nathaniel's stomach churn even to just hold it loosely at arms length by the fin of its tail. He hurled it away. It fell to the water with a sickening slap, and the gulls swarmed down upon it, each trying to rip it from the beak of another until the fish had been torn in half, and they all chased after the two birds that tried to sneak away with their prizes. They nipped at each other and beat their wings against the backs of their neighbors as they grappled for their own little piece of the rotting meat. The wily ones hovered at the edge of the riot and swooped down to gather what little bits of flesh and guts were flung from the carnage. Finally, the twin halves of the fish fell into the water and sank, bits of meat and skin trailing behind them. Some of the gulls dove into the water to salvage what scraps still clung to the bones. Perhaps one or two birds chased it to the bottom. Then the flock floated above the waves and cast one sidelong eye each on Nathaniel as if hoping that he might fling himself overboard.

Glad I'm as big as I am, Nathaniel mused, trying to bring to mind the imperfect comparison that he had heard on the docks...

"Rats of the sea!" yelled a voice from the cabin. Nathaniel had heard the clomping of knee-high rubber boots climbing the stairs from the hold below, where drinks were stowed in piles of ice, and now the wearer of those boots stepped, squinting, into the genial early-Autumn sunlight. He had found a whiting that the lumper had missed among all the ice. The fish gave a weary contraction, and Steinbeck threw it overboard, the seagulls clawing at each other for skimpy bites of the bony fish's body. "Tell me again why you didn't want to take out my sailboat?"

Nathaniel smiled. "I wouldn't want to ruin the polish with my callused feet."

"I don't think she'd mind," Steinbeck told him, meaning the boat.

“These rubber boots don’t make my feet none too delicate.”

Steinbeck handed Nathaniel a soda and opened his beer. It fizzed over as if agitated by the rocking of the boat. They both leaned back on the wooden sideboards, the seagulls sizing them up from behind. Nathaniel commented, “It’s always felt kind of fake and arrogant to me to go out on the water in a boat that was only built for pleasure.”

“I think you’d change your mind about that if you came out in this utilitarian bucket with me for weeks at a time. It’s nice to know the difference between work and play.”

“I guess.”

“Guess nothin’. You know it so well that you stick with a job that you hate just so’s you don’t start thinking of it as play, and you’ve tried so hard to keep your hobbies private for fear that they’d come to feel like work.”

“That’s not entirely true.”

“Well mostly, anyway,” Steinbeck took a swig of his beer. “Why do you still bust your ass out here with us workin’ men? ‘Specially since you’ve got a chance to make a real career for yourself out of your writing?”

“I like all you workin’ men.”

“And we like you, but I bet there isn’t a man on those docks that wouldn’t rather hear about you doin’ great things far away than watch you work your way up to foreman hereabouts.” He rethought his statement, then, “In a good way.”

“I know what you meant, but there’s no need to lecture me about it. I’ve been giving my whole situation some thought.”

“That’s great. What’re you gonna do?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about what Sal said...”

“Oh this again!” exclaimed Steinbeck with a chuckle. “You know there’s nothing you can do for him right now, and he ought to’ve known it before he came lookin’.”

After sipping his soda, Nathaniel responded, “Well I can understand why he did. I tried for many years, and with different strategies, to get some kind of a break that would help me get to where I could live off of

things that I do anyway because I love them, and it wasn't until after I gave up that some strange combination of circumstances and luck gave me a start entirely by accident. It just seems an awfully slim chance on which to hang much hope."

"First of all," Steinbeck began, "it doesn't take but a thread of chance to catch some hope. And second of all, if it was easier it wouldn't mean as much."

"But what a waste to have it mean so much for most people that they never get it. Especially now that everything's marketing and business."

"Well what're you gonna do? There are other ways to be happy. Look at me, I never intended to be a fisherman, but I'm happy with my life, and sometimes I have moments that I wouldn't trade for anything."

"Yeah, but wouldn't you have liked to have a chance?"

"At what?"

Nathaniel was bewildered by this question, though it was one that he had, of course, heard many times before, because it was so foreign to his way of thinking that he hadn't even considered it for his own life. "Wasn't there ever anything that you wanted to do out of passion for it?" he asked.

Steinbeck's face gave the impression that he was cycling through his memory. "No," he said plainly. "Never anything like you and writing. I mean, I always wanted to be happy, of course, but I just figured I'd set out and hope that eventually the happy moment's would maybe equal the not so happy ones. Lately I'm happy just being satisfied."

"Oh how I envy you."

Laughing, Steinbeck countered, "Envy me? What's to envy? I'm happy, sure, but you've got a shot at the big reward."

"And what's that?"

"You might just change the world. You may be miserable most of the time you're doin' it, and you may get to thinking that you're getting nowhere, but at the end of the day I think you'll know that you counted for something. You better, at any rate, otherwise I'll take you out here in old lady *Steadfast* here," Steinbeck gave a good natured slap to the

side of the fishing boat and changed tone, feeling as if he ought to lighten the conversation, “and throw you over the side.”

Nathaniel turned around and leaned with his forearms against the wooden railing. “I guess you’re getting at the way I’ve been heading with my thoughts. Since I gave up trying to be famous, every day I understand a little bit less why I ever wanted it.”

“Well I don’t mean to hurry you, but I get the feeling from the buzz I’ve been hearin’ that you’re gonna have to make the call soon. What’s your plan?”

“I don’t know,” Nathaniel confessed. “I thought, well I’ve been thinking more and more, about maybe forming some kind of group to help all the Sals of the world get their shot. Just take all the business out of the whole thing and make it mean something again. I mean, give artists the means and a reason to get better rather than closer to some marketable idea of artistry, whatever that means.”

Steinbeck’s lips and eyebrows arched in a sign of pensive approval, and he told Nathaniel that he thought it was a great idea, sincerely. “Be tough, though,” he appended.

Smiling with sweet cynicism, Nathaniel replied, “Well it wouldn’t mean as much if it was easy.”

They were both quiet for a moment. They were treading waters that were far too deep for such a pleasant and still afternoon, and neither was still young and innocent enough to imagine that their Sunday talk might instantly solve the world’s problems. Better, perhaps, to leave Sundays to drifting fancies and conversations of gentle rocking. Steinbeck wanted to ask one more question before they sank into the repose that they both knew was imminent. “What’re you gonna call it?”

Looking sidelong at Steinbeck while putting the soda can to his lips, Nathaniel let out an amused thrill of air through his nose. “I was thinking maybe *Timshel*.”

Steinbeck let out a hearty laugh and slapped Nathaniel on the back. “Sounds like a good name to me!” he said.

A good, hopeful name indeed! Even the seagulls seem to flutter

about with slightly more anticipation. Their anticipation, however, may owe more to the fact that the men on the good ship Steadfast have stirred, one going below deck, and they think by their sense of smell from far above in the air that the innards of the boat store fish enough for all to get their fill. But, being birds, they do not understand that the boat has been emptied for the insatiable humans, and all that is stored under the boards is ice and intoxicating fluid. Perhaps, if the man who took all the fish from the hold to earn his own singular living had overlooked some morsel in his haste to fill his baskets, then there will be some small treat for them when the captain returns aboveboard. But they will have to claw each other's backs and snap at each other's beaks to get even just a taste, more often the taste of blood than that of fish, though whether they are still capable of the distinction is a matter of some doubt.

No, hope is an abstraction, no matter how we might feel it to have substance. It cannot be woven into platters, though, in a sense, it may be shattered. Hope flutters, perhaps glisteningly, for a moment, but the object to which it is tied slaps against unpredictable reality and is quickly consumed, and what is not claimed cannot do otherwise than sink below our reach until another chance is fabricated out of the misty air.

Chapter 18

As the sun peeked slyly over the ocean at the fleeing moon, the machine whirred. Its metal slats scraped an occasional rasp against the walls along the sides of the mesh belt as they were dragged up and over and under and back into the salt water. The water frothed along the edges of the stainless steel tub and spun irritable ripples along the surface; underneath, it was roiled by the belt and twirled in a current as it was sucked through a tube and spit out onto the wooden planks. Rubber boots slopped across the slimy boards followed by the metal wheels of mechanized yellow palette-jacks piled high with empty waxed cardboard boxes that were being tossed in rows along the sides of the dock. Gnarled loops of thick rope thudded against the lids of the boxes and set them rocking as the cords slid down posts and tightened into the splintered grooves. The sides of the boat thumped against the worn wood and made the whole dock shudder. A cloud of smoke billowed out invisibly against the dark gray sky as the boat's engine gave a final thrust against the tide and was cut off. Huge, white, and stained buckets swung over the boat on ropes and floated into the hole in the deck, disappearing into the hold. They tottered as they reappeared, spilling whiting onto the deck, into the water, and onto the dock. The fish were dumped into a chute and rolled through the lime-colored plastic tubes in waves of cool salt water. The whiting churned over and around each other as the chute dipped and curved and emptied them out into the tub of the steel machine where they seethed with the water and were caught by the metal slats, which carried them over the mesh metal belt and dumped those that it did not shred onto the scale-encrusted cull-board. Bodies with torn and spilling guts were plucked from the surge of fish and tossed into the grimy water of the harbor, where the seagulls finished the disembowelment that the machine had begun. The whole fish were pushed

along by a rubber glove and fell into a chain-linked basket on a rusting scale. In response to an uttered “yawp,” the glove held up the flow of whiting while Nathaniel lifted the sixty-pound basket and poured its contents into a cardboard box, and the box was whisked away.

The men chattered as they worked, spilling rude jokes and spitting barely sensical exclamations into the air. They shouted to each other about drinking and gambling and women. They tossed good-spirited insults to their friends and roared boldfaced lies of rumors along the line. Nobody believed any of it. The red-eyed box-maker shouted a boorish question to the lanky palette-wrapper, who sneered it at the jack-ass, middle-aged and muscular, who laughed it in a husky voice to the chunky, charismatic foreman. The foreman whispered it to the assistant foreman, who loitered like a shifty toady by his side, and the assistant foreman shouted it like a dirty joke to the boxing team, who passed it around among themselves — from the stocky palette-loader to Nathaniel, the dumper, to the dark and jovial cull-board man, who was missing a finger on his left hand — and then cheered it down the dock in unison to the old, gnarled winch-man. The winch-man cackled it to the bucket-catcher. The bucket-catcher pushed it to the fishermen on the deck of the boat along with an empty bucket, and it followed the bucket through the hole to the lumper in the hold, coming back with a snide answer that followed the fish, the product, back down the line, anticipated with and pursued by roguish mirth.

Meanwhile, another boat docked on the opposite side of the pier, and banter shot back and forth across the boards like cannonballs. The sun was well into morning when the first boat was unloaded, and the second cut loose and lurched across the water to take its place. The dock workers took quick breaks, some staying behind to take a less onerous position on the line, though rank or brawn was likely to supersede the move, and some returning with the faint smell of brandy lingering in the air around their heads.

The second boat was all fluke, flounder, monk, and dogfish. Less weight but more work. Huge green vats were dragged out onto the dock for the monk and dogs. The sun beat down upon Nathaniel, and he

began to sweat as he lifted boxes of flatfish onto the palettes in layers of six, five high, eighteen hundred pounds of fish on each before the jack-ass took it away with his yellow machine and Nathaniel slammed another wooden palette against the boards.

Next came lunch. The tourists, a thinning crowd as Autumn overtook New England, passed more hastily now than they had just moments before, when they had slowed to watch the workers as if it wasn't work at all, but a reenactment in an authentic outdoor museum and the workers only actors who mimicked the motions of ancient dock-hands in the actual costumes of ages past just as others, elsewhere, took the roles of blacksmiths and candle-makers. Now the workers dropped their rubber overalls around their ankles and sat at a desiccated picnic table to eat and ogle the wives and daughters of passing men, who diverted their eyes and hustled their families along toward the ferry.

After lunch, the workers made their way reluctantly back to the dock, some by way of the bathroom, two by way of the ice room (again, lending a subtle spice to the air when they emerged), to find a boat waiting to unload lobsters and stone crabs. A cloud was spreading across the sky and the wind picked up, putting a chill in the air.

Now that they had eaten and relaxed, and because lobsters and crabs are packed more lightly and make for slower, more careful work, the wind seemed to freeze their sweat and sea soaked shirts against their skin, and one by one they slipped away to add layers of clothing. They knew, though, that they would strip it all again when they got into the groove of unloading the next boat, a big one that was already strapped the posts.

It was mid-afternoon by the time Nathaniel paused to take off his heavy flannel shirt, and he had just slipped his hands into his grimy rubber gloves when the foreman stuck his head out of the office window and shouted that Nathaniel had a visitor.

Someone said, loud enough for all to hear, "See that? Once yer famous y'ain't no good for workin'; can't put t'gether a whole day 'n less'n a week."

Everybody laughed, including Nathaniel, and they all laughed again

when the dark-skinned cull-board man with the missing finger yelled out, “Herry up ‘n sign yer ahtographs, boy, an’ get yer ass back here. Theh’s work ta do!”

Nathaniel slipped off his gloves as he stepped inside the barn-like building that housed the office. He could hear the thirty-five inch television on which the foremen and their boss liked to watch basketball games. He walked toward the sound but stopped when a familiar voice called out his name from behind him.

He turned and said, “Holden! What are you doing here?”

Holden shuffled his feet on the new wood floor, still covered with sawdust, as if he had more of a confession than a request to make. Then he swung right into his pitch, “Listen Nathaniel. I’ve come a long way to do you a favor, and I’m not gonna insult you by beating around the bush.”

“Well it’s mighty fine to see you, too,” Nathaniel said, smiling because he wanted it to be an ambiguous joke.

“My father runs *Ethos* magazine. Have you heard of it?”

“Yeah, who hasn’t...”

“Well your book’s really taking off with our readers, and it would really be a great promotional tool for you to let me write an interview with you.”

“What... wait... I, I haven’t been looking to do any promotional interviews.”

“Exactly!” Holden exclaimed as if his point had been made and the matter settled. “That’s why nobody has printed it yet. And I wanna be the first.”

Nathaniel shoved his gloves in the pockets of the jeans that he wore under his rubber overalls and looked at Holden with bewildered eyes that hinted, though only slightly, that he foresaw impending helplessness. “Despite the fact that you’ve appeared from nowhere and sprung this on me without showing the slightest interest in visiting with me, Holden, I appreciate what you want to do for me, but it’s a path that I don’t want to start walking. I want to let the book do what it has in it to do on its own, but without involving me.”

Appearing to rear up a bit, Holden took the tone of an elder brother, “Nathaniel, I know you think of me as a kid, but I’ve seen enough to know that one of two things will happen: either the book will lose steam without promotional pushes from you, or it’ll take off anyway and drag you along.” Then, poking his left hand with his right pointer finger, “You have to get control now or you’ll lose it altogether, and if you start it off with a friend, you can be sure to start it off in a good way.”

“No.”

Holden threw his hands in the air, “Why are you being so stubborn?”

“I’m not being stubborn,” Nathaniel replied, keeping his composure though he was slightly displaced from reality by the rapid pace at which Holden moved in his thoughts, changing, entirely, the mood of the day for Nathaniel in mere seconds, “I’ve given this a lot of thought, and have made up my mind to stay out of it. Even the fact that it was published had nothing to do with me.”

Holden laughed sardonically, “Nothing to do with you?” He laughed. “You wrote the goddam thing!”

Nathaniel shook his head with an expression that confirmed his words, “Believe what you want, but I’m not going to change my mind. I’m sorry you came all this way just to find it out.”

With his demeanor making the transition from advisor to helpless friend to fretting child, Holden first shook his head, then, turning his back on Nathaniel, stomped his foot, finally flailing his arms from over his head to his sides, where they slapped his thighs. Nathaniel watched the transformation patiently.

With his temper petering out as if being flung off in pieces with each wave of an arm, Holden turned to face Nathaniel. “Well if you won’t do it for your stupid self, why don’t you do it for me?”

“What difference does it make to you?”

Holden bowed his head, preparing to make a confession, “Listen... I’m the owner’s son, and I haven’t really had a big story or idea yet, so nobody really takes me seriously. And I... I’m just sick of feeling like everybody is talking behind my back and thinking that I’m getting an easy ride. I mean, I may not be a bigshot reporter or nothing, with all

the stars ringing my phone off the hook or great as hell stories falling into my lap, but I do work.”

Nathaniel was reticent to offer too much consolation, but tried to present a noncommittal comfort by saying, “Holden, I’m sure you’ll find something big if you keep at it long enough.”

“But you could be it.” His confidence was rebuilding. “I mean, if you gave me an interview I’m sure other things would follow. All it takes is one break, you know that.”

“No, I disagree. It takes a long time and hard work.”

Holden’s confidence slipped and his temper splashed up, “Oh whatta you know? Everything’s come to you on a platter. You don’t even want to do the work of an interview.”

“It’s not that.”

“It *is* that! All you do is throw your fish around all winter and then sit in the woods picking your nose all summer, then somebody publishes a book you wrote and people are talking about you like you’re the next... the next J.D. goddam Salinger, and you won’t even help out a friend. Who wants a friend like that? I’d help you out if I was this big famous author and all.”

“Holden, I’m sorry, I just don’t want to...”

“To go down that path, I know. You said that already. Can’t you think of something new to say for Chrissakes? It’s a miracle you finished a book at all!” Holden stomped his foot and put his hands on his hips, saying, “Well, I didn’t want to have to do it, but if you’re not going to help me out I don’t have a choice.”

As if his ears had perked up, Nathaniel’s eyes flashed, and in a harsh tone he asked, knowing that his was precisely the expected reaction, “What do you mean?”

“Oh you know what I mean. I saw the way you used to act, and you can’t tell me that there isn’t a world of dirt out there on you. That’d be an even *bigger* story, and you know it. I wasn’t going to do it because I thought you were my friend and all, even though I knew it would be a better story.”

“You wouldn’t know how to begin looking,” Nathaniel said, getting

angry.

“Oh I’ve read your notebooks. I know where to start, and you can’t stop me.”

“You better bet I can stop you! If you so much as…”

The foreman stepped out of the office looking large and imposing in the dark corridor, “Hey Nate, is this guy giving you a problem?”

Holden raised his hands in a defensive, dismissive gesture and said, “No. No problem. I was just leaving. I have to catch a train to New Jersey. Nathaniel, I’ll see you later.”

With that, as quickly as he had appeared with his tornado plea, Holden slipped out the door and was gone. Nathaniel was about to chase after him, but paused as the foreman spoke. “Is everything alright?”

Going slack, Nathaniel responded in a distant voice, “Yeah, he can go to New Jersey, but I don’t think he’ll know what to do once he’s there.”

A car horn tooted, and Nathaniel heard the sound of tires trying to peel out on gravel. “Yeah,” he said, “he’s nothing to worry about.”

The foreman slapped him on the back and said, “Whatever you say, Nate, but let me know if I can do anything for you.”

Nathaniel stands looking out the doorway as the foreman walks back to the office and to the television. The sound of disparate drops of rain begins to reverberate through the empty wooden room. Going out into the fresh air, Nathaniel crosses to the storage room and emerges wearing a plastic raincoat. He looks at the sky as if refreshed by the slight drops that fall onto his face and slide down his neck.

He walks out onto the dock, the other workers brushing by him as they use the rain as an excuse for a break, if only one long enough to put on rain gear. With the dock momentarily cleared, Nathaniel is free to choose a station, and instead of trying to get away with taking one of the easier ones, he stands ready in a position that nobody will begrudge him. Ready to dump baskets.

Chapter 19

This is bad, thought Nathaniel as he struggled to keep the bitter wind from blowing his car off the bridge: Winter, it seemed, was coming early this year. In fact, it, not meaning the weather, was worse than he had thought it might be. A week ago, he had begun to feel people looking at him when he was at the grocery store, subtly, over the tops of magazines or out of the corners of their eyes as if looking at the produce near him. But he had learned much earlier in his life to dismiss these impressions as either conceit or paranoia, the former as when he was a developing teenager and thought the entire world was “checking him out” and the latter as he had felt later, thinking that all of society was conspiring against him. So now he just smiled at those whose eyes lingered too long to escape his, and ascribed what few looks he could not deny to his book.

As it had turned out, he was less correct, while closer to the truth, than he had realized. It all came together, however, two weeks before his crossing of the bridges (and an awful pair of weeks the two since had been), when he had returned from whatever petty task, he could not now remember what it had been, had taken him away from his home. He had walked through the door with a smile on his lips and a humming melody in his throat only to find Jen crying over a wrinkled copy of *Ethos* magazine, which lay on her lap like a spent viper.

“It’s not true,” Nathaniel had lied instantly, not knowing if it was true or not.

The worst of it all, for him anyway, was that it was his own fault: he owed it all to his naïve self-denial that the mere mention of his name in certain vicinities could raise the past from its locked coffin. Holden, probably by an ineluctable mixture of accident and luck, had mentioned his name in such a place, and that had likely been all of the work that he

had had to do: Nathaniel's past had swept out from under the lid that had kept it superficially incarcerated and had carried Holden along on his curious path of discovery. Nathaniel laughed bitterly as he imagined Holden's disposition as he stumbled from one story to another, mixing his excitement, for he must have felt the appeal that Nathaniel's story would have to the lecherous mass public, with the disgusted surprise and denial that even a brat like Holden must have experienced as the Nathaniel whom he had come to feel as if he knew mutated into a monster.

That's exactly what had happened with Jen; the person that Nathaniel hardly felt, now, that he had ever really been emerged within her impression of him as if he were being possessed from without. Who he might have once been had become more real to her, more important, than who he was at present.

"I'll put it back the way it was," Nathaniel said out loud to the silent interior of the car, wiping a tear from his right cheek. He sped along the road feeling as if the cows that grazed across the roadside pasture raised their heads as he passed to offer the quiet condolence of Nature. He would go to New York and fix his life, somehow, not knowing what he would do once he got there but feeling the pull of opportunity and chance.

He looked into his rearview mirror and noted the car behind him. It was a black sedan about one hundred yards back. He sped up, and it seemed to him as if the sedan sped up as well; he slowed down and he thought that his follower slowed down, too. But then the black car turned off the road. Nathaniel laughed at his silliness: nobody was following him on this back country road. He looked again and watched as a rusted green pick-up truck appeared from the same street down which the sedan had gone. He laughed again. Silly.

The story of Nathaniel's past had somehow become deemed newsworthy. At first it had been picked up by local sensationalist magazines and then their larger parent publications. Then a handful of fashionable teenage biweeklies (at which, Nathaniel supposed, the staff had had to do some research to discover the book that had put him in the public view at all — and still not likely having read it) found old, unflattering pictures of him to print beside one- or two-line provocative

pop culture updates. One had even added an eye-catcher under his picture: “Nathaniel Ariss’s smart’n’cute, but watch out!” He had almost felt as if he should be flattered.

Once the adolescents had begun talking about his book as if they had read it, though he was sure that most of them had learned what little they had from brief spurts of hypertext on the Internet, his statement becoming, in their eyes, one of angst and rebellion, their parents and teachers had been eager to use his book as a tool of communication. He wondered, though, how many of these adults, in the dual desire to connect with their children and protect them, understood his argument at all and how many of those who did approved. The question was, of course, ridiculous: if they understood they would have approved. He wasn’t, after all, a radical. But whatever they had thought of it, the grownups gave the large, reputedly creditable, publications and evening news shows a new story to flash their eyelids about between stories of terrible distress and trite success. By this point, however, Nathaniel recognized the person about whom they were all speaking even less than he did the boy of his memories. His life was more and more embellished with half-truths and all out lies in order to be made something new... something breaking... until his entire biography had been pummeled into fiction, with nothing but names and images taken from life.

Nathaniel pulled onto I-95, and the pickup truck continued on the back road, but the increased traffic meant more eyes, passing more quickly though still seeming to be placed in turning heads. A sports car appeared behind him as if dropped from the sky and honked. Nathaniel held his breath until the car had slid into an impossibly tight space in the fast lane and flown by him.

“What’s gotten into you?” Nathaniel spoke out loud, meaning himself.

But he could not control this impression that the entire world was watching him, as if there were a blue-camouflaged helicopter broadcasting his journey for all to see. The idea struck Nathaniel that his public image might be turned entirely around if the reporter in the imaginary helicopter presented the trip to New York as a human quest

to restore a damaged life. *Why do I even have a public image?* Nathaniel asked himself in thought.

He turned on the radio, partly for company, true, but also partly, he had to admit to himself, to see if he really was on the news. *I'm being ridiculous*, he thought, but he continued to feel as if he were driving in a spotlight. He changed lanes.

I'm demented. He had to have known, though, that he had been, willingly or not, with whatever secret satisfaction it brought to his dismay, thrown into the very spotlight that he had once striven to find in the darkness of his life's obscurity.

Now that his moment had come, however, Nathaniel felt only confirmed in his more recent resolution to remain unknown. The irony was obvious: he had begun his search for truth, and he had orchestrated it into a painstakingly ingenious book, with always a slight hope that the effort would bring with it fame. There was always a whisper of varying proximity within his mind that hoped that achieving renown would encourage people to look for his book in his life, almost entirely in order that they might notice that he had lived after all. Now the whisper was outside of him, in the journals and the magazines, on the television and the radio, being sent along the very phone lines that ran along over him and crossed his path on the highway in conversations and faxes and emails, and all around, it was clear that people were merely looking for his life in his book, though it wasn't really his life that they wanted to find. The book had begun to sell incredibly, despite the shortcuts that he believed most of his "readers" to have taken, but the money felt tainted. He was receiving an artisan's better recompense for his art, a fortune so that an ashtray might be made of his sculpture. His book was no longer read in any sense that reading implies understanding. Its message was lost. "Irretrievably," he muttered.

He turned off the radio with a snap of his wrist. *The dessicated garbage they put on the radio these days*, he thought.

From here his mind covered all of this ground again, bounding from one thought to the next in ever more chaotic sequences. He seemed to feel as if there were a solution lingering among them, but he kept losing

it as some distraction or other diverted his attention and forced him to retrace his intellectual steps, though he never quite succeeded. His car, however, was not diverted from its purpose and rumbled through urban Connecticut over its highways' cracks and potholes, some of which were the distractions that wrenched his mind along its helter-skelter course.

As he turned left off the highway after White Plains and before the Tappansee Bridge, he realized that he had come all of this way without a clue as to how he would proceed. Finding *Ethos's* offices would be fruitless; Holden's story had grown too huge for its opportunistic writer to do anything about it now. Nathaniel was pretty sure, anyway, that Holden had never really had control over anything, let alone the juggernaut of success, his own or anyone else's. He would probably offer Nathaniel an "opportunity" to clear his name through an interview. His father, or some other experienced executive, had probably made that suggestion already.

Nathaniel supposed that tracking down Sybil would be a good way to start. Her firm had to have some kind of public relations team. "Ha!" he blurted, thinking, *They probably love all of this exposure*. Still, they'd have to pull the book, at least, if he insisted. Or, at the very least, not print any more volumes. He didn't think he had signed away his right to make them do *that*. He didn't think he had.

As he saw the George Washington Bridge materializing between the trees, his mind drifted into a vision of him disappearing over it and into America. Others had been lost there before, perhaps he could do the same. *I really am a selfish man*. He wished that he had been able to convince Jen to come with him, but she had refused. He hadn't wanted to leave her, but he had to do something... if only to show her that he was trying to do something. *What if, he thought, what if I turned around and convinced her to disappear with me. We could elope. We could just continue along the path that we had been following before this summer, or we could take out all of our money and disappear into the Caribbean or something.*

He began to envision the cinematic cliché that had helped to spawn this idea, feeling the simple bliss that he used to feel even with no more

proximity to the islands than the dreamlike one that comes into the consciousness by way of a lens and a large canvas screen, but the flashing dashboard lights of an unmarked police car behind him tore him from his acquiescent reverie.

He pulled to the side of the road, surprised at his lack of concern. He didn't know how fast he had been going and didn't seem to care; he had been miles away. A large man in street clothes stepped out of the car that had pulled up behind him, and Nathaniel rolled down his window. Without looking, he began to speak when he felt the man looming over him, "I'm sorry officer. Just give me the ticket. I'll pay it. And I'll try not to go so fast anymore."

The man laughed and said, "I'm not going to give you a ticket, Nathaniel. Even if it was part of my job, you were only going about fifty miles per hour. I just need to talk to you."

Nathaniel looked up. It was Jake, looking clean-shaven and official.

Before Nathaniel could respond, Jake looked around and informed him, "This isn't the best spot to have a conversation, though. Just follow me."

With that, Jake strode back to his car, pulled into the slow lane, and passed Nathaniel before he could get his mind to grasp what had just happened. Jake's car pulled into the breakdown lane, and his brawny arm appeared through the window and motioned for Nathaniel to follow.

Jake led Nathaniel past the bridge and along the Hudson River. Nathaniel tried to find the spot that he always envisioned when he heard John telling of his trip to New York. John himself, Nathaniel supposed, would be unable to find it because it was likely just a vision to him as well. Still, though, he could forgive it, if it were no more than fiction, because the image was so clear and palpable with the hills and buildings of New Jersey rippling in the water before him.

A beat up car with impenetrably shaded windows cut him off. He looked away from the water and saw Jake slowing down to force the car that had come between them to swerve into the other lane and go around.

Finally, as they neared the bottom of the island, Jake put on his signal and pulled up to a red light to go left. The two cars made the turn,

and Nathaniel became lost in the labyrinth of Greenwich Village, where the orderly streets of Manhattan jumbled into chaos. But Jake apparently knew where he was headed, and it wasn't long before they were struggling to fit their cars between the riot-like masses of dirty city folk and crisp college students to get across the sidewalk into a parking garage. The parking attendant waved his arms at Jake to indicate that there were no empty spots. Looking into Jake's car through its rear window, Nathaniel saw Jake flash something shiny at the attendant and point to Nathaniel. They were waved on, finding two spots not far from the entrance.

When they stepped out into the smell and reverberating noise of the garage, Nathaniel winced. Jake strode around to Nathaniel, his shoes clicking against the pavement and the sound bouncing between the cars. He smiled and held out his hand to be shaken, "So how are you, Nathaniel?"

Nathaniel gave the question some thought. "Not bad. Well, things could be better."

"I know what you mean."

Looking up at his friend quizzically, Nathaniel asked, "Do you?"

With a sympathetic nod, Jake told him, "More than you realize. Come on."

Jake started to walk toward the exit, but Nathaniel stopped him with an inquiry, "Where are we going?"

Pointing to the wall, Jake said, "Just next door. There's a quiet bar."

In an attempt to lighten the mood that had been increasingly with him for the past several months, Nathaniel tried a joke, "Not going to drink on duty, are you?"

Jake smiled amicably, "Oh, I'm not on duty." Adding, "And it wouldn't really matter much if I was."

That said, they walked out into the filth of New York. Nathaniel felt his mood crash upon him, and he began to understand what it was. The feeling had only been looming, of late, in a vague corner of Nathaniel's perception, but now he was inside of it, within it, and he recognized his surroundings. He felt unreal, which was a mood and a

world that he had managed to escape as a state of being only through years of conscious effort and the luck of finding love. He felt as though he could reach out and pull paper maché from the concrete walls that were really only a facade. None of it was real to him now... rather, for now. He held on to the vision of his life as he had been planning it before his trip to the Pequod this past Summer. It could still become reality. So he forced himself to lift his head, and he noticed that he was across the street from the Blue Note. He could almost hear the music. Again his memories blurred, and for a moment he was in his youth, and his job, his engagement, and his recent aspirations were but dreams.

Jake tugged at his sleeve, "Are you alright?"

Nathaniel tore himself out of his trance to respond, "Y...Yes. Are we going in here?" He gestured to a filthy wooden door.

"Yup. This is the place."

The bar was sticky, and seedy, and quiet. They sat in the back and ordered beer from a flaccid waitress.

When the beers came, Jake took a deep drink. "What's going on with you, Nathaniel?" he asked, not just making conversation.

"Nobody wants to make small talk anymore," Nathaniel mused.

"What do you mean?"

Nathaniel shook his head mildly, "Never mind. I'm not altogether with it lately for some reason."

"Well from what I've heard, you've got plenty of reason to be out of it."

"Exactly the reason I can't be. So what have you heard? I assume that's what you need to talk to me about."

"You're right there," Jake responded, leaning back in his chair. It squealed under the pressure. "I mostly want to get a sense of whether you have an idea the impact that your book's been having."

"The *book* isn't having any impact."

Shaking his head, Jake told him, "You're wrong. You're referring to all the press, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's been playing its part, of course, but it's just an

annoyance. The book is your real problem right now.”

“How so?”

“I’ve heard people who are worried about the questions that it’s making people ask.”

“Like what?” Nathaniel asked, a bit confounded.

“Oh, you know, the usual insurgency stuff about society and the government. It’s hard to pin down because the reality is that people aren’t thinking of anything that they didn’t want an excuse to question in the first place.”

“You’ve got that right. I’ve heard so many statements that I supposedly made in my book cited that I’m not sure what I actually said. Maybe I should read it.”

Jake chuckled and sipped his beer. “Maybe you should, at that. But I don’t think figuring out where people aren’t understanding your statement will solve any of your problems. The book’s become a symbol, or a slogan, for something else. A lot of people are talking about you in ways that are best not to be talked about in.”

“Oh, I know this. My fiancé will hardly speak to me. I’m getting strange looks everywhere I go. But really, Jake, I think it’ll all fade away with time. I’m on my way to try to take my book out of print, and I’m certainly not going to dignify any of this nonsense with a response. America’s attention span is short. They’ll all forget me before long.”

Jake pursed his lips and thought for a moment. “Normally I think you’d be right,” he said at last, “but your timing on this couldn’t be worse.”

Lashing out without knowing why, Nathaniel hissed between his lips with frustration and said, just shy of a shout, “I didn’t time anything. It’s all been so random. And as far as my past goes, I did everything but change my name, Jake, to get away from it.”

The bar tender shouldered a grimy rag and looked toward their table, evidently deciding that there was nothing going on that he should be concerned about, but keeping an averted eye on them now.

“I don’t think you understand,” Jake answered, leaning forward with his large forearms laid out on the table. “It’s not your book *or* your

past. It's not even really your ideas. It's how you're being perceived. What your prominence is being used as an excuse to do."

Nathaniel looked at him bewilderedly.

"I don't understand."

"Look," Jake said, relaxing his tone, "there's a lot of tension out there. Our lives are changing so drastically that everybody's trying to figure out where they're going to fit into the scheme of things, and most of them are either planning on scrambling over everybody else to get out of the path of progress or resigning themselves to being swept away by it. I guess that's where your ideology does come into play. But the real problem is that once you open the door to our collective anxieties, you're no longer dealing with your one issue; you're forced into the whole mixed up argument. Everybody wants to jump on top of the latest hot issue to get their say in even if it has no relevance, or even if they aren't completely sure what the hot issue is all about. What's more, as best as I can tell, there really isn't anybody who wants to fix the larger problems. They either want it to go on or to blow up."

"I've thought the same at times. I tried to get away from..." Nathaniel drifted off.

To snap him out of his torpor, Jake suggested that Nathaniel have some of his untouched beer. "Why not?" Nathaniel asked absently.

When the cool drink seemed to have brought Nathaniel back a little, Jake continued, "It's the last group that's going to present you with a problem. Most of the people who are holding up your name as an example of right or wrong will move on, especially if you do get your book off the shelves. They're only concerned with themselves anyway. But you're being dragged into schemes that you couldn't possibly know anything about by people that you've never met who will keep your name important so that *they* can continue to benefit." Jake's face became a mixture of dismay and shame, "Well, you might know at least one of the people who are doing this."

"Nick?"

"Yes. I've been right on the edge of busting him for years, I came really close once and had the opportunity, but I guess I didn't have the

heart.”

“What’s he into?”

Jake half-laughed skeptically, “That’s just the thing. We don’t know. He’s a slippery character. He seems to have ties everywhere, but he’s not a part of any group. He’s not Mafia; he’s not what we call a specialist; he never does an old fashioned robbery or murder. But I’ve got reason to believe that he’s up to something big lately, and I think he’s been looking to involve you.”

“What could I possibly do to help him?”

“I told you...”

“I’m not really me anymore.”

Jake shrugged to indicate that however Nathaniel wanted to phrase it was probably close enough.

Nathaniel pursued, “Seriously though, Jake, what could I possibly do for him? Or what role could this dubious fame play in a crime that would involve me personally in reality?”

“I’ll be frank with you: I don’t know. I can imagine things that would bring you in personally and physically without even knowing it. There’s a ton of money to be made by pitting groups against each other, and I could see Nick using you to do just that. You probably wouldn’t need to do more than be seen with him. But the truth is that I can only guess. I just wanted to make you aware of the possibility.”

They both leaned back in their chairs and sipped their beers, Jake’s sip significantly larger. Nathaniel was distracted; he stared into the dimness around them. Then he mumbled, “Such was the response that the dead man had fancied himself to receive, when he asked of Death to solve the riddle of his life.”

Jake had slipped into thoughts of his own and only realized that Nathaniel had spoken after the words had passed. “What was that?” he asked.

“Oh nothing,” Nathaniel told him. “It’s just that my predicament is becoming so much more complex and worrisome every day, every hour, that it’s all blurring together into inconsequentiality.”

“Don’t talk like that. As you’ve already said, it’ll all fade away

back to normal life with time. Nothing's going to end the world. Do you remember Charlotte?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Well, she disappeared out of your life, and life went on. Hell, she disappeared out of the world, and we're probably the only ones who noticed." Jake twitched slightly as if he had said something he hadn't intended.

Nathaniel caught the twitch and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"Listen, Nathaniel, you were in a tender state back then, and it really had nothing to do with you, so I never told you."

"Told me what?"

"Look, Charlotte was a prostitute. That winter she was murdered by some," Jake paused to find a word that would not carry an undue insinuation along with it, "by some guy who picked her up."

Nathaniel looked moderately and vaguely distraught at the news, but not surprised. "Did they ever catch him?"

Jake almost laughed, "No. He was just some random... guy. It happens all the time. But listen, what I'm trying to say is that sometimes people are what they seem, and the world treats them accordingly. And sometimes bad things happen to people you know without it having anything to do with you. But the world moves on."

Nathaniel managed a slight, but unconvincing smile, "It didn't go on for Charlotte." He pushed back his chair and stood.

Jake stood, as well, "Where are you going?"

Looking toward the door and then back at his friend, Nathaniel said, "To start the process of stopping."

"Going to your publisher?"

"Yes, that'd be the first step."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No, I feel like I should go it alone from here on in."

Jake seemed disappointed, "Do you know where you're going?"

"Uptown, first. We'll see from there."

With this ambiguous plan laid out before him, Nathaniel shook Jake's hand and asked if he could leave his car in the garage for a while. Jake

told him it shouldn't be a problem. Nathaniel nodded and thanked him. He started toward the door but turned before he had gone more than a half-dozen steps. "Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you look in on me from time to time?" adding, "Wherever I happen to be?"

"Of course."

"I'd like that."

"You got it."

"Thanks," Nathaniel finished and skated across the greasy floor of the bar. He tapped the bar and waved as he passed the bartender, who said, "Thanks, Nathaniel. Hope to see y'again soon."

Then Nathaniel was gone, and Jake watched for him to pass by the window. He didn't. Looking down at the table then back at the window, Jake pulled out his wallet and threw a ten dollar bill between the unfinished beers and strode toward the door.

It had been easy for Nathaniel to forget that he had once wandered these streets aimlessly, and the distance of a New York city block, which struck him as much longer than he remembered, superimposed his feeling of the past over the discomfort of the present. He had crossed Washington Square Park, which never looked quite right except in the Spring and Summer when it was filled with people. He had paused beneath the Washington Arch and stared up 5th Avenue as he used to do often, trying to picture the subtle difference of view that one might have from under the Arc de Triomphe. Now, as he had often done before, he pretended to walk down the Champs-Élysées, trying to lose all sense of being in America as he brushed by New Yorkers. He used to wish that he really was in Paris because America's version seemed a poor imitation. He wished the same now, though he was less concerned with authenticity. He had just never seen it.

His old habits continued to return as he walked uptown. He glanced around at the buildings, never looking all the way to the tops because that might mark him as one who did not know the city. But even that, he

knew, was regional pretension: *Nobody knows this city*, he thought. Each building, rather, each room, was a city of its own, and the larger city outside its walls was only a reflection of what was within. Inside some of these buildings were people doing obscene things, the experience of which led the doer to trust that each window shade hid similar lechery. But in the next building, indeed the next room, might be found a shrine to some long departed lover whose partner had remained faithful even in uneven death. But it was not a city made up concretely of the sinners and the pious; every shade of each might be rubbing up against Nathaniel in the rolling throng. Some faces, it is true, read only of benignity. Other faces, more forcefully wholesome, all but writhed at the cheeks for all the murky thoughts beneath. Yet there were others away from whom none would be blamed for walking, but who might walk so strangely, themselves, for fear of disturbing even the slightest bit of life.

As in place, so in time. While a moment held for one citizen the realization of untold dreams, another member of the insulated society watched an entire lifetime of tribulation congeal, as if instantly, into a reality snapping failure. Just as a business person, high in a conference room, gathered up the articles of his flawless presentation, a hooker gathered up her clothes. He reached out to shake hands; she reached out for wrinkled bills — each gathering the same thing, really, with the gestures: currency. In this very same city such different lives were lived as the fairy-tale one of the stars and the nightmare horrors of the homeless. For the first, night meant another social gathering, replete with wine, hors d'oeuvres, and habillements so costly that some poor families could live an entire generation through for the same amount. For the second, night, this time of year, meant another trial to survive, replete with frostbite, starvation, and murder. Though the wealthy, educated group might argue that there is less difference than there might seem between these experiences of the night by adding the word *social* to the word *existence* without diminishing the import of the latter, Nathaniel knew the truth. He shivered because of the cold and because he knew that the second group had become so resigned to their position that they nearly justified for themselves the wasteful lives of the stars

and better-offs with the fantasies that those lives made so much easier for the have-nots to have.

For Nathaniel, the coming of the city night, as it was coming now, did nothing more nor less than remind him that he was wandering aimlessly, with no clear goal nor sense of process. The windows began to darken around him, and it occurred to him suddenly that behind some of them there had to be dead bodies. With all of the rooms and all of the people, there simply had to be. He wondered how many there were undiscovered in the city. Probably more than one per street; perhaps one per building. Add to that the dead in the cracks and in the subway and in the rivers and in the sewers and in the parks and in their cars and in the cement and in the walls and in the air. "They're all dead," Nathaniel concluded.

He caught a quick movement out of the corner of his eye that, for some reason, stood out among all of the busting movements of the city evening. He walked on, but got the feeling again. A dark car passed by. Knowing that it was highly unlikely, Nathaniel still could not shake the impression that it was the same dark car that had been behind him that very morning over one hundred miles away.

Nathaniel's heart began to rap more loudly inside his chest as the car slowed, but when it moved on, Nathaniel realized that it had only been traffic that had slowed it. He laughed at himself, trying not to worry that he was going crazy. A car horn startled him, and he looked up at a sports car that had stopped beside him blocking traffic. More horns sounded until the racket bounced from cement wall to cement wall up into the atmosphere.

Nick stuck his head out of the sports car's window and shouted for him to get in.

It occurred to Nathaniel that, if it were not his life but a book or a movie, this sequence of events would seem too unlikely to be plausible. He stepped tentatively off the curb. "How did you find me, Nick?"

Nick responded, "There are so many people looking for you that you're easy to find. Get in."

The shouts and horns, which blended together in one monotonous

cry, seemed to be urging Nathaniel to do as he had been told. He glanced up and down the street. It was getting dark. He walked around the car and got in, and they headed back downtown.

Both men remained quiet for a moment, as if to give the built up traffic time to loosen, and it was Nathaniel who spoke first, “So what do *you* want?”

Looking at him with slight bemusement, Nick replied, “It sounds as if you’ve had a surfeit of surprise requests of late.”

Nathaniel didn’t respond, he just looked into Nick’s face.

Nick wet his lips, “Well I don’t want anything, Nathaniel. I’m only worried about you. A man like you can’t be wandering around the streets of New York.”

“What do you mean a man like me?”

Gesturing toward the car’s front window and the Arch beyond, Nick said, “Hold that thought. Where do you want to go?”

“I was going to my publisher’s.”

“Alright, then. I’ll have to drive around the park.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Of course.”

Nathaniel was confused; he felt as if, in his life, everybody had been privy to the script but him. “How?”

“Oh never mind,” Nick comforted with a boyish secretiveness. “As I said, you’re really not that hard to find.”

“Yeah, I know,” Nathaniel said. “A man like me...”

He left the sentence open and looked through the glass as the car circumnavigated the park. Then he continued, “So what do you mean by that?”

At first laughing with measured incredulity, Nick told him, “You really don’t understand the ripples you’ve caused, do you?”

“Ripples?”

“Of course. You’re the all things to all people guy.”

Absently, Nathaniel spoke to himself, “But I thought I had been so clear.”

“You had,” Nick spoke, having overheard the more or less private

comment. “But that doesn’t matter. Strange to say, but it almost seems as if the more clear and honest one is, the more misunderstood one will be. I guess nobody believes that anybody is really as they seem. People who want a hero will find one; people who want a villain will find that.”

Something in Nick’s voice made Nathaniel ask, “So what do you want?”

With a chuckle, Nick responded, “I just want to help.”

“How?”

Now Nick checked his review mirror and turned toward Nathaniel, like a character in a movie who drives for miles without looking at the road once, and got down to business, “Nathaniel, you’re not going to believe that I’ve got your best interests in mind, especially if you’ve spoken to who I think you’ve spoken to, but I’ve got some” pause “friends who’re used to dealing with people in your situation.”

“Like the ‘friends’ who threw you out of the car when you first came to the Pequod?”

With a laugh that Nathaniel thought was much too hearty for the subject matter, Nick said, “No, no. I don’t associate with *them* any more.” Then with sudden seriousness, “This is a different kind of scene. All you’d have to do is be in a couple of pictures and that sort of thing, and you’re in with a powerful group of people.”

“So what’s in it for you?”

Nick shook his head with a salesman’s best sincere frown, “I’m not going to lie to you, Nathaniel, I have a vested interest in you, as it happens. But it may not be like you think. There’s no money involved... directly... you’ll just be helping some of my pieces to come together.”

Nathaniel placed his elbow against the armrest on the door and rubbed his forehead.

“You don’t have to give me an answer now, you know. It’s just something to think about. What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

“I said, ‘No,’” he repeated himself more loudly, “I don’t need to think about anything. I’m not interested in your offer or any offer that you or anybody else could make. I’m going to take my book off the market; I’m going to go back to Rhode Island and convince my fiancé

that I'm still the same man that I've been; and we're going to get back to our lives. I don't want this. I never did, or if I did, it was because I didn't know what the hell I really wanted."

"Nathaniel..."

"I said 'No,' Nick!"

Nick motioned graciously around them. "We're here," he said. The car had stopped.

"Where?" angrily.

"At your publisher's office."

"Oh," Nathaniel said, somewhat ashamed.

"Are you sure that you want to get out in this rain?"

Nathaniel raised his head. It had started to drizzle. He hadn't noticed. His mind drifted.

"... a place where you can stay. They're friends of mine." He heard Nick talking.

"No," Nathaniel spoke himself as if out of a dream, "I'll be fine. Thanks for the ride. And," pause, "sorry."

As Nathaniel stepped out of the car, he heard Nick call out from behind him, "Not a problem. I'm mostly trying to help you, and if you don't need it... Hey! Even better! But Nathaniel..."

Nathaniel bent down to look into the car. For some reason he gave himself the impression of a hooker. "What?"

"If you should change your mind..."

Interrupting sarcastically, "I know, I know, I'll find you."

"Actually, I think it'd be easier for me to find you."

That said with a mysterious smile, Nick leaned across the car and pulled the car door closed and drove away.

If you're going to find me, how will you know that I've changed my mind, Nathaniel thought to himself. He thought he could guess what Nick would have said if he hadn't sped away so quickly.

Nathaniel braced his palm against a tree as he paused to think. The tree was gnarled and dead: a city tree. The rain was coming down a little harder now. Freezing rain. Painful rain.

Noticing only fleetingly that a single hair was sticking across his

forehead, Nathaniel looked across the street at what was apparently his publisher's building for the first time.

With the hand that had been pressed against the wet tree, Nathaniel ran his fingers through his hair. He looked at the tree, and the rain water that ran down his cheeks felt like tears. Nature struggling and breaking through the floor of the city depressed him, though he knew that it had been put there, or left there, to evoke the opposite emotion. But Nathaniel had never had the ability to force himself to feel as he knew he was supposed to, or even as he wanted to. He realized this about himself, and that it was especially true during a time of year that reeks of death anyway.

"This tree was put here for me," he said quietly out loud, speaking broadly though he wasn't aware that he had spoken. "But I can't fall for it." He looked at the concrete around him. "Any magic that this tree has is only there because it is not that which is around it. It dies in the Winter and is cold, yes, but it is still not as cold as the concrete death in which it is buried."

Realizing first that he had been speaking, as if reciting by rote the words from some play that had sunken into his memory, and second that he had raised his voice, he searched for the audience that he hoped wasn't there. He saw no one but a corpulent figure passing through the revolving door of the publisher's building. "This tree has at least the warmth of a promise," Nathaniel whispered to no applause.

The large man was now outside and glancing nervously up and down the street while he tried to pull his collar entirely over his head. His eyes finally came to rest on Nathaniel, and, squinting, they dragged his head forward. Similarly, Nathaniel looked more intently at the man, feeling, even from the distance, as if the man's face was familiar. Abruptly, the man broke the inquisitive mutual stare, shuffled his collar up to his ears and set off at a rapid pace down the street.

Something in his stride struck Nathaniel as familiar. "Can't be," he told himself.

With no pretense at disguise, Nathaniel scurried down his own side

of the street craning his neck so that his eyes might better peer at the figure across the street, who accelerated his pace correspondingly to his nervous twitches and glances at Nathaniel.

“Impossible,” Nathaniel rasped against the cold air that struggled into his mouth and nose between each heavy breath. “Martin!” he called out.

The figure froze, as if hoping to blend in with his inert surroundings and be passed over. There was no other motion around them. Nathaniel repeated his call and started across the street. Martin’s feet shuffled as if he were tempted to take flight but hadn’t the willpower.

Nathaniel hopped up on the curb, and asked, “What are you running for?”

Looking away as he spoke, Martin replied, “Wha... oh... I... it’s raining.”

“So it is.” Nathaniel raised his cheek to the drizzle. He knew that there was more to it. “So did you guys get together and plan this all, or what?” he pushed.

“What do you mean?” Martin shuffled his feet.

“I mean that already today I’ve ‘bumped into’ Jake, Nick, and now you. It just all seems a little too coincidental.”

Martin’s answer was terse and sincere, “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

A little taken aback by Martin’s uncharacteristic use of a swear word, Nathaniel’s line of thought fluttered, and he mumbled, “So I guess it’s just coincidence.”

“I guess so.”

As if the atmosphere had soured around them, Nathaniel found that he had nothing to say. He wanted, of course, to ask Martin what was going on, but, surreally, couldn’t be sure that it was Martin to whom he was speaking. “Is everything alright?” he finally settled on asking.

“Yes, fine,” was the response.

Answering a question that he had anticipated, but that had not been asked, Nathaniel said, “You’ve just never taken this tone with me before is all.”

With a growing look of impatience on his large red face, Martin explained that, “Well I guess I didn’t know you well enough then to take this tone.”

“Martin, you’ve known me for years.”

“No, apparently I haven’t. I didn’t know how dangerous you are.”

“Dangerous? Martin, I...”

“Yes, dangerous. And, and even if you aren’t a dangerous man, you’re a dangerous presence. I ran because I don’t want to be seen with you; there’s no telling what people would think.”

“Martin, I don’t understand. All I did was write an essay, now Nick’s going out of his way to be seen with me and you’re going out of your way to not be seen with me.”

“I’m not going out of my way,” Martin told him, as if to downplay Nathaniel’s significance to him even in a negative sense, adding, “and I’m not surprised that Nick contacted you. You people can always tell your own kind.”

“We people?”

“Yes. I haven’t even read your book, but I can see it in you. I always could, and I’m surprised that I never acted on it. You: trouble makers, criminals, subversives.”

Nathaniel didn’t know what to say. He looked bewildered.

“Well,” Martin announced, “I can’t afford to stand here in the rain with you any longer.”

Then, without so much as a parting glance, he began walking down the street. He had only gotten a few steps when Nathaniel called out after him:

“Martin. What were you doing in my publisher’s building?”

Stopping and turning slowly to reveal a face, usually confused and slightly dim, that roiled with disgust. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’ve been trying to get them to publish my work for years. I knew I recognized that... woman... when she came to the house this summer. I was hoping, now that I know her, that she might give me a chance. But your little chippy just averted her eyes as if I were oleaginous.”

Nathaniel chuckled to himself. “Martin,” he began, “do you know

what ‘oleaginous’ means?”

“Yes, in fact, as a writer, I do. It means unctuous, or smelly.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“I may have never noticed it while I was on top of it, but you’ve been awfully inconsiderate to me over these years; always thinking that you’re so much smarter than I. Yeah,” Martin went on, “you may have a book, and I may not, but I guess they don’t want real literature anymore. Only subversives get published nowadays.”

With that, Martin turned and continued to walk away. Nathaniel couldn’t understand how the sequences of this day, and all of the recent days, had brought him to his current state of disconnected melancholy. He was almost beginning to feel apathetic about his book and baneful fame. He was not so disordered that he didn’t feel a little saddened to see a long-time acquaintance walk away from him into a stormy night, regardless of any lack of true affection between them. He called out to Martin, who turned, his face divulging a slight, but poorly hidden, hopefulness.

Nathaniel just lifted his arms by his sides and shrugged.

He could almost hear a feigned “Harumph” as Martin turned again and walked, this time until he disappeared around a corner.

The rotating glass door wouldn’t budge, so Nathaniel assumed that the building was closed. Still, he lingered for a while, looking through the glass with the idea that he might see Sybil passing by inside. One by one the lights in the building went out, dismissing the outside world bit by bit, and, with his impatience increasing with time, Nathaniel began to puzzle out what he would do all night. Surprisingly, in a city of so many people doing so many things at so many places, he could not think of a single place to go. It wasn’t his home anymore, and he would be a stranger no matter where he went now. Although, he did fancy that he need do no more than step toward the street, and somebody that he knew, or rather, who knew him, would appear.

Having no reason to turn his steps in any particular direction, Nathaniel decided that a few paces toward the street would be just as

good as any other; thus he afforded himself a justification for testing his theory. He reached the curb and looked up and down the dark street but saw nothing but the dim shadow of a pedestrian and the occasional car driving past on an intersecting avenue. No car screeched to a stop before him on the road, nor did any doors open to reveal a faintly familiar face. Nathaniel laughed at himself for expecting it, and his laughter bounded down the empty street and rebounded from wall to wall, playing its temporary role as the city noise of the moment, seeking any cracks or ears that might be disoriented by a true silence. Nathaniel listened as the echo of his laughter faded; particularly, he waited for the dead silence that is only disturbing where it is rare. But the racket of a loose exhaust pipe filled in the silence before there was truly a silence to be filled, and Nathaniel listened to the rattle, playing the familiar game of trying to figure out from whence the sound was coming. It seemed to come from all around, as if every car in New York were dragging its tail. Then that sound faded, and Nathaniel waited expectantly for the noise that would take up the call. This next sound swelled up from indistinguishable static in the air to the distinctive roll of rubber tires over pavement. A large, dark car stopped at the curb beside Nathaniel. He couldn't laugh now; he couldn't understand what was happening enough to laugh at it. The rear door of the car swung out over the sidewalk.

Nathaniel felt he knew whose legs would swing out of the car, and the face that emerged from the gloom inside the car into the dim light of a street lamp confirmed his prediction. It was, of course, Huck.

"Hello, Huck," Nathaniel said, beyond surprise or the need to make a half-humorous inquiry.

"Nate." Huck answered the salutation, flapping open an umbrella.

"So what do *you* want? Or do you want to help me, too?"

Huck's lips pursed and his brow furled in an expression that bespoke but little wonder. Mostly the look that Huck offered to Nathaniel now was that of a man who may not know the specifics of another's situation but knows the larger issues at hand and feels as if it has been laid disagreeably upon himself to tie it all together. He seemed visibly to consider several phrases, then spoke with only a hint of a southern accent,

“Listen, Nathaniel, I don’t know exactly what you’ve experienced lately, but I can see in your face that you’re not sure what to trust anymore. I can only say that it may not be too late to salvage some semblance of reality if you trust me now to help you.”

Reluctant to trust anybody but not wanting to relinquish his last hold on memory by believing that he could not trust such a long-time friend as Huck, Nathaniel felt his mind frozen in a fluctuating circle of too many possible realities because none was any more believable. A tear of frustration moistened the corner of his right eye. “Huck, I...” Nathaniel began to plead then sat down hard on the cold wet sidewalk.

Huck was beside him on the filthy pavement in a breath without thought to the trousers of his expensive suit, his arm around his friend’s shoulders and the umbrella’s protection split between them. “I know you must feel like you’re drowning, Nate, and that there’s not a gasp of air in all the world, but you have to force yourself to realize that reality’s only a plunge away in the right direction.”

Nathaniel opened his eyes and looked up at Huck. “Your accent,” was all he could muster himself to say.

Almost with a chuckle, Huck told him, “Yes, it’s not as strong as I chose to make it when I was playing a part in our vacation from life.”

“You never could seem to settle on one dialect.”

“No, I guess not. Maybe I’m just not that good of an actor. You had to realize that it was a game among us.”

“Of course. I was playing my own role, too.”

“Exactly. But it’s not to say that it wasn’t a strangely real game. Life’s exactly like that, only maybe not so obvious. That’s what you have to force yourself to realize.”

“You’re the fourth one I’ve seen today, and none of it seems to have anything to do with me,” Nathaniel said, partly in defense of his confused state and partly in explanation of his feeling a part of a fiction, but mostly because he still wanted some explanation that would put the pieces of the world back in place for him.

“Of course none of it has anything to do with you,” Huck responded, perhaps not intentionally avoiding Nathaniel’s real question. Even so,

his voice was absorbed by Nathaniel as one feels comforted by the steady voice of a narrator. “Everybody’s living their own story, and they’re picking roles for themselves and for everybody else. Surely you understand all that; why else would you have made all those rules of the house? But now the fact that you’re playing a big role in a lot of different stories isn’t as under control for you as it used to be. This isn’t a world of fiction that you can understand because you’ve read all the right books; it’s the real world, and all you have any control over is the size of the role that you play for somebody else, not what that role is, at least not in any predictable, usable way.”

Still, Nathaniel pushed for something concrete, “It couldn’t all be coincidence.”

“Oh yes, it can be, and it is. I don’t know who all you’ve seen today, but because I know I’m not involved, I can tell you that most of it isn’t really about you, Nathaniel. You’re just crossing the river in a bad current. Perhaps the only thing that *is* about you is my wanting to give you an opportunity to get out before you’re too far from the shore. You may not be able to jump out of it in one leap and go back to your life, but you can let it blow over and salvage what you can.”

Nathaniel felt as if Huck had reached some kind of point to which he had been building, and he felt suddenly as if he didn’t have a clue what was going on but that there was sense to be made of it all. “What do you know?” he asked.

An indistinct sound from down the street stopped Huck before he had made an answer. He looked over Nathaniel down the dark street. “Why don’t we continue this in my car. It’s raining,” he explained.

Before he could protest, indeed, before he could do more than utter the first syllable of a question, Nathaniel found himself whisked through the rear door of Huck’s limousine. The car pulled away from the curb.

“What’s going on, Huck?” Nathaniel asked, looking around the interior of the car and noticing nothing distinctive. The inside of the car yielded nothing extraordinary to his glance, just the faint sense of conspiracy that the barely discernible shape of the driver’s head through a closed tinted glass partition helped Nathaniel to contrive in his imagination.

Huck settled back in his seat, having just finished a search of the darkness outside the car. “I have to tell you, Nate, that I don’t exactly know what’s going on.” He noticed Nathaniel’s suspicious glances at the driver, and stated, “Despite the atmosphere of my car, I’m no more involved in activities of intrigue than one at my, let’s say, social elevation must always be. I’m just a business man, and to be frank, the things that I’ve been hearing and seeing in relation to you leave me feeling a little disoriented and unreal myself.”

“Why? What have you seen and heard?” Nathaniel asked, his eyes, desperate to see logic, firmly settled on Huck now.

With a nervously humored exhalation of air through his nose that bespoke both disbelief in his own position and skepticism as to the likelihood of somebody else believing him, Huck told him, “To be honest, nothing concrete. Just whispers and hints, really. As I said, I’m not a spy or an agent or anything like that. I’m just a man in a position to overhear conversations between people who are always thinking more and worse than they say.”

If he hadn’t been able to read so much uncharacteristic nervousness in Huck’s disposition, Nathaniel may have been inclined to be frustrated with the vagueness of his answer. As it was, he only asked, “What have you heard?”

Shifting a little in his seat, Huck told him, “Your book caused a little stir in my world when it was first released, but only enough, as it seemed, to allow me to amuse myself with how little all of my acquaintances understood what you were saying. After Holden’s little piece on you...”

“You knew that Holden wrote that?”

“Certainly.” Nathaniel seemed relieved, though he wasn’t quite sure why. Huck went on, “Once a vague controversy began to surround your name, and therefore your book, people took another look at it and saw the potential to benefit themselves by making you, well, I guess it could be called ‘an inverse martyr.’ What I’m saying is that they’ll make an example of you, if they can.”

“An example of what?”

“Whatever they don’t want people to admire.”

Again Nathaniel felt the need for more specific answers, but this time he suspected that there may not *be* a more specific answer, even beyond what Huck himself might know. “I could have written anything or nothing in that book.”

“Perhaps,” Huck conceded. “The problem is that you wrote it so well.”

Nathaniel laughed despite himself. “If only we could go back in time a hundred years or so, and I could be a cobbler or something.”

With his own restrained laugh, Huck agreed that he would love such a chance, as well. “I guess this is where I come in,” he said. “I want to help you get out of it.”

“How?”

Shaking his head slightly, Huck told Nathaniel, “The only thing I can think of is for you to disappear. I could set you up anywhere you’d like to go.”

Nathaniel nodded, “I was thinking of that on my way into the city today.” He looked out the window, and Huck let him think. Nathaniel brought his focus back into the car. He looked resigned to something. “I guess it’s settled, then. Will you come with me to Rhode Island to help me persuade my fiancé that it has to be done?”

His hands falling into his lap, Huck looked at Nathaniel sympathetically. Huck watched as Nathaniel realized that he had already considered this and understood the conclusion. Nonetheless, Huck spoke the judgment, “I don’t think that’s an option. I’ve looked into it, believe me, and I think you’ll agree that she has too many connections to her life to disappear easily.”

“She’d do it for me,” Nathaniel pleaded.

“Maybe she would, but would it be fair to her to ask? She loves you, I’m sure, so there’s hope that you’ll be able to explain it all to her later.”

“When?” Nathaniel interjected.

Huck paused at the tinge of desperation in Nathaniel’s voice. He realized that the same thing that made it possible for Nathaniel, by himself,

to disappear would make it next to impossible for him to do it alone: he had only one connection to life. “I’m sorry, Nathaniel. I wish I had the power to make it all go away for you, but I don’t. I can only tell you what I think is coming and help you step out of the way. As I said, you have to let it pass over, which it will do, and then you can salvage what you can. It won’t be forever. Hell, people are so fickle these days that it may not be more than a couple of months.”

“And then what?” Nathaniel all but whispered.

“Excuse me?” asked Huck. He hadn’t heard.

Lifting his head to look Huck in the eyes, Nathaniel repeated himself, “Then what do I do?”

“Well, I guess you start putting your life back together.”

“But what do I live for?”

Not sure how to respond, Huck returned a question, “What did you live for before all this?”

Nathaniel dropped his head. Huck waited and tried to follow Nathaniel’s thoughts. Actually, Huck, being as practical as he was, couldn’t really understand what was tying Nathaniel up so. Nathaniel, after all, had made it a point for many years to disappear from his life for several months each year. Why would a man who made a habit of stepping away from reality, returning year after year to his life and finding it no less meaningful for his absence, worry about doing so once more? In fact, if Huck’s own experience were any testimony, Nathaniel ought to feel as if he would come back to his life with fresh eyes. Huck knew there was something he wasn’t grasping.

Before Huck could give the matter any more thought, Nathaniel lifted his head and spoke so quietly that Huck had to lean toward him to hear. “OK. You win.”

“Pardon?”

Nathaniel repeated himself and nearly shouted, but not at Huck, rather it seemed as if he were speaking to the city that blurred past beyond the car window, “You win!”

Huck looked confused, “What do you mean?”

“I mean you win. Or they do. Or whoever. But certainly not me.

I'm not the winner here.”

“Nathaniel, I'm missing your...”

“Don't you see, Huck? I see now. It's all clear. You're right, it has nothing to do with me. I'm just an example. I pushed too hard and I'm stuck into two choices now: it's either resign the game or lose my queen...”

“That's not necessarily true.”

Nathaniel went on with his sentence as if speaking to somebody other than Huck. Huck felt even more as if he weren't grasping the real reason for Nathaniel's reaction.

“...and then be chased around the board on the endless brink of checkmate until the world gets sick of me and finally cuts me off. So you win,” Nathaniel said, again not to Huck. “I resign. So I'll make my choice. I'll go home. I'll do my work for the company — not my little company,” he explained to Huck, “but the big conglomerate made up of all the little companies and all the littler people — and I'll find meaning in my work by forcing myself to do more of it and more of it and in my family, my soon to be wife, 'cause now that I understand we won't have this distance between us anymore, and my future children, and I'll give them... get them... no, I'll buy them everything that young families need, like a little house with a mortgage and a lawn that I can mow and buy chemicals for, and a microwave to heat my cold fast food while I sip my brand name soda, or better yet, my brand name beer, whichever has the better commercials that month...”

“Nathaniel. Are you alright?”

“...so that I can forget a little and make myself just dumb enough to stare at the television and the shows of people that I can care about instead of myself while I watch the commercials and figure out what to want, want, want. Then I'll buy the latest exercise equipment, 'cause now I'm getting fat, and I'll even buy designer hiking boots to better feel like I'm experiencing nature. And I'll keep buying, but not so much that I can't pay for an education for my children and get them the best damn diploma that money can buy and let them learn how to pretend, like all the greatest minds of our time, without realizing that they're pretending

and how to drink beer and spend money and spend more money than they've got."

Nathaniel stopped ranting for a moment, a slightly crazed look of mixed-up revelation skirting across his face, and Huck was trying to figure out what to say or do when Nathaniel started up again:

"I've got it! That's it! This isn't happening because I wrote a subversive book, or even a brilliant one. It's because I stopped using my credit cards, isn't it?"

He looked at Huck, who just looked blankly back.

"I don't have to disappear, Huck. I have to do just the opposite. My name has to start popping up on people's computers as a spender. So I'll use it. I swear. First thing I'll do when I get home is buy Jen some roses and candy. And a greeting card that says something pithy like," he thought for a quick moment, just enough time, really, to think of two words that rhymed, "like, 'Sorry is so hard to say, that's why I put it off until today.' And we'll make up and have that family, and I'll take out a loan to buy a sport utility vehicle so we can put on our designer hiking boots and pretend to be outdoorsy and go out in the mountains to picnic or to ski. Yes, we'll go to some ski lodge in Vermont and rent all kinds of garbage just to fall down in the fake snow. And I'll make sure that one of us breaks a limb so we can occupy the doctors and the insurance people and we'll all have an extra Tylenol just to celebrate. And all the time, from morning until night, we'll be watching television, or listening to the same damn song over and over and over on the radio, or jumping around the Internet looking for specious trivia or virtual shopping experiences, or looking through magazines and pretending to read the one sentence reports, but really ogling the half-naked people in the full page advertisements for cigarettes. And all the time we'll stare at the advertisements, everywhere, on the street and the television and the radio and everywhere and we won't think. I promise. I, myself, will especially force myself to not think."

He stopped and looked at Huck. Huck was surprised to find that Nathaniel could not have looked more sane. But there was a sadness in his eyes that made Huck wonder if Nathaniel wasn't just being mordant.

“Don’t you see, Huck? I don’t have to disappear. I just have to go back to my life and stop thinking. Because when I start to think I see how ugly and vicious and greedy the world is. So I won’t think. I promise, Huck; I promise not to think.”

Not knowing exactly what to say, Huck soothingly spoke a resolution that he didn’t think had changed, or could change, no matter what revelation Nathaniel might have, “I don’t think you have that option anymore.”

Nathaniel frowned. Then laughed. “You’re right. I can’t do that. I never could.” He laughed again, laughing until he felt the need for more air to gasp in in order to laugh it out, so he flung open the car door and rolled out. Luckily the car had been slowing for a traffic light.

When Nathaniel got to his feet, he saw Huck’s head emerging from the car.

“What are you doing?” Huck shouted.

Nathaniel saw the faces turning, with disguised interest, toward him. “Don’t you see?” he yelled, not only to Huck, “We *can* go back. We just can’t go forward!”

Then, before Huck had managed to get both feet on the blacktop, Nathaniel sprinted around a corner and was gone.

Nathaniel wasn’t sure where he was running to, or, for that matter, what he was running from, but his sprint decreased, as the rain was decreasing, toward a quick walk with each city block. Whether the pace of his mind, ever more meandering as the original surge of perplexity faded into consideration, caused his feet to slow or the more rational pace of his legs gave his thoughts wider breadth, he began to think, as he walked through the thickening crowd of people around him, of what he should do.

Around him, he knew, were thousands of lives, each with its own concerns. What’s more, on the faces of the vast majority, Nathaniel could not see a trace of recognition, even on those that dared to look at him. *It is a huge and populated world, he thought. There must be somewhere that I can go.*

Though he didn't fear that Huck would chase him, he suddenly realized that, as one of the myriad different faces in the street, each with its own hue and texture, he was indistinguishable. Perhaps, he mused, were he of a mind to lower his eyes in accord with the unwritten, pervasive dictum, he could actually disappear. For as long as he could keep his head down and keep himself quiet and acting only along the direct middle line of behavior, he might even be able to disappear from himself; surely, then, could he give all of those who would use him, not even his self but just his name, the slip. After all, if he ceased to be the man behind his name, Nathaniel Ariss, the Nathaniel Ariss that seemed to be in such a bind, would no longer exist. With each person who harshly grazed his shoulder, he might be brushing arms with an entirely different person of the same name. Similarly, he noted faces that, as he fancied, matched his to lengths just shy of exactness, yet only *his* facial features disguised his particular self. Why, if people could share names *or* features and still be different people, could he not combine the two and become another person, though one with the same name *and* face?

But, it came to him as he passed a dusky little book store, this was the exact problem that he now faced: he could not have been less akin to the boy that Holden had unearthed, but the world would not acknowledge him as somebody else. Now that this particular avenue of casuistry had been cut off, he realized that he would be unable to turn his back on himself — it just wouldn't be, well... him. He chuckled, not out of desperation or nervousness, as had been increasingly the case with his laughter, but out of sincere amusement with the silliness of his largely semantic conundrum. But this simple trick of words helped him to move toward a new perspective.

"The way out of my predicament," he spoke out loud, disregarding the sidelong glances around him, "isn't to run from the past; it's to slow down in the present."

He stopped in place, feeling, rather than hearing, the discontented grunts around him at his doing so. In this huge and populated world, with all its pursuant options, the easiest way to escape problems might truly be to ignore them, without even allowing the problems the weight

of an active dismissal. He would simply walk right past them as if they weren't there. Strength, real gargantuan physical strength wasn't seen in the being who could buffet a path through the crowd, but in the being that was unaware of the crowd, so why could the same not be true of more mental obstacles? He wouldn't battle with the world to reclaim his life, he would simply reclaim it.

A shadow skirting across his nose caused Nathaniel to look up, and a quick gust of cold air curled around his ears and hooked into his nostrils. Likewise, his eyes were assaulted by the cold, mechanical light of neon and spotlights and headlights jumbled together in the whole artificial bonfire of Times Square.

Nathaniel's first thought was to turn his steps away so that his mind might not be distracted by the harsh cacophony of material life. But he stood his ground, forcing himself to acknowledge that he must, after all his theorizing, deal in the world of which this spot was so appropriate an allegory. He glared at the bright lights, moving and stationary, the flashing, informationless proponents of barely distinguishable products — identified not by value or even use, but by name. He watched a bus speed past, no longer devoted to advertising by means only of a side-panel, but splashed entirely with colors in the name of some scarcely decipherable service. He forced himself to stare at the torn posters of adulterated beauty.

Then he turned his eyes to the people around him. He watched all the familiar images of New York pass him by: from the fur bedecked trophy wives of lascivious old men to other old men who were bedraggled in filth; from the pompous police officers to the cocky hoodlums; from the dealers to the beggars. He spotted a stairwell across the way that he knew would bring him into the intestines of the city.

Let me make of this a symbolic act, he thought. Just as he had been resolving to stride through his trials as if they were but vague clouds that wafted across the sky of his private world, he would slip through the crowd and the traffic. Just as he must first lower himself in his plans, so, too, would he descend into the subway. From there, his symbol and his life would blend together over the course of time. His actions

would become less symbolic and more effectual. He decided now what he would do: once he emerged from the bowels of the city downtown, he would reclaim his car and return to Rhode Island. He would persuade Jen to leave with him, less with excuses than before and more with vows. Together, they would head out for the Pequod, where they would weather the Winter and emerge new people. The somewhat harsher living would bind them together. They would share the welcome birth of Spring and know each other for their selves rather than their names, abilities, or accomplishments. Then they would return to the world, married, now, in reality if not in fact. By Summer the world would have forgotten him, and he could begin rebuilding his life, with more strength this time because he would be sharing the labor and rewards with someone who would know not just who he was but who he had been and have hopes of who they were to become together.

With this resolution, Nathaniel plunged through the bodies that flooded the sidewalk around him and marched across the street, unthreatened by the racing traffic that seemed, miraculously, to sway its own course for his sake. In the space of a breath, and not a bit disheveled, Nathaniel hopped onto the concrete island in the midst of the pandemonium. Even the light around him seemed to have changed, even the smells. This was not the same world that had watched the sun disappear to the West. This world had hope. Nathaniel looked up triumphantly.

Within a mass of passing pedestrians, Nathaniel thought he saw a familiar face, but he was not unsettled, as he had been several times earlier, by the strange coincidence that suggested some esoteric and possibly cryptic scheme. In fact, he was anxious to share his moment of resolution.

“Alex!” he called out.

But his call had apparently not been necessary; Alex had already spotted him and was walking toward him. Nathaniel held out his hand and smiled. This is how he would defeat the world, with a welcome. Alex reached out his own hand, and Nathaniel stepped toward him to shake it but saw that the spot into which he would put his hand was

occupied by what looked to be a long shard of glass. Before he could withdraw his greeting, Nathaniel felt the sharp pain that explained the blood that gushed from his palm where Alex had pressed the glass into it.

Nathaniel looked into Alex's face, and Alex smiled at him coyly. Nathaniel pressed his bleeding hand with a corner of his jacket, looked at Alex again, and in a puzzling whisper asked, "Why?"

The answer came in a slightly accented near-kiss whisper in his ear: "I'm not an American."

Alex stepped back, and Nathaniel looked toward his hand as at something unreal.

He looked down at his wound and the sanguine liquid that splattered instant stains on the filthy, discolored, and splotchy pavement. When he looked up, Alex had disappeared. Nathaniel was alone in that indistinguishable crowd, looking ambiguously relieved or disappointed but, without a doubt to anyone who saw him, dejectedly unheroic.

It seems as if the neon lights ought to warm the floor of the city, where the shade of the tall buildings is not impenetrable, but the wind that whips through the channels of the streets makes the air bitter cold. The people shuffle past each other with nary a glance. Some meander aimlessly, lost as they are and anonymous in the mass of bodies that might be pungent were it not so cold. Others run. Whether to or away appears to make no difference, they rebound off the meanderers and the strollers. Amazingly none of these hustlers collide with one another, only with those who choose a slower pace. A faceless man on a bicycle whips through the racing cars and hops the curb onto the sidewalk, nearly rolling over an old man who is propped up against a mesh wire garbage can. His can jingles, but he doesn't notice the bicyclist.

Nor does he notice the horns nor the grumbling engines that spit their smoke through growling exhaust pipes. He has ceased, it seems, to hear these sounds, or see the steam that rises from the sewers and the manholes. He still smells the decay, though, despite the cold. It is in his nostrils, more a memory than a sense.

A young boy crouches beside the road, glancing up and down the street at the rushing cars. He sees an opening and sprints across the street. Some might say that he barely makes it, but he laughs with the exhilaration. He scurries off toward an unknown destination.

But the boy is depressing, even as he adds a sparkle to the mass of duplicate citizens. Please, let us away, for it is too much to think of getting caught up in these other plotless stories. Soon, we hope, we might cross the river and return to our brook, and let us see if we might persuade Nathaniel to raise his eyes from the cold filthy floor and to leave with us.

Chapter 20

“It’s a dreadful smell, this one of smoldering leather and parchment, though at first it is just a blasphemous curl, seeping through the books and entangling itself in the disembodied thought of smoke betwixt the arms of the willow as if in mocking emulation of the leaves that have long been missing. Then, as if the books are being taken up one by one from their pile around the willow’s trunk and their pages crumpled by an invisible hand, the crackling of paper is frightful, like the rattling of old bones in a playground of quiet fantasies. A binding makes an audible pop like a firecracker in a distant barrel, and a single sheet of paper floats into the air, scraping against the bark and sending forth its words in tiny spurts of sparks.

“The crackle begins to churn upon itself until it is a grumble, as if the spirits of the authors of the books are taking up their arguments with strained civility. One must have been stricken with an incendiary rhetorical tool, for his entire volume bursts into flames and brands the works around it. It seems that all of our questions will be answered after millennia of debate and consecrated in a baptism of fire!

“And now it is as if the great minds of all time have come to an agreement and taken up the same enlightened idea in unison, for the grumble has become a roar, and the flames lap at the bottom arms of the tree, covering the illusion of dead nature with the weight of real death in soot. The tree gives the impression of undulation, and the theories of humanity branch out, making the short leap from literature to music, and the strings of the grand piano begin to twang discordantly as they break when strained by this hot earliest of discoveries.

“And the dead flowers and the browned grassy hair of Nature seem compelled to take up the cry, for they carry the conflagration across the ground to the chair and to the shelves. The fire begins to climb the

walls, as it is even now making its way up the middle part of the tree. It curls between branches and banisters alike, and all char and burn and fall to black pieces.

“The conflagration, for it is a conflagration now, scrapes across the roof, sucking air into the courtyard, though the air there is no longer breathable. The flames search the house, tearing down doors if they are closed, for any evidence that has yet to be converted. It finds the beds and the counterpanes, and lavishes especially in the silky awning of Nathaniel’s bed. It claims a shirt that has been carelessly flung across the arm of a chair, and then it claims the chair itself.

“Seeping through the walls, the blaze finds the front hall and pounces on the old, dry floorboards. It frees the old guardian beneath the boards, only to crush his bones into fine powder. It slips beneath the swinging door of the kitchen and rattles about among the pots and pans. It finds little support in the meager stock of firewood, but the kitchen itself is fuel enough to help it melt the silverware around the edges. The kitchen flames rush into the northern hall, perhaps to lay claim to paintings that hang unexpectantly upon the walls, only to find that others of the fire’s tendrils have found them out already and used up what sport there was in tearing the canvases from the frames.

“The whole Pequod fills with smoke and temporary black stains rush along the walls and the floors. Nothing, it seems will be left after this malignant philosophy has consummated its inevitable conclusion, lest it be the cold marble of the ballroom or the antiquated plumbing. And for this, it seems the fire tells the truth of the dead authors’ theory, and all is really one, in the end. And for this reason, I say, nay I cackle, that it is beautiful. See the majesty of my end! Hear the roar of my undoing!

“My God how I burn!”

When the windows of the dining room imploded over his shoulder, forcing him to keep his seat by will rather than impulse, and his beard was ruffled and singed by a burst of heat, John knew that he had done what he had set out to do. No others would convert the Pequod to their

own needs at the expense, each time, of a memory. No more of Nathaniel's manuscripts would be subjected to a worse destruction than the flames that were tearing the words from the pages at that moment.

Still, though, a tear cut its way down John's face, and he sucked it into his mouth with a swig of rum. He turned his head to look at the wooden sign that somebody had hung above the entrance. The message of that, too, would burn away. He looked at the eastern lawn and watched the flow of shadows. A breeze seemed to skitter across it toward the house then change its mind and dissipate in all directions. John watched the trees sway in the distance. He looked toward the hills, his eyes lingering for a moment on one in particular. He laughed.

"The Nonesuch Inn," he said and laughed again. He took a long drink of rum and leaned back on the porch swing.

Coda

Let us away. It is disgusting what men will do. We were wrong to tarry our rest. The pomp! Come now, we must admit it. We must own it. The ostentation of our hopes. To have put off a much needed departure from all these things only for the sake of learning that we were right all along. I am sick with them and I am sick with us.

But then we've always been right; we've always known.

But should we not continue our vigil and watch what comes as the smoke is cleared and listen for the resolution? No, for we have seen every epoch and every symphony end thus: with calamity and crescendo in a final blaze. And the masses and the audiences stand to applaud the end of an era crashing down until the players are revealed in all their homogeneity and the clapping smoulders and peters out until all but one or two have left the hall. We must resolve to sleep, for we may expect no more pleasing show than what dreams provide in the silence.

So to the brook. It is Winter now, and the birds will not disturb us, nor will humanity. Nor, truly, will the brook itself, for it lays before us in frozen turmoil. There is nothing to keep us now from our sleep. Indeed, we've the soothing crackle in the distance of the cleansing fire to lull us now.

True, I know, that Spring, sadly, will come again and bring with it the false hope of a renewed world, though it will still, as always, be buried beneath the Autumnal waste and the dust of time. But if the world might find a new constructed hope, then let us have hope that we will be long gone when it comes. And hope for a better place to go, too.

I fear, though, for all our hopes, false or otherwise, too many of us have little faith. So let us hope, and let those who cannot believe in divine Meaning, in the least, have faith in grand Nothing, simply for

the boon of a difference. No more of the turbulent monotony of faith in faithlessness!

So let us to sleep. We were right all along: this world is not one in which to be awake. To sleep, then, sleep. If Meaning seems too vague and Nothing seems too bleak for faith, have faith then that, at the very least, you will have missed nothing for having slept, for it will all be exactly as it is today if you open your eyes again to this world. Different shades, perhaps a different landscape of images, but the underlying foundation will be the same. The rough shape of the mountains. Nothing will ever truly change.

Were this art, we would be able to resign ourselves to it as such and sleep the eternal night in peace, dreaming sweet dreams of forevermores and never ending lines of progeny, for it would all have been a reverie. Were this art, doctrine would demand that the ending be ambiguous and we could find, for comfort, our own opinions buried and ratified by their interment. But this is life! In life we may end trite and not be concerned with platitudes. This is life, and we may not sleep easy until we have interred the concern itself. And because this is life, we may leave it all with no hope, yet no true despair: with no doubt, yet no surety.

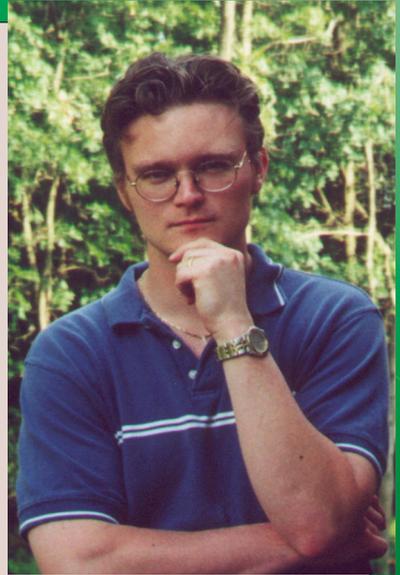
So, finally, I will have done my chatter and let us sleep to the crackle of the fire, and the whisper of the wind through the branches, and the soft plea of the owl asking, "Who?"

And in answer to all we will snore, as if to say, "Nobody," for a cadence can only be followed by silence.

Postscript

Perhaps I am no genius, after all.

“I haven’t seen these hills change,” says Nathaniel Ariss, “even if only because the city hasn’t reached here yet, but I’ve seen me change.” In fact, Nathaniel and his history change with every person who tries to make sense of the man and the meaning behind his life and work. Having gone through some mysterious tribulation in the past, Nathaniel retreated to a house in the Catskill mountains of New York that he calls the Pequod. But the city found Nathaniel in the persons of those who try, at least temporarily, to escape it by visiting the Pequod and taking the names of characters from, for the most part, great American novels.



When Nathaniel decides to return to his life, however, an unexpected success and the pursuant breakdown of the reality that he has been building for himself turn his biography, *A Whispering Through the Branches*, into a comment on society’s lust for ambiguous truths, the mutable nature of America and its history, and the relationships between reality and fiction, desire and perception, and a character and the author who created him.

A Whispering Through the Branches is Justin Katz’s first novel and the first movement of his *Symphony Without Music*.

Cover design by Justin Katz

Timshel Literature

P.O. Box 751

Portsmouth, RI 02871

www.timshelarts.com