

TRIPTYCH  
(THREE NOVELLAS)

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts

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by  
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To those valiant souls who have taken the roller coaster ride with me from inspiration to boredom and back again, I humbly offer this collection in partial payment of the debt I owe.

## FOREWORD

The stories in this collection contain characters and events that are the creations of my own imagination. But I would like to gratefully acknowledge the kind assistance and direction of Mr. Sylvan N. Karchmer, Dr. James Cleghorn, and Mr. Bohuslav Horak, who provided me with their insight and expertise. Their invaluable aid and patience gave me the impetus to commit my ideas to paper.

## PREFACE

The creative writer, himself an artist, faces certain problems in writing about other artists. Whether they are painters, playwrights, or sculptors, they have their own perspective on their craft, just as the writer has. For the creative writer, this perspective becomes the foremost concern. He must convey this particular point of view toward the creative process and the role of the artist, both as it applies to himself and the characters he creates. Secondly, through the technical mastery of his craft, the tools readily available to him, he has to portray the character, convey the perception, and depict the execution with enough drama and validity to capture an essentially mental function and transfer it to the visual realm. The writer must be able to create the mental image, the idea, but, in this particular instance, he must be able to create the visual art, or the reality if you will, as well, the art of painting, sculpture, or the theatre.

Inherent in the problem of technical application is the handling of terminology, the concepts of a particular art, and their transference to the writer's own field. The creative writer wishes to produce the aura of the art, not a textbook. But at the same time, enough specific reference is necessary to achieve the proper atmosphere. In portraying the artist, he also portrays the impediments

an artist faces, and in a sense the problems he himself faces as a writer. These take several forms: the impediment can be in the mind of the artist or imposed from without, by factors not normally associated with an artistic viewpoint. The artist can often lose himself in an idea, becoming so concerned with that one "inspiration" that he literally shuts himself off from society, stifling his own creative talent by ignoring all external perception, until he suffers the destruction of everything he has strived for. It is, in a sense, a spiritual death. On the other hand, history and society can exert enough external pressure on the artist that he adopts a popular viewpoint of what the artist and art should be, confusing it with emotions that do not properly belong to the art world, or the artist himself, rather than finding his own mode of expression. It is, again, another form of death. In many cases, it is a combination of the two. Nathaniel Hawthorne portrays this combination in his "The Artist of the Beautiful," and "The Birthmark," as well as in his novels, The House of the Seven Gables, The Blithedale Romance, and The Marble Faun. Henry James uses the artist as the central figure in "Madonna of the Future," "The Death of the Lion," "The Figure in the Carpet," and "The Real Thing." The internal problems an artist faces are brought to light in James Joyce's The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Contemporary literature also reflects these problems, as can be seen in Bernard Malamud's Pictures of Fidelman and Laurie Colwin's "A Girl Skating."

The three novellas in this collection focus on the problems and

the role of the artist, and, to a degree, on the influences that shape him. All three treat the perception the artist has of his work and of himself. In the first, "Chiaroscuro," a young painter, absorbed in his craft, attempts to come to grips with his perception of his art and the execution of that perception on canvas. He must also reconcile his artistic sensibilities with the way others see him. "Fantod" deals with the shaping influences of family and historical heritage on an aging Irish playwright. The last novella, "Taction," portrays a sculptor who has developed a firm view of himself, his art, and his role, when an unforeseen accident destroys the foundation he has built his career on.

A secondary theme working throughout the novellas is that of the artist in society. As a human being, he is a part of the social milieu around him, but often, as seen in such characters as Owen Warland and Stephen Daedalus, the artist feels that he is isolated from his fellow man by his role as an artist. Many times the role is reinforced by society, as well as by the individual. Ultimately, the artist is forced into a social mold, and if he is not strong enough to cope, to maintain his individuality, then society, while at least partially responsible for molding him into the form he has assumed, will turn and destroy him by pulling him in more directions than he is emotionally able to go. The creative writer must attempt to integrate these two worlds, these two views. This becomes one of the first problems that faces the writer. Other special problems that must be considered are of a narrower scope.

Firstly, the use of technical jargon of the art and theatrical worlds must be considered. Experience and formal training in both fields provides the background that enables the writer to draw on the past with familiarity, as well as with an understanding of the terms used. This is reflected in the characters created, in their dialogue, and the narrative portions of the stories, so the aura of the world the characters inhabit enhances the overall effect.

Secondly--particularly in "Fantod"--dialect is a problem facing the writer, as well as locale. Actually living in Ireland is the best experience, for it allows the writer to study the speech patterns and the society first hand. In lieu of that, the writer can examine such playwrights as Sean O'Casey and John Millington Synge and their use of dialect. James Joyce, Flann O'Brien, and Liam O'Flaherty give great insight into the Irish way of life, as does the contemporary playwright Brian Friel, while Connor Cruise O'Brian is helpful as a historian.

Thirdly, the circumstances of the individual artists in the novellas is such that the writer must avoid a melodramatic treatment. The fact that it is the mental attitude of the artist, rather than the physical action, that is treated lends itself to over-explanation and over-dramatization of the thoughts each artist has. Involved with this is the hazard of making the artist a stereotyped figure. By varying the situations, the writer can create distinctions between the stories. He also creates sympathy or antipathy for the artist viewed. This reaction is accomplished by suggesting the

fallacies or weaknesses in their particular points of view (through thought, action, or recurring motif), rather than fully explaining them. This, in turn, hopefully allows the reader a degree of objectivity, instead of appealing to the emotions of the situation.

The writer should also maintain an objectivity. One method of doing so is to rely on third person narration, but making it a reflection of the main character's thoughts rather than the writer's. In this way the writer remains emotionally divorced from the characters and avoids coloring the characters with his personal beliefs. If the characters do not cry out with a philosophical message, but maintain an individuality, then they do not become stereotyped. Their individual situations and points of view are traced in patterns drawn from their personalities and the immediate influences on those personalities, influences such as theories of what art is and what it should be, history, society, and physical ability. The writer must delineate the influences, which helps to avoid making all the characters seem the same, though he is dealing with one type of character.

While these stories make no attempt at a final reconciliation of the problems facing the artist, they do attempt to examine a trend that has particular relevance to the twentieth century, an age that has influenced and reinforced the polarity between art and society. The artist is a more isolated figure, caught between a need for individual expression and a trend toward standardization and mechanization. Primary concern, though, is for the individual



himself, and his attempt to demonstrate his particular artistic flair to the best of his ability, to visualize his own private perception.

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## I. CHIAROSCURO

I have known no man of genius who had not to pay, in some affliction or defect either physical or spiritual, for what the gods had given him.

--Max Beerbohm--

1

Kieron sat watching, waiting. The moonlight began its nightly battle against the shadows. Tracts of brown parquet lay exposed under the skylight window, and the moonlight glinted off a glass here and a disintegrating cloud of smoke there. It had not yet reached the corner where the cigarette flared intermittently to life, the only clue to Kieron's presence. Sending out a puff of smoke, he gazed beyond the center of the room and the moonlight to the far side of his rectangular loft.

There, deep in the recess that formed the parameter of his existence, stood an alternate light source, untouched by the moonlight, yet emanating a radiance which kept the young artist's eyes riveted to it. The half-finished canvas returned Kieron's stare, beckoning him, caressing his senses. Only the graceful and continual arc of the ember revealed a sign of life.

The immobile vigil was not new, more a culmination. The canvas had started as an idea back in college, that had been with him throughout every thing. But the longer Kieron had worked on the canvas the

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farther he had been from the end. It compelled its completion, yet concurrently resisted that same effort.

Kieron's mind reeled. The colors and textures laid themselves across the barren white expanse of the left half of the canvas. The right side, a riot of magentas, crimsons, scarlets, purples, displayed their fabric, their vibrance. The heavy, oblique strokes bled into the crushed velvet, feathered into the faint French-silk shimmer, blending, leading from surface to surface.

The left paled, flickered, died. Again and again the colors tried to match the texture on the right, only to fail. The feathered edge of the painting refused to extend itself, to share any of its soft vibrance with the rest of the naked canvas. Yet, while it refused, it lay languidly waiting, breathing softly.

Kieron snuffed out his cigarette in the glass beside him. How long had it been? No idea. He rubbed his eyes, ran his hands through his hair. It had been a long, long time. Still no closer, and daily moving farther away from everything he had known. All the good he had accomplished--especially considering the beginning. The beginning. Twelve miserable years of scraping and scrimping to be able to have a place to paint. That's all he asked, just somewhere to paint. It hadn't always been that way. No, when he had arrived, fresh out of college, he hadn't thought it would be that way. He thought he'd take the world by storm. He had been good. Best in his class. All the professors had said he'd go far. Because he had talent. That golden word. Talent. He knew he had it; his profs knew. Surely

the world would recognize. But it didn't. Talent didn't feed you. It didn't keep you warm or buy paint and canvas. How quickly he had found that out.

He had stooped, demeaned himself to painting on the street, in the park, at one of the innumerable little stalls that dotted the main path where all the other starving artists worked. He had turned out trash so he could continue hand to mouth. He'd done all right at that, because he knew he had more talent than most; it had allowed him to get the cold-water walk-up so he could create his own. But that wasn't to be either. He had to spend so much time mechanically turning out street scenes, bowls of fruit, flowers, that he didn't have time for his own.

Then came the break. That woman whose portrait he had done in the park. Portrait. That was a joke. Those quickie sketches always flattered; that wasn't the real portrait. It made old women young, ugly ones pretty, hid all the traces of the passage of time, all the flaws. But she had adored it. And she was rich. She paid him double for the thing, then had asked if he taught; would he give her lessons? That was the chance to pull him out of the slime. He grabbed at it. Only later did he realize that it had been a move from one quagmire to a slightly more respectable one.

The memory revulsed him. She had been so kind. Always complimentary, always excited when he came to give her the lesson. Then she had changed, gradually, imperceptibly, as she felt that she owned him more and more; because he came more often, at all hours; he

neglected his own work, neglected the stall in the park. Finally, she had given him the gold key. He had become a toy to show off to her wealthy friends, which had led to more work, but not without a high premium. Especially among the ladies. That had caused her to be jealous, vindictive, petty. But he had remained. Because she paid better than any of the others, not because of her. It had gone on for almost two years, she trying to own him body and soul, he letting her think she did; and trying to paint, plus saving the money and garnering the contacts.

He had deceived himself in the long run. She had owned him. She demanded, cried, cajoled; he did whatever she wanted. Until that night. She had gone too far, pushed too hard. Or maybe it was just that he was tired and couldn't go on with the charade any longer.

They had been to one of the interminable "soirees" that she habitually dragged him to in order to display her young prize to all her friends. He had spent the night talking to some young woman about art when she crept up behind him. She was seething, and she didn't care how big a scene she made. He accommodated her. She left, telling him to come pick up his trash that evening. He stormed after her. When the taxi had pulled up in front of her place, the servant let him in before he could put his key in the door. He went upstairs to the studio, turned on the light. The room shattered around him. Canvases were strewn helter-skelter around the room, thrown from their neat rows into piles across the middle of the floor. Paint and turpentine mixed, ran into thin multi-colored pools. The odor of linseed

oil and varnish filled the air. Everything was stained, besmeared, with some canvases torn from being pitched around. She had done a thorough job. There was nothing left but the one white canvas on the easel with her message--BASTARD--scrawled across it; everything else was ruined, all his work gone, even if it was only commission work. He had done it; it had been his. Now it was nothing.

He ran, three steps at a time, up the stairs, threw open the door to her bedroom. She lay on the bed in the beige satin gown that she always wore for him. She laughed, a low gloating laugh. "Bitch. Stupid, selfish, spoiled bitch." He grabbed her, dragged her off the bed, down the stairs to the studio, threw her through the door. "Get in there." She didn't laugh now. He slammed the door behind him, advanced, almost stalked her. She scrambled away, the satin gown tangling about her ankles, as she slipped through the paint and varnish in her attempt to stay clear of him. He pinned her against the canvases, vise-gripping a shoulder with one hand. "Damn you. Look at what you've done." He twisted her face around with his free hand, toward the canvases. "Everything. And it's not yours. It's mine. Get that through that thick head." She started to cry. "That doesn't cut it anymore, sweetheart. You went too far, ruined it all. Everything. Even us." He trembled; she tried to pull away. "What in hell . . . ." Before he even realized it he had hit her. He felt the sting in his palm, saw the bright red traces of his fingers across her cheek. It seemed to release all the pent-up rage and frustration that had built up for the work he hadn't been able to do. He hit

her again, and a third time, then the rage dissipated into tears. He walked to the door, tired, broken. He surveyed the room, the wreckage, and her, bruised and covered with paint, then tossed the gold key on the floor.

He had wandered aimlessly after that, without steady work, moving from odd job to odd job. All of which didn't allow him the time to work at what he wanted most. There had been a few commissions, not many; he'd pretty effectively put an end to that. Then one golden spring day he'd seen the little gallery. On a whim he wandered in.

"Morning." The girl behind the counter smiled. "Welcome to our new gallery. It's our grand opening."

"Morning."

"Can we help you?"

"Just looking."

"For anything in particular?" She was perky. Small and lithe.

"No." Kieron flashed a rueful smile at her. "Just work."

"Are you an artist?"

"I guess you could say that. I'm also a dishwasher, a busboy, a night janitor, whatever comes along." He felt himself blushing.

"These are nice. Local?"

"Yes. All local right now. We're trying to showcase the district, and build our clientele. We're as new as some of these paintings. Only opened a week ago."

"Can anyone bring work in?"

"Well, it has to be approved first, but . . . ." She paused,



flashed him that bright smile. "Sure, why not? Do you have some you want to bring?"

"Some. Not a lot."

"Listen, I'm afraid we don't . . . ." She crossed to him, looking a little abashed, then suddenly brightened. "Did you say you were looking for work right now? Or do you have some other . . . ."

"No. Not right now."

"Can you come back at 2:30 this afternoon?"

"Why?"

"Mr. Ronan, the owner, will be here then. He's looking for someone to build frames, cut mattes, and work the counter in the late afternoons. If you're interested, you might be able to work out something."

"I'm interested. Thanks. I'll be back at 2:30." He was halfway out the door when he turned back. "What's your name, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Laura. And I don't mind." Now it was her turn to blush.

"Laura. Thanks again."

"You're welcome."

Her smile lingered in his memory.

He'd gone back, talked with Mr. Ronan, gotten the job. It didn't pay much, but when they had discovered that he slept in the shop most nights, they had allowed him to put a cot in the back. There, after he got off work, he had painted at night.

That little gallery had started him toward his goal. It had gotten him recognized. First, because he could paint what he felt

inside, and because he could talk with those around him who felt as he did. He grew in the atmosphere, thrived on the rap sessions in the little coffee shops that dotted the district, and created. Created the things that had been held in check so long. Those creations had been noticed, and bought. Then the ultimate goal had been achieved. He had been elected as the new artist of the season. That had meant his work had been chosen to be put in the museum. The struggle had been worth it. Finally.

Now he struggled again. But this was different. This time the struggle was between the painting across the room and himself, not against the outside. There, in the corner, was the only problem. The painting. The idea. He had wanted to do it. For himself. This was the painting. Beyond the gallery. Beyond the museum. Beyond it all. The physical manifestation of the idea he had carried with him for so many years. From job to job, and through every cold water flat and garret loft he'd lived in.

The soft gray moonlight had given way to the mauve tint creeping over the loft window's edge. Another day timidly pierced the gloom where he lay. Another night gone. No sleep. No rest. No progress. Nothing. How long? How long could this go on?

The canvas, more vibrant than during the night, stretched its tenacious feathered arms toward him, luring him to it. The colors danced before his eyes, entreated him to rise, come to them. He lay there; the cigarette dangled from the arm flung over the side of the bed, while the other supported his head. He sighed. Would it come

today? Could it? It had to. God, it had to. Soon . . . soon.

Laura lit another cigarette, looked at her watch and back to the entrance of the restaurant. The maitre d' smiled at her, a little too feebly for her liking. She smiled back and turned her gaze to the waiter, indicating another refill on her martini, her third.

She returned to the vigil at the foyer, despite the frosty hauteur of the maitre d', and waited for Kieron and her drink. The waiter placed the drink in front of her. She nodded, smiled, without taking her eyes off the door.

Kieron appeared in the entrance, tieless, in jeans. The maitre d' moved toward him, to tell him he wasn't allowed in. Laura jumped up, moving to intercept the row she knew was coming. "Kieron, you finally made it."

"Madam . . . ."

"It's all right, Marcelle. He's my guest."

"But, Madam, it's not . . . ."

"Marcelle . . . ." She slipped a twenty into his breast pocket, patting his chest, flashing her brightest smile.

"Very well, Madam." Marcelle resumed his post.

Laura slipped her arm through Kieron's, leading him toward the table. "Kieron, I said formal. Jeans are not formal. This is formal." She ran her hand down the side of her black jersey gown.

"I forgot."

"How could you?"

"I just did."

"When I talked to you this afternoon I asked you to wear that gorgeous black velvet suit I gave you last year."

Kieron shrugged and shoved his hands in his back pockets.

"Never mind, never mind. At least you're here . . . finally. Do you know what time it is?"

"No. Does it matter?"

"No. Not really." She put her hand on his arm. "What would you like to drink?"

"I don't know. What are you drinking?"

"The usual."

"That'll be fine, I guess." He motioned to the waiter, pointed at Laura's glass, and held up two fingers. His eyes roved over the room, absorbing the warm dark wood, the texture of the maroon drapery, the reflection of the candlelight in the chrome and glass, the shimmer of Laura's dress. The dim softness enveloped him.

"Kieron? Are you listening? Kieron?"

"Hm?"

"Did you hear me? What do you think?"

"About what?"

"Quit fiddling with your fork and listen to me. I have a commission for you. An important one."

"A commission? For what?"

"If you will look at me instead of the drapes, I'll tell you."

All over again." She couldn't help letting the anger creep into her voice. His not listening had become a regular habit and it irritated her to have to repeat almost everything she said to him. "Are you even interested?"

"Yes. Sorry, Laura." Kieron reached across the table and took her hand. "Tell me about this important commission." He winked and squeezed her hand.

The anger drained away. She smiled, returned the light pressure, then withdrew her hand to light her cigarette. "Damn you, you devil. Let's get down to business. Do you recognize the name Ariana Piagenet?"

"Vaguely."

"Vaguely? Honestly, Kieron. Ariana Piagenet happens to be one of the wealthiest women in this town. Well, anyway, she was in the gallery this morning, looking at the exhibit. She especially liked your work, even though she said she preferred your realistic pieces. She also said that she had seen some of the work you had done for her friends some time back."

"Deliver me from self-styled critics. What the hell does she know?" He resumed his tracings on the tablecloth with the tynes of his fork, laying down flat straight strokes with the edge, then feathering them out with the point.

"Don't take that artistic martyr attitude with me until you hear me out. She asked if you still worked on a commission basis, and I told her that you did on occasion."

"And?"

"She wants to talk to you about doing a painting for her."

"What kind? A bowl of fruit?" His eyes left their creation on the table and moved back to the drapes, where they devoured every line and fold for highlight and shadow, how the color intensified in the soft light and dimmed in the recesses, how the edges faded into the wood paneling.

She hesitated. "Her portrait."

His lip curled ever so slightly.

"Kieron, it's the first work you've had in almost a year. You've got to be close to the end of the money you got for those three big paintings last year. Don't turn this down out of hand. Mrs. Piagenet is willing to pay you what you got for all three paintings if you'll do her portrait."

He etched the halos of candlelight on the racks of glasses at the bar into his mind's eye.

"The gallery hasn't sold one of your paintings in ten months, Kieron. And I know that the Museum isn't paying your rent or keeping food in your mouth. Will you do it?"

No answer.

"At least talk to her. Certainly that can't hurt."

He lit a cigarette, exhaled, and watched the smoke dissolve into erratic wisps. It impressed him the way the smoke changed from white to pale blue to mauve, all in a matter of seconds.

"Are you afraid you'd be prostituting your precious talent if you accept? Now that you have a painting in the Museum?" She crushed

her cigarette in the ashtray. "Talent won't feed you, sweetheart. It never has."

Kieron twisted toward her. "Don't ever talk to me like that. Never. Do you hear?" The look in his eyes far surpassed the vehemence in his voice. The razor's edge sharpness, the hard internal glint made her involuntarily shudder. He crouched across the table. "What do you know of art? Or talent? You sell paintings. You don't create them."

"Kieron, I . . . ."

"You have absolutely no idea what it's like to hold that brush in your hand and see the paint swirl and stretch into existence in front of you, to see a creation come to life until it breathes of its own accord."

"But . . . ."

"Shut up." The anger seared through him, rekindling the past. Only an artist can feel the inspiration come, or the agony of not being able to put an idea on canvas. It was a special sensitivity, that he knew. One that created a vivid repulsion to anything that compromised talent. That was prostitution. But the prostitution happened anyway. He'd done it, seen others have to do it. Sometimes for years. Do a bowl of fruit for the nice lady here, or a nude for the moneyed gentleman there. And every single one of them will tell you what you're doing wrong. They'll tell you about your rotten choice of color, or they don't like the angle of their head, or the shape of their pet dog, and they never realize that you are

painting both what you feel and what you see. For them it's simply a matter of you being a poor artist who doesn't have as much talent or brains or creativity as they have money and "taste." For them an artist becomes a toy, a puppet, or a monkey on a chain to dangle and dance in front of all their other wealthy friends. And if they had anything in common, it was the universal cry of "I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like." But that never stopped them from being critics. They were all the same. And he felt the repulsion and the disgust rise up in him, even at the memory, because to eat and to live he'd had to deal with them, to pander to their tastes. "I know all about commission work. And about the people who pay for it. I've had to do their portraits, their nudes, and their bowls of fruit. Otherwise, I can't do the real work, the real art. So don't ever tell me about prostitution."

"Kieron, I'm sorry." She reached out, tried to touch him, to calm him. "I just meant . . . ." He jerked away.

He was silent. The darkness of the room hid his features. He sat hunched, withdrawn, drawing angry circles in the ashtray with his cigarette.

Laura finished her drink. "Would you like another?"

"No."

"I'll call the waiter then, and we can eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Kieron, please. I waited over an hour for you, so that we could have dinner together. I haven't seen you in weeks. And because I



just wanted to talk to you. You never call. Please, let's eat."

"I told you I wasn't hungry, Laura. I'd better go."

She fought tears. "But you just got here."

"I can't stay. I have work to do. See you." He rose and turned toward the door without looking at her, ignoring her entreaty.

"What about . . . ?"

"I'll call you and let you know. I have to think." He walked out, his head down, his hands jammed in his back pockets.

## 3

The ember arced quietly through the darkness. Bastard. She was only trying to help the other night. Kieron stretched across the unmade bed to drop another link in the long nightly chain into the glass beside it. Through the smudged and dusty sides of the glass his eye caught the distorted glow of the canvas, his constant solitary companion. But she didn't understand. She saw only the business side, not this side. She couldn't feel--not this. Her feelings worked another way, at cross-purpose here. That was new though, not like the beginning.

His mind turned back the days to the first one he had seen Laura, her smile, her dancing eyes. She was so crisp. She seemed to brighten everything, she herself brighter than the canvases on the walls around her. She had helped him when he had needed it most and it had been nice. For them both. She had liked his work; he had liked her. She sold and he painted more than ever, and she sold more of it as

he did. Night became the time for picnics on apartment floors and moonlight raids on the fountain. The first raid painted itself before him.

"What are we doing tonight?"

He turned from his canvas to see her disembodied head poked through the curtains at the back of the gallery. "I don't know. What did you have in mind?" He chortled, holding his brush under his nose, twirling the end.

"Dummy. Let's have a picnic. I'm in the mood for candles, salami and potato salad. And a little nectar of the grape."

"Sounds good. What time does this feast begin?"

"Nineish. Be sure you come hungry."

"Hungry? This is an artist you're talking to--a poor artist--remember? What other way am I--ever? I sometimes think I originated the term 'starving artist.'"

The bell on the door to the gallery jangled. "Got to go. Customers. Don't forget now. About nine, my place."

"I won't. See you later."

He had finished his painting late and rushed over to her apartment, stopping only long enough to buy one lone tulip from a street vender. Outside her door he could hear the sound of her stereo and picked up the tune. He rang the doorbell, leaned against the jamb, and put the tulip between his teeth.

"Who is it?"

"Guess."

"Could it possibly be a certain starving artist I know? A late one?"

"There's only one way to find out."

"Maybe."

"Listen, I've slaved all day long to work up this huge appetite--which I was told I had to bring with me--and I'm standing here, yelling at my hostess through a door. What is this? And, besides, what'll your neighbors think?"

She let him in. "Kieron, honestly. Sometimes I think you're crazy. Particularly now, with that tulip dangling from your mouth."

"I've brought this as a token of my apology. Along with a talking stomach. When do we eat? I'm dying." He kissed her lightly on the cheek. "All kidding aside, I was finishing a painting and I didn't pay any attention to the time. Forgive me?"

He handed her the tulip.

Dinner had been quiet, over two bottles of Blue Nun. He had questioned her sanity in spending so much on the wine, but found through many subsequent experiences that she would do things like that on the spur, depending on her mood. He opened the third bottle, handing her a refilled glass. "Laura?"

"You know what I think we should do?"

"What?"

"Secret." He held his fingers to his lips. "Come with me."

"Where?"

"Come on. I've got a surprise for you."

"Where?"

"Don't ask questions. Just come." He lifted her up by the arm, grabbing the bottle of wine with his free hand. "Take your glass, and your key."

"My key?"

He nodded. "Your key."

"All right, but if we land in jail I'm saying I'm underage and what you drugged me."

"Who bought the Blue Nun? Come on, slowpoke."

They crossed the plaza by her apartment into the park, walking slowly and enjoying the night air and the lack of crowds. Kieron led her up to the fountain in the center of the park with its shimmering reflection pool. "We have arrived."

"At the fountain? What for?"

"To go wading."

"Now?"

"Now."

"No."

"Yes. It'll be fun. You'll see. Come on." He carefully set the wine on the edge, and began to take off his socks and shoes and roll up his jeans. "Take off your shoes."

"Kieron . . . ."

"Oh, come on." He stepped in the fountain. "See?" He grabbed her hand, took the keys and put them and the wine glass beside the bottle, and proceeded to drag her in beside him, shoes included.

"Kieron, it's cold!"

"A mere figment of your imagination. Here, cut the chill." He handed her the wine glass. "To you."

He drank and bowed with a flourish. As he did so, she pushed and over he went, wine glass in hand. Spewing and slipping to get up, he grabbed for her. "You see . . . hold still, dammit . . . you see, I didn't spill a drop."

"But you don't stand up too well either, captain. Here." Laura stretched out her hand, laughing.

He grasped it, still sitting in the fountain, and pulled her down. "Don't spill your wine."

"Kieron, no. Don't." Too late. She'd already lost her footing. "You'll regret this. You realize that, don't you?"

"What's to regret? More wine?" He slogged over to the wine bottle and set the glasses on the edge.

"Yes. But wait, you'll see." She quietly rose, sneaked up behind, and proceeded to drown him. "There. I told you you'd regret it."

He rushed toward her as she tried to back away, splashing her all the while. "Guess who's going to regret it."

They backed around the fountain, splashing and laughing, until he caught her under the cascade. They collapsed together howling, and ended sitting under the falling water in each other's arms.

That had been the first of many such zany nights. All filled with laughter. He smiled at the memory of her in that apricot jumper,

knee deep in the fountain and Blue Nun. Then she had worked harder for him, selling his paintings, surprising him with little gifts along the line. They grew closer until it all culminated in the big sale last year, his new studio, and the black velvet suit. It had been nice then. Not like now. No hassle, no grind, no worries. Somehow it had begun to fade, to scab over like stale, exposed pigment that had not been treated, until it was coated with the traditional evils, yet still fluid and vibrant underneath. For him. Not for her. Never for her. Not even after the other night. He'd been shoddy, cruel. She cared, worried. His hangup. He'd hurt her and he shouldn't have. But . . . . He stared at the painting that stood waiting in the alcove. Laura wasn't like the rest, but she couldn't see or feel. This was more important. He had to do it. The moonlight cast its dead light across the room. But Laura was right. He had to live. Maybe if he took the commission . . . . No. He couldn't. Not now. He couldn't let go. Kieron rolled over, away from the painting, trying to avoid its influence, its unfinished beckoning. Lit another cigarette. If he did the commission, then he'd have money. He could devote all his time to "her." He twisted back toward the painting.

He dragged the phone out from under the bed. It rang many times. "Laura . . . it's Kieron."

"Kieron . . . ." Her voice, drugged, garbled, echoed him. "What's the time?"

"I don't know."

"Oh God, it's four a. m." The surprise cleared her speech, then

it gave way to concern. "What's the matter? Has something happened?"

"No . . . ." He cleared his throat. "I want to apologize for the other night. I'm sorry."

"That's all right. But why did you decide that now? Why at four a. m.?"

"I . . . I wanted to talk to you about . . . ."

"About what?"

"About . . . ." He felt a feathered arm graze the back of his neck.

"Kieron? What did you want to talk about?"

No answer. He tried to avoid the presence that he felt growing around him.

"Why don't you call me back? Like in the morning at a reasonable hour?"

Nothing.

"Hello? Kieron?"

"I'm here."

"Kieron, what is it?" The exasperation crept into her voice.

"I wanted to talk about . . . ."

"You said that. About what?"

"The . . . ." The colors smothered him. "What we talked about the other night."

Laura caught her breath. "The commission?"

"Yes."

"For Ariana Piagenet? Oh, Kieron, hang on. Let me get my notebook

and a cigarette. I'll be right back. Hang on."

He could see her, scrambling out of the double brass bed, running for the desk she kept buried in those damn ferns.

"Kieron, I'm back. What have you decided? Will you take it? Tell me."

"I think I'll take it. I'm not sure."

"Will you talk to her?"

No answer.

"Kieron? You still there?"

"Yes."

"Will you at least talk to her? I can set up an appointment. Then decide, but at least talk to her. Okay?"

He was so tired. "Okay . . . When?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to call you after I talk with Ariana. Would that be all right?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Kieron, I'm glad you called." Her voice sparkled with excitement. "How are you?"

"Fine." He sighed. The canvas glared from across the room.

"Sure? That wasn't the most convincing answer I ever heard."

"No, I'm all right."

"You sound tired."

"Haven't been sleeping."

"Maybe this will help."

"Maybe . . . ."



"Can I do anything?" The inflection gave her away. He knew she'd be smirking.

He ran his hand through his hair. "Not now. Sorry I called so late. I'll let you get back to sleep."

"Want to help?"

"Laura, please . . . ."

"I'm sorry. I'll call you tomorrow afternoon. Will you be there?"

"I'll be here."

"I love you." She smacked the receiver.

"Talk to you tomorrow. Bye." He hung up the phone, not waiting, not wanting to prolong it any further. He got up and walked to the canvas. It stood there defiant, challenging him, almost sulking. He stretched out his hand, ran it over the textures, caressing the softness, the pulsing color . . . . "Sorry."

## 4

The appointment with Ariana Piagenet had been arranged for three in the afternoon. Kieron stood at the gate half an hour early, gazing at the house. He knew by the overgrown and tired, ancient look of the house and grounds that money had lived here a long time; he also knew that because it had lived here so long, it would be firmly entrenched in its ways and accoutrements. Like the guard standing behind the hedge and the servant at the front door. When the proper time came, he would be admitted into this darkened artifice to meet the queen.

The gates opened in front of him, and he walked up the long circular drive to the house. Inside, it resembled all the others he had been in. Crowded, dark, lush. But lush in the sense of decay. Old and frail, and weighted down by time. He waited.

Ariana Piagenet walked in. Swept in. She personified all Kieron saw around him. A direct extension of the house that lived and breathed. "How do you do? I'm Mrs. Ariana Piagenet."

"Kieron."

"Kieron what?"

"Just Kieron."

"Just Kieron?"

"Just Kieron."

"Odd. But very well, young man. Won't you sit down?" She indicated the ornate velvet chair.

Kieron sat. He felt tired, as if he was becoming part of the furniture. He dragged out a cigarette and matches, started to light it, then had second thoughts. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No. Alex, bring our young visitor an ashtray."

Alex appeared with the ashtray, a heavy crystal oval, at Kieron's elbow.

"Thanks."

Alex nodded. "You are welcome, sir." He set the oval on the table and disappeared as quickly as he had originally come.

Kieron watched the match flare into life in the antique, yellowed mirrors that hung behind the dusty gray sofa that Ariana Piagenet

draped herself on.

"I've seen your work on many occasions, Mr. . . . Kieron. You seem to have a great deal of talent."

Kieron stared at her through the smoke. The word "seem" burned in his ears.

"And I would like to make use of some of that talent, if you don't mind.

He shrugged, barely acknowledging her comment.

"Would you care for some tea before we get down to details?"

"All right." The formality made him nervous.

She rang the tiny brass bell on the coffeetable between them.

"It won't be but a moment. Tell me something of yourself."

"Why?"

"Because I'm interested in you."

He felt the vague, sinking feeling that he'd felt many times before begin in the pit of his stomach. "Why?"

"My, aren't we suspicious? Well, for one thing, I like to know who I am doing business with. For another, I am naturally curious. Particularly about a young man who looks so sullen, when he really has nothing in life to be sullen about."

"How would you know?"

"How could anyone as young as you are, and with as much talent and success as you have, find anything that makes him so unhappy?"

"I'm an artist." He managed to keep his impatience to a sarcastic edge in his voice that twisted his stress on the word artist. And he

thought of the money from the commission.

"I see. Is that all you do? Do you have any other job, I mean?"

"No."

"That's all? Surely, you must have a lot of time on your hands?"

Her incredulity sandpapered his nerves. "No. That's enough."

"But what do you do with yourself all day? Painting doesn't require that much time, does it?"

Kieron stabbed the ashtray with his cigarette. He quickly lit another while the tea was set before them.

"Well now. Perhaps we'll come back to you in a moment. Right now, I would like to talk about the commission. I want you to do a painting for me. And I will pay you well for it, because it is a very special painting to me." She laughed, a high, dry tinkle in the dusty room. "Think of it as an old woman's vanity, if you like."

He rubbed his eyes, sighed, and picked up the gilt tea cup.

"My husband tried for many years to have a portrait painted of me. Though we talked and worked with many different artists, they never quite achieved what we were after. They just never quite met our expectations. I have an attic filled . . . well, never mind that. It may be that I had to grow old, to achieve 'character,' if you'll let me call it that, before my portrait was to hang on the walls of this house with the other family portraits. Come with me. I wish to show you what I am talking about."

She rose and moved toward the entry hall. Kieron followed her. In the hall were rows of portraits, hung in heavy, oiled frames, on

panelled oak walls. He found himself surrounded by a sea of darkened, dingy faces that stared solemnly out of their rectangular graves with dull yellow eyes.

"This is my family. Almost two hundred years of it, and each of us is represented here. All except me. And that is the job I want you to do. To make me a representative of my family, just as all those you see before you are. I want you to paint my portrait so that it will fit in with the rest of these."

"But these paintings, or most of them, are very old."

"I, too, am old, as I've already said. But I want a portrait that portrays me with dignity and follows the time-honored tradition of my family. These paintings are the tradition, and I don't wish to change it. You paint, for the most part, in the work that I have seen, in dark colors not unlike these. I thought that since you did so, you would be a logical candidate for the task."

"But, if you have seen my work, then you know that this is not my style."

"You can alter your style, can't you?" Again the bell-like laugh. "My goodness, but you are an intense young man."

The oppressive atmosphere and the cloying odor of the old house, and the old woman, were almost more than he could stand. He knew the rest of what she wanted, could feel it. In his stomach, his muscles. He could probably repeat it verbatim--without her even saying it. He could hear her talking on, but he wasn't listening anymore. The canvas in the loft, his canvas, flitted into his mind, before his eyes,

dancing and reaching out. The more Ariana droned on, the more pre-dominant the image of the unfinished canvas became.

"Therefore, for the duration of the time that you are working on the portrait, you can live here, if you like, in the east wing. There is plenty of light for you there, and more than enough room. And it is private. I will arrange to have a key made for you, and you may have use of my chauffeur when you need it. . . . Then you need only to come to the sitting room, which I would like to form the background for the portrait, when it is your choice to do so. I think the sitting room keeps the flavor of these portraits, don't you?"

"Mrs. Piagenet . . . ."

"Aren't these arrangements satisfactory? Is there something else I've overlooked? Tell me, and I'll arrange to provide you with what you need."

"Mrs. Piagenet, I don't, can't, paint this way."

"What do you mean? All artists paint. I know. I've seen many. Some can see better than others, some have a better knack with the brush than others. But they all paint. And it's not as if I were asking you to make something up, to create a picture for me. I'll be there in front of you, so it will be easy. You won't have to bother yourself with any of the other things. It's sort of like taking a photograph. And look how easy that is. The only difference is that you'll be doing it with paint. I think it has to do with the fact that you don't have to let your imagination interfere, don't you?"

Come, let's finish our tea."

"Mrs. Piagenet . . . ."

"Call me Ariana. All my friends do. And I do want you for a friend, particularly since you'll be living here. You also haven't told me about yourself yet, and I am intrigued by this morose young man I see before me."

He felt the quagmire pulling him down, and even the money couldn't save him. With grace, he thought, do it with grace. "Mrs. Piagenet . . . Ariana . . . I can't; I have a painting of my own to finish."

"You'll have plenty of time when you finish my portrait. You're young, and this portrait is something I have waited all my life for. Can't you indulge an old lady's whimsy?"

"You don't understand . . . ."

She smiled, reached out a reassuring arm. "Yes, I do. You're eager, young, and a trifle impatient. Can't you spare the time for this commission? Besides, my reputation, and my money, might be of help to your career. I can introduce you to some of my friends. You will have more commissions, more money. That's what art is all about, isn't it? I know. I've dealt with people all my life. Artists are no exception."

"No. You don't understand. Not artists." It was the same old song and dance. All she understood was money and power. The work, the concentration that went into a painting she had no conception of. Like a photograph? God. She was just like all the rest of the grubbers. Taste, influence, tradition. That's all she understood.

Her taste, like her house, was the taste of the dead and the decaying. Not the tastes of another human being. She'd try to set herself up to run his entire life for the time he would be working there, leaving him no time, no peace, no pleasure. Then she'd probably be dissatisfied with him too, because he wouldn't see her the way she saw herself, and she didn't like what other people saw. So, then she'd go in search of some other poor artist who she'd think would benefit from her influence. "Well, let me tell you, lady, I'd rather starve than work here." His voice, sarcastic in his address, trembling, echoed through the hall. She could take her portrait, her house, her money, and especially her prestige, taste, and tradition and shove it . . . .

"Young man, I will not be spoken to in this manner." She was flushed and her voice quavered ever so slightly.

"Yes, you will, dammit. I've dealt with your kind before. And they all need to be told. So now I'm telling. You don't know anything, not of talent, art, or artists. You're just an old woman with a lot of money, and you think that entitles you to everything. It doesn't. Not to me anyway. Indulge your whimsy with someone else. I don't want your help or your commission. Keep them. I'll do my art my own way."

He was screaming, shaking. He bolted from the room, out of the house. Once outside, he felt more alive. He ran down the drive, off the grounds. Toward the loft, where, he knew, his painting stood waiting.



He sat at the foot of the easel, staring up at the canvas. The empty bottles littered the floor. Kieron sent one of the discarded wine bottles rolling when he reached for his cigarettes. How long had he been sitting here? He wasn't sure. He faintly remembered going out for the last bottle of wine. Was it tonight, last night? What time was it, anyway? No watch. He'd locked it for the last bottle. He remembered now. The lightning flashed, illuminating the room in blue-white light. Storm. There was a full moon. At least that's what he'd seen last. He rubbed his face. Two, three days growth of beard. Must be a new day. But what one? Stiff and sore, he crawled on his knees over to the phone under the bed. Call time service. They'd know. Phone was dead. He shook himself to try and clear his fog-bound head. Dammit, he'd never paid the bill. He leaned against the bed, the phone still in his lap.

In the intermittent blinding bursts of lightning the colors of the canvas jumped out at him, the white so intense that it seemed to compete with the sky's angry pyrotechnics. Darkness re-enveloped the room; yet the painting still radiated, haloed the silver white patina. Shimmering. Fluid. Alive. It shown its luminescence on Kieron.

"She's mine. Mine. The best yet. Everything I am, everything I have goes into her. What I've waited all these years for. She is the epitome of my craft. The symbol of achievement. Have to finish. Have to finish. Soon. To show everyone. To prove I'm right." He

stared at the painting. "She's grown. Seems bigger than when I began. Brighter, more vibrant."

The steady drum of the heavy rain, in combination with the light of the painting that mesmerized him, lulled Kieron's aching eyes. He put his head back, resting it on the bed. "So tired. Need a little sleep. Fresh start. Sleep, then a fresh start. So much to do."

The painting bathed his drawn features in a soft glow, giving them the color they lacked. He relaxed, propped against the bed; his breathing grew progressively more shallow. Easy, rhythmic, quiet. The dark room was shrouded in silence.

Kieron saw himself with his brush in hand, with his palette, his canvas. It stood before him, waiting. He mixed the pigments slowly, lovingly with the knife, adding a little varnish or turpentine as it became necessary, to gain just the right consistency, the right texture. He had to have just the right blend so the tints and hues didn't become muddy, cloud the paint already on his canvas. He tested his colors again and again on the old piece of bleached canvas that stood next to the painting itself, never touching the canvas. Not until the colors were exactly right, a perfect match. Not until the textures could overlap each other, fuse together to become one organic unit, a whole painting inseparable from itself, its design, its materials. He worked the brush, making sure there were no loose bristles, no clogs or pools of paint or turpentine so the pigment would flow smoothly, gracefully. He had to have absolute control over every element. This mastery of his tools and materials would reflect

itself in the finished painting. His masterpiece. His alone.

The colors danced before him. The magentas led out the crimsons and scarlets, while the purples hung back, forming the backdrop for the whirling brilliance in the foreground. The colors spilled out, off the edge of the canvas, spinning, bleeding together, surrounding Kieron in their warmth. He felt the pulsing colors flow over him, lead him on, into the heart of themselves.

Their softness brushed and caressed his skin. He sank into them, warm, complacent, unified at last. He was their life source, they his. He felt the bare warmth of the purple counteract the heat of the scarlet, modify it so there was a perfect harmony. He tumbled and rolled in the luxuriousness of the velvet, wandered through the gossamer webs, felt the silken texture of the living paint.

Suddenly he felt a sharp coldness. One that shot through his system. It was hard, brittle. White. Void. Brilliant, yet dead. It had no life, only a luminescence that pierced the eye, the flesh, into the core, at the brain and at the heart. It was static. Adamant in its claim to its own territory.

The softness, the warmth battled to re-engulf him, fought to maintain the ground they had won, to regain the upper hand. Yet the crystalline cold had made an inroad, breached the front. It made Kieron aware that there were secondary forces at work, subverting the main drive. It altered his sense perception. He felt a bitter edge, a sharp pain that abraded his pleasure, his assurance. He was caught between the two, torn at from both sides.

He was buffeted by the warring factions, bruised, beaten. Then he felt something. Sensed a third presence. He couldn't see it. It was moving slowly. Yet Kieron knew that it was a greater force than the two raging elements he was pinned between now.

It was cool, but not biting, not like the cold hard whiteness. It was clammy, clinging. It pervaded by degrees, but achieved its purpose all the same. Without surprise or shock. It merely usurped the authority around it.

He could see it now, in his peripheral vision. Gray, viscous, crawling slowly forward. Moving imperceptibly, it absorbed all in its path, both the vibrant colors and the dead white alike. With the sixth sense that had first intimated the presence, Kieron now knew that it was there for a certain purpose. Not to fight the opposing forces he first encountered. But to come for him. The gray mass was his personal foe on this field of blood red and pristine white.

He struggled to free himself, but he was locked between them, their prize possession, and not to be shared. He was frozen in position on one side, tangled in the finely spun warmth of the other.

He twisted, wrenched his body to loosen the grip of the head-on combatants. He could move by inches, while the grayness moved on in immeasurable tenacity. No matter how much movement he managed in his effort to get away, it came on, breaching the distance between them, gaining on its quarry. He was amazed, for though the muscles in his throat told him he was screaming, there was no sound. He was in a world of color, light, and texture where sound did not matter.

It was closer now. He felt damp, covered in fine mist. And he was growing colder. It was funny, but the white cold didn't feel any longer. Neither did the warmth of the paint. Only the clamminess, the creeping chill.

It had reached him. It was at his hair, his fingertips, and it was dividing, splitting to completely encircle him. It oozed over his field of vision, until it had obliterated everything around him. The white and the colors had dissolved away into the grayness without a trace. He was trapped, staked at the center of the tight, prescribed and narrowing circle.

The chill crept through him. It produced a numb, draining exhaustion. His limbs and eyes grew heavy, leaded. The grayness moved forward, over his feet and legs, over his arms, crawling slowly up him. The exhaustion was overpowering him; it was oppressive, smooth, cool. It became hard to breathe. Tears filled, then overflowed, and trickled down his cheeks uncontrolled, to disappear into the soft damp that pressed against him. He felt nothing. No pain, no fear, just a monumental weariness. He no longer struggled, but instead relaxed and cradled into the grayness. It flowed over him, welling and expanding while he sank to become the nucleus of the mass.

Kieron wrenched upright, away from the bed. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead; his breath came in tight, shallow draughts. The room was wrapped in the cool gray of dawn, unchanged. Yet . . . He looked to the canvas standing in its easel. A paleness, a dulling of the lustre. He shuddered.

## II. FANTOD

Art should be independent of all claptrap--should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye and ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of concern with it.

--James McNeill Whistler--

### 1

The orange fingers slowly caressed the manuscript until the edges curled and blackened. "You friggin' little shite. You've pissed it away again. Jasus, are you daft?" Dermot groped for the brandy decanter that stood beside the chair he had thrown himself in, his eyes never leaving the hungry flames. The light of the fire, the only light in the old Georgian room, shimmered across his face, reflected in his red, watery eyes--the eyes that betrayed the effort put into the now dying pages. He pulled on the brandy, eager to feel it cut its way through him.

As he drifted toward the numbing haze that was now so familiar, he dug in the pocket of the tweed jacket for the pack of Woodbines, one of the last vestiges of his past. "Courvoisier and coffin-nails. Wouldn't Mam snort to see that? She's probably spinnin' in Glasnevin, God rest her." The tenement flat on Gardner Street, immaculate, pristine, with the hand-crocheted antimacassars, touched him lightly.

The pale figure of his mother, gentle, yet imbued with her indomitable ability to surmount any obstacle, filled him with loneliness and regret. "I'm sorry, Mam." Dermot moved back into the tiny flat, a little boy, with his brother, two years older than he, and his mother. She had been exceptionally strong then, during the Troubles. His dad, an engineer in the IRA whose duty it was to blow up the British trucks, was in prison. In prison because of her. The British had knocked on the door, late at night, after curfew, and Dan, his dad, had tried to go out the window. She had held him back, not letting him, until the Tans had taken him.

What had told her to hang on to him no one knew, but she had, and it was well that she had, for only after did they realize that the roofs of the surrounding buildings were lined with Tan snipers, waiting for anyone who tried to lam out. So Dan had gone to Dundalk prison, with Eamon de Valera, to do 'a six months' turn. Mam, Dollie Dan called her, bore up under the strain, knowing that she would rather have him alive in prison than dead free. Dermot hadn't understood that until much later, but he had never blamed her either. She had managed to stretch the small sum she and Dan had saved to care for their sons and herself until he was released from gaol. The only difference Dermot had recognized then was that his dad hadn't come home in the evening for a long time. When he finally did, Dermot and his brother had not known him. The prison had changed him. Dan had left a healthy, dark-haired, young man. He came home thin, minus half his teeth, white-haired, considerably aged beyond his years by

the ordeal. He took a long time to recuperate, working as much as possible to keep food in their mouths and the roof over their heads. In that time Dermot and his brother came to know Dan, to love him and respect him, to see the great gentle man who never scolded, never hit, who only had to talk to them to stop their childish devilry.

The memory of them made the darkened, wood-panelled room loom about Dermot, barren and cold. The fire, down to glowing embers, faintly illuminated the plaques, trophies, and framed awards scattered throughout the room, the assorted collection of many years' work. Meaningless. Impersonal. Devoid of any attachment now, though he had been proud of them once. That was when they were new. The newest was . . . how many years old? Dermot pulled at the almost empty brandy decanter. Five. Five years old. Five long, cold, miserable, and unproductive years. "I've not slipped past it yet, dammit. I've not. I can do it. I've done it before." He cradled the decanter to him. He could do it again. He could, by God, he could. He crouched back into the recesses of the overstuffed wingback, drawing himself in, wrapping the chair around him. The brandy took its toll. The decanter slipped down beside him. His head, cooler now, lolled back as the fire died.

He was a young man again, an adolescent really, filled with the dreams and desires of all fifteen year old boys. With a few minor exceptions, life had been good to him, and to his family. Dan had gotten on well, becoming a builder, working for the government. He



had built their house, the big house, on Walkinstown Road, that they lived in now. Mam, like always, had the house immaculate, but it was no longer pristine. The antimacassars were still there, though the furniture had changed. She had enjoyed decorating the house with her beloved white furniture and the statues of the swans and cranes. The sitting room, warm in the white, inviting, displayed the pictures of her children. The Victorian Rose tea service, like the roses in the front garden, added the special, gentle touch of color that set off the room. There too she had the grand piano, and the great, thick white rug that she took special pride in.

Dermot, one of ten now, did as he pleased, what he wanted to do. He was attending the acting academy, where he had wanted to go for so long. It was even worth the trouble to get there. At last he was shut of the Carmelite priests. They couldn't hurt him now. Not anymore. His palms still ached at the thought of the caning he had received at the hands of Father Michael.

It had been during Retreat the year before. Father Michael had told the boys that they would not be allowed into Mass if they were late. And one morning, Dermot had been. He knew that he could not get into chapel, so he and Ray, another late arrival, decided to do their homework, Dermot giving Ray his English and Ray giving Dermot his math. Father Michael had caught them in the stall in the restroom. He had said nothing, just looked, and gone on.

The day dragged by. Finally, in the last class, Gaelic, Father Michael had walked in. "Father, pardon me, but I would like to see

Dermot MacRaemon and Rayamond Dempsey."

"Surely, Father Michael."

"Dermot, Rayamond, come to the front of the class."

They had come, slowly, to stand before the priest. "Yes, father?"

"You two young whelps missed Mass this morning, did you not?"

"Yes, father."

"And what did you do then?"

"Our lessons, father."

"Where?"

Silence.

"Where?" The priest's voice hitched up, one notch louder.

Still silence.

"These boys were caught in the same stall in the lavatory, Father Dominic. Supposedly doing lessons. Missing Mass, and this the week of Retreat."

Father Dominic lowered his eyes, said nothing.

"For that, both of you will receive six raps of the cane.

Rayamond."

Ray stepped forward. Father Michael held his palm flat, open. Ray cried at the first downward stroke of the cherry wood cane. He received the six on each palm, then returned to his desk.

"Dermot."

Dermot stepped forward. The procedure was repeated with the open palms. But he didn't cry. He wouldn't. Not for that bloody bastard

and his accusations. Men in dresses. Dermot hadn't cried either, not even when his hands had split and bled under the twenty-four blows to each palm from the cane that had risen higher with each stroke.

That had been the end of school. He had shown the priest. The lack of a leaving certificate didn't bother him. He had refused to go back, and Dan hadn't pushed him. Father Michael had gotten his come-uppance as well, shipped off to be a missionary in Africa. Maybe the cannibals would eat him. Poor beggars, they'd probably get indigestion.

Dan had given him a job, helping build the houses in the afternoons, with his brothers, after he had finished at the academy in the mornings. At night he rehearsed for whatever play he was in at the moment, or he would be at the movies, or doing turns for Mam and Dan in the sitting room, with Cousin Freddie at the piano, accompanying him.

Dermot awoke with a start, sending the decanter skittering across the rug into the ceramic tiles of the grate. The room, thick and musty, was different; how he wasn't sure. He felt the hair at the back of his neck involuntarily rise. He twisted quickly, contorting himself, in order to see behind him, behind the chair, to reassure himself. "Bloodthirsty ejits." He sat, immobile, listening. Nothing. "I know you're there. I feel your bloody eyes." He shuddered, his body wrenching away from his attempt to control it. "Can't you leave

me be, for Christ's sake? I tried. You know I tried. Feck off. I'll start again tomorrow. I promise." His flesh hurt, crawled under the tension. "You gurriers. I can't write every minute of the bloody day. Sweet Jasus, leave me be. And none o' your sass, Siobhann."

He sprang for the lamp that stood beside the desk, making it in one leap, hand out, reaching for the knob before he touched the floor. The light, flooding the room, left it empty of all but the familiar. Dermot shakily lit a cigarette, sat at the great oak desk, behind the typewriter, and wept.

They would be back. He knew. Hadn't they always come back? Every night, for five years, they had come. To wait. To stare. To force him to work. To produce the manuscript, the new play. Not that he hadn't written for five years. He had. There were ten one-acts and two full length plays conceived over that time. They still came though, to taunt, to cajole, to exhort, trying to get him to write a play that matched the caliber of the ones that had won him the assorted gold, silver, and parchment paraphernalia that decorated the walls.

Dermot put paper in the typewriter, lit another cigarette, and pulled another bottle of brandy from the drawer of the desk. "I'll not sleep again tonight. Not now." He stared at the paper. How much like the beginning it was. The idea there, but not the wherewithal to put it down in words.

That had been more than thirty years ago, the year after he had

gone to London's West End, to the Metropolitan, with his first professional show. At the time, he was in the Irish Army, stationed in the Dublin Mountains, with Freddie. The Second World War, as far as they were concerned, consisted of watching for German planes by day and drinking and singing in the pubs at night, usually capping off at Neary's. There they sat and talked of theatre and music. They would discuss ideas, plan dreams, for hours. When "Time, please, gentlemen" was called, they'd buy a naggin of Irish apiece, and walk home since they weren't billeted at the base, plotting all the way.

Dermot had made his first nebulous starts under Freddie's guidance. His criticisms, more like suggestions, helped keep Dermot on track. The plays, sketches really, weren't brilliant, but he had been proud of them. And so had Freddie. That had been a great year, until the end.

In December, Freddie's tuberculosis, which he'd had for years, flared up badly. Not even the daily sherry with the raw egg in it for breakfast helped, nor the medicine. He lost weight rapidly. Relieved of duty and confined to bed, he failed steadily and was gone within three months. The inspiration left Dermot. He dropped everything except his army duties. He didn't write, didn't sing, didn't act. He never left the house at night. Nothing. Except to occasionally run his fingers over the keys of the piano, to pick out one of Freddie's favorite tunes. Finally, to evade the memories, he resigned his commission, and went to England to work. It didn't matter.

Once in England, he was busy almost twenty-four hours a day. The

hurt grew less. Dermot found himself caught up in the tensions of the war, the night raids, the buzz bombs, the V-2's, and the fires. To relax he went to the theatres, where he could let go of the terrible strain. There he had found a kind of peace. He had also found Joan.

Joan. Pert, sassy--and English. A terrible great error in his life. Not because she was unkind or cruel. Ambitious maybe, but not a bad sort. More the fact that everything in their life together had been a rush. Married within six months of the day he'd met her. Home to Ireland, settled in business with his brother, and a father in a year. He was only twenty. Twenty years old and domesticated. Damn. She had urged him to write though. Not for the same reasons as he wanted to write for. He wrote to satisfy a need, some emptiness within himself. She wanted him to write for the money and the prestige, the more the better. He had written, not as much as with Freddie, nor of the caliber that he had written at first, just dribbling pieces, but it was a start.

The start. So long ago. They had both won in the literary battle in a way. He had made money, a lot of it, and had earned the prestige that she wanted him to have--and herself to have. He, in turn, had finally done the kind of writing that he had wanted to, writing plays instead of articles. But even that had faded, changed. Why had it changed? What had caused it? He wasn't sure, just felt a vague gnawing ache that he couldn't find a way to satisfy. He watched the smoke from his cigarette curl up and around the plaster

filigree on the ceiling, watched it cling to and obscure the fine details.

It had been fun in the beginning. Not serious work. The serious work had been feeding his ever-increasing family, which had grown to four before he knew it, then five. Then Joan, in her drive for wealth and comfort, had had her brainstorm.

"Let's move to Australia."

"Australia? What in the name of God for? Haven't we a good life here in Dublin? The business is going well. We've a lovely home, and there's lashin's to eat--for once."

"There's a lot of opportunity for writers there."

"I'm not a writer. I'm a carpenter."

"You are a writer. Haven't you sold two pieces this year?"

"That will hardly feed two adults and three children. Besides, those were magazine articles. You know I want to write a play. Australia isn't looking for playwrights."

"But Australia is begging for people. All manner of people. There are jobs to be had for tuppence. You could write there, and get paid much more for what you write. The money is much better there, better than any you could make here."

"Don't be foolish. We can't just drop everything and go. We've a family to care for. We'd have to start all over. No."

"We can do it. The children will grow in Australia, just like they would here."

"They'll grow in Dublin. They're Irish." Dermot snapped the Independent up, barricading himself behind it.

"They're English as well."

"The children were born in Ireland, their father is Irish, they're Irish. Period. I'm not destroyin' the business that is finally successful, sellin' the house, leavin' my parents and brothers and sisters to move to a bloody, scalding penal colony set up by the British in the middle of the Pacific Ocean."

Joan had won though. It had taken her eleven months to do it, but he had finally destroyed the business, sold the house, left his parents and the rest to move Joan and the children, and her parents, to Australia. He had been a commercial writer and had made money, all to Joan's delight.

Eleven hot miserable years and two more children later he had moved them all back. The damage had been done. The more he worked the more he wrote. The more he wrote the more money he made. And the more he and Joan had drifted apart. The money was never enough, not with her, her parents, and five children, so he worked other jobs, made more money. Still they drifted. It was as if the heat of the desert he worked in for the last eighteen months he was in the God-forsaken country had dried up all the ties they had ever had between them.

She had left him within a year of their return to Dublin, taking the two youngest--a son and a daughter--and had gone back to England. That had been the crush. To take his only son and raise him as an



Englishman. It had extinguished any residual feeling he may have had for her.

There was no use dredgin' up the past. It was the present he needed to do somethin' with. Dermot drank deeply and long. The brandy, thick and warm, relaxed him. He put his feet up on the desk. "I can feel that goin' right down in me, and doin' me the world o' good." Brandy, Dan's drink. Dan had taught him to drink it long ago, said it was the drink of gentlemen and that it was a safe drink, one to make an entire evening of without losing your senses over it. "Proved you wrong there, didn't I, Dan? It's not the way you taught me, I know. This is my own way, my special flourish. It has taken me ten years to develop it, all by myself. I've worked on it steadily, and I doubt there's a man living who can better me at it. What do you think? I hear you. I'm as grown as I'll ever get. Mam knows. She tolerates it. I was a member of the Pioneers until I was twenty-two, wasn't I? . . . Yes, sir. I apologize. I wasn't trying to be disrespectful. You know that, don't you, Mam? I was just remembering."

Dermot rolled the crystal stopper over the desk top, listening to the staccato of the facets against the wood. "Mam? Dan? Can't you talk to the others? Mostly to Siobhann. She's a great, bloody pain. Won't let me kip in for a decent night's rest." He put his head down. "Please. Just a little sleep. Then I'll work. Even when I wasn't working, I worked. Made money. Sold those plays,

didn't I? When I lived up in the Wicklow Mountains? You remember, Dan. I wrote all the time."

The tiny trailer with the onion patch and the birch floated through the liquid amber fog. He'd lived there and written. It had been quiet. Nobody bothered him. He could go to Powerscourt if he wanted to, or Sally Gap. That's where he'd written the first big play. "Remember? It's not quiet anymore. They won't let me alone. I can't get any rest. Help me, Dan. Mam."

His fingers loosened on the neck of the half empty bottle. His head nestled into the crook of the arm flung across the desk. "Just forty winks, Dan. Like you used to catch before supper." The crystal stopper rolled out from under the tips of the now inert fingers, onto the floor. The room, quiet now in the early morning grayness, seethed, echoed with the breathing of the exhausted man at the desk, and the steady rhythmic pulse of the waiting, the ever watchful.

## 2

"I want a good part, Dermot. Not that measly little throllop you were after givin' me before. Do you understand that?"

"Siobhann . . . ."

"Don't Siobhann me . . . you tried that last time. I let you get away with it then. I won't have it this time."

"Siobhann . . . shut your gob. I'm writin' this play, not you. I'll give you what you deserve."

"Make sure it's a good part; I'm warning you."

"You great red-headed, raw-boned fishmonger. Why don't you go divil the people in Moore Street? I'm the playwright. You're only a player."

"Oh . . . so you want to have to, do you? Like in the old days?"

"No, not like in the old days." The old days. He'd met Siobhann, or the inspiration for the greater part of her character, in the Gate Theatre, many years ago. She had been young, and talented--and a lover. She had been cast in the lead in one of his first plays, and since he was constantly at rehearsals, rewriting as the show progressed toward opening, they spent many hours together. She had been helpful, kind, patient. But she was also ambitious. And volatile. It had been a stormy affair, though both he and Siobhann had done well by it. He became a successful playwright, a commercial success admittedly, but what the hell. She became a star on the Dublin stage, mostly as the lead in his shows. As their careers had spiralled upward, so had her ego. She became more and more critical of his work, particularly in relation to her roles. It was not an uncommon occurrence at rehearsals for her to walk off the stage, into the audience where he sat, and tell him to change a line or a scene. Not ask--tell. And he'd done it, many a time.

When he had started writing the big play, she had collaborated with him, doing research. And her character had fused with all the great actresses of the Dublin stage, with the women of Irish history and legend. She was Sara Allgood, Deirdre, the Countess Markievicz,

and Cathleen ni Houlihan all rolled into one. And that made her a tyrant. She had hounded him through it all, just as she was hounding him now, though the real Siobhann was long since gone. "Siobhann. . . ."

"Don't try to renege."

"All right, all right. Have it your way."

"Siobhann, why don't you let Dermot write the whole play--by himself?"

"I'll not have any of your advice, Miss Kathleen, thank you."

"You devil him so."

"It's all right, Kathleen. I'm used to Siobhann's nagging. She reminds me of the missus--the ex-missus."

"Tanks awfully, luv."

"Whisht, Siobhann. None o' your venom. She shouldn't, Dermot. We might have had this play long ago if she'd leave you be."

"I wouldn't be too harsh on Siobhann, Kathleen. After all, between her and myself, we've kept Dermot writing."

"Oh, have you really, Dennis?"

"Yes, we have."

"What about myself? And Sean? And Fergus? And Nieve?"

"What about them?"

"We've all worked on this play, not just you and Siobhann."

"Why don't you all bugger off and leave me alone?" Dermot ran his hands through his hair, what was left of the rapidly thinning salt and pepper, and lit a cigarette.

"Mam, you see how they act? It's like this all the time. Nag,

nag, nag. 'I want this. I want that. Why don't you something or other' every damn minute of the day. For five bloody years. No wonder I can't work." He reached for the ever present brandy bottle.

"You're not going to start drinking again, are you? Dermot, how do you expect to get the bloody play done?"

"I've done it before, Sean."

"And ended up pitching it on the fire after."

"Five years of manuscripts up in smoke. Why can't you write like you did in the trailer?"

"Because you won't leave me alone, Fergus, that's why."

"We left you alone once. What did you do then, Dermot?"

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

"Why not? You asked us to leave you alone, and all we're trying to do is remind you what happens when we do."

"I know." He thought back fifteen years. The first manuscript he'd completed of the big play, this play. He'd been so proud of it. All the others had been successful, had made him money, but they didn't hold the special attraction this one did. They had made it so that he didn't have to live in the trailer any more. Didn't have to ride to Dublin on the minibike. Didn't have to live on the government subsidy. Now people had come for him, taken him to interviews, parties, debuts. He had been the toast of the town. It hadn't been as easy to write anymore. No time. But he had enjoyed it. Enjoyed being in demand, being a celebrity. And he didn't have to worry about money. What the plays didn't bring in, the public appearances did.

Then, at the height of this success, he had had this brainstorm. His darling. The ultimate goal. He was going to make a name for himself, to be bigger than O'Casey, than Synge, Yeats, than any Irish playwright heretofore. He would write the definitive Irish play.

He knew he could. He had gotten the original idea after seeing the Abbey's revival of "Plough." It would take place during the Rising, in the city center, near the GPO. The characters would come from the leaders of the IRA--Collins, Pearse, Connally, McDonagh--and from Irish legend--Cathleen ni Houlihan, Red Hanrahan, Cuchulainn, Brian Boru, Dierdre. He would encapsulate all of Irish history, all of what Ireland had stood for, all of what it stood for now, all the passion, chaos and turmoil, into one play. That would make him be remembered forever. He would become Irish history himself. Make him more than just a commercial success.

Yet when he had tried to put it down, to make it cohesive, whole, it had not gone well. All the characters had come, had blended their respective pasts together, but they fought with each other, fought the action. It had taken him a year to meld them together. A solid year of writing, reading, researching to produce those first four acts. But he'd done it, and maintained the social life as well. Then he was ready to take it out and introduce it to the world, to let them award him the laurel wreath for his effort.

He had submitted it to the Abbey. Since it was the national theatre, what more fitting place to present the national play? The Board of Directors had had a copy of the play for six weeks before

they had called him. No word for six weeks had nearly driven him starkers, especially since he hadn't had to wait for a play to be read in several years, but it had finally come. That crystalline April morning of the meeting he had dressed his very best and walked to the theatre. As he stood outside the boardroom he thought how prophetic, fitting that the play be produced, in that particular month, in the fiftieth year celebration of the Rising. Finally, he was introduced into the dark, mahogany room, lined with the portraits of the founders, of the legends of the Abbey. He'd probably get his portrait hung there as well.

"Good morning, Mr. MacRaemon. Won't you please be seated?" The dour, dry faces all focused slightly over his left shoulder, leaving him vaguely discomfitted.

"Certainly." Dermot sat in the stiff, highbacked chair.

"Mr. MacRaemon, we have called you here to discuss your play. To hear from you a defense of your actions."

"A defense? What do you mean by 'defense'?"

"Normally, a rejection of a manuscript is handled through a letter, but due to the extraordinary circumstances--your celebrity, notoriety--what you will--we felt that this matter would best be handled in closed conference, out of deference for your position in the rest of the theatre community."

Rejection seared through his brain, burning out their drone.

"Rejection? You're rejecting my play?"

"Yes. We feel that it is not of the necessarily high standards

that must be maintained by the National Theatre of Ireland."

"Not of the necessarily high standards . . . Do you know how much time I've put into that manuscript? How much effort? Don't you know who you are talking to?" Shaking, torn between laughter and tears at the ridiculousness of the situation, he groped to express himself.

"Please. While we acknowledge your success, you have not presented, in your plays and in this manuscript in particular, the cultural background that we try to present at the Abbey."

"What's wrong with the play? It's all about cultural background, the cultural background of Ireland."

"But it is of less than acceptable quality. We cannot produce an inferior play. Perhaps if you were to explain . . . ."

"Explain? I'll explain nothing. It explains itself. What more do you want? It's about Ireland. You arrogant bastards keep my play for six bloody weeks, then call me down here to tell me it's not good enough for you."

"Mr. MacRaemon, please take hold of yourself. Lower your voice."

"Like bloody hell I will! I poured everything I had into this." He snatched the manuscript off the table top, punctuated his thoughts, emotions with its gyrations. "And all you goms can tell me is that you reject it."

Their words echoed hollowly at the back of his now throbbing head. Dermot realized that he was crying, racked with the choking of his outburst. He ran into the nearest pub, into the dark. "A brandy."



He walked to one of the private conversation booths. "I'll take it in here." The brandy came through the partition. That had been the first in a series of binges. He had gone through all his money, through an entire day, and it still had not been enough. So he had gone out the next day, doing the same, and the next. Always in a quiet, unknown little pub. Always with the manuscript, grown battered, dingy, and stained, clutched to him. That was the beginning. Five slow years ago.

After the first week he had come around, had tried to rally himself out of his torpor, into the speaking engagement. He mustered the strength to eat, to shave the week's growth from his face, to wash away the innumerable pubs he'd crawled through. But it hadn't lasted. He'd gone back to the brandy, ruined the speech, left in the middle after screaming at the audience that they were a bloody lot of thick cows. To hell with them all. With everything. That had made the headlines. He didn't care. He refused or ignored the other invitations until they no longer came. It didn't matter. He couldn't eradicate the scoriations the Abbey board had inflicted.

Then they had come.

Slowly and gently. At first prodding, giving more insight to their characters, their pasts. Then growing more insistent when Dermot failed to comprehend, to translate their emotions into the written word. The less he accomplished, the more he drank, and the more the memory seemed to rankle, to stifle his ability. That had gone on for better than a year. Until he tried to find an alternative

solution.

He had grown despondent, unresponsive to their ultimatums, to the point that he did not write at all. Merely drank. The solicitors handled all his business affairs, and he simply sat in the Georgian house--inert. He had torn up all but the original manuscript, which he kept locked in the desk drawer, bringing it out only when he was well in his cups, and then only to hold, never to read.

Siobhann, aggressive from the outset, had berated him steadily, the others chiming in as they felt like it. One gray December night, she went at it with extra zest, having started early in the afternoon and keeping at it until well into the night. "You're a loser, Dermot. You sit here, day after day, scuthered, not writing, not thinking. How do you expect to get the play written? Do you think you'll ever do anything except sit on that arse of yours and nurse a bottle? Listen to me, Dermot. You will never, never make it. You're not of the caliber for immortality, for history. You're a drunk, gutter trash, who's drinking himself into the grave."

"Go way, bitch. Go war on your legend."

"That would be easy for you, wouldn't it? Not possessing an ounce of sense yourself, nor any creative talent, you try and rid yourself of those that are willing to give it to you."

The crack about talent grazed the unhealed memory. "Whore. I created you. Therefore, I have some talent, though it may not be of the highest quality in your case. You stem from a noble background, but you're comin' to a bither end."

"Pearls out of the mouth of the great almighty? Listen round, people, his eminence speaks."

"Get out, all of you."

"What will you do without us? Would you like me to lay it out in detail?"

"Siobhann, one more snide remark and you won't be in the play any longer."

"Don't threaten me."

"It's no threat. It's just a statement of fact."

"Your statements all come out of a bottle. You can't any more get rid of me than you can write the play."

Dermot, caught short, was silent.

"I thought so. You're spineless, Dermot."

Dermot staggered off the divan, toward the fireplace. Leaning against the mantelpiece, he carefully began to tear the pages from the worn and faded manuscript that he had carried all this time, and throw them, a few at a time, into the fire, until nothing remained.

"Nothing. No change, Dermot. We're still here."

He could feel their gloating eyes mocking him. "There is still one other thing I can do." He reeled out of the room, down the hall, to the bath. Fumbling through the medicine press, he found Dan's straight razor, the only keepsake other than the IRA medal that he had wanted after Dan's death. "This will stop you."

"Dermot, wait. Don't be rash."

"I'm tired. Tired of the strain, the torment. Tired of your continual bitching, the constant recriminations. I want out, to be free, and this will solve that."

"It will solve a lot of things--permanently."

"I don't bloody well care." Dermot opened the razor, its edge crisp, biting in the dim light.

"What do you want?"

"I want to be left alone. I've no more strength. I can't go on like this. Don't you see?"

"All right. Have it your way for a while. We'll go. We'll go. Now."

The tension ebbed away. Dermot's knees gave way beneath him, left him crumpled on the cool tile. "Dan? What are you doing here? Mam. You, too? What is this? What? . . . I know. That's very observant of you. Yes, I'm drunk. More correctly a drunk . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Oh, God, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Don't go. I need you. Please. Please, don't go. I need help." He rolled, grovelled until the exhaustion caught him, draining him of all movement, all ability to control himself. There he lay shattered.

"But we came back too, didn't we?"

"Yes, Siobhann, you did, in full force. And you haven't given me one day's peace since."

"And I won't. Not until you've finished the play."

"I've finished it several times."

"It's not right yet, though, Dermot. You know that. As soon as it is, we'll be gone."

"I don't think you'll ever be gone, Fergus."

"Dermot, don't talk that way. We're only wishin' to help."

"I understand that, Kathleen, but look how far I've gone in all this time. What have I gotten done? Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"Shall we get back to work then?"

"All right, Dennis." Dermot stamped out his cigarette. "Dan, Mam, please stay. I'd like you to. I . . . Never mind. Just please stay for a little while." He drew out the long yellow tablet and a pencil. "Act One . . ." for the umpteenth time . . . .

## 3

"Mam? Dan? Do you like it?" Dermot was as close to sober as he could get. "You do? You think it's really ready now . . . ? I know it's up to me, but I want your opinion, too." He fondled the manuscript lovingly, ruffling the pages, listening to their soft whisper. "What about the rest of you?"

The rewriting had progressed steadily for a month, with only minor interruptions. The fits of depression seemed to lessen; Dermot spent more time at the typewriter and less on the bottle. In the calm, Dermot acted more rested, relaxed than he had been in a long time.

"Well?"

"I think it's fine, Dermot. The best."

"Thanks, Kathleen. Sean?"

"Smashin', Dermot."

"I personally think it's as close to a masterpiece as you'll ever get."

"I'm not sure how to take that, Dennis. Is it supposed to be a compliment?" Dermot edged forward in his chair.

"Take it for what it's worth. That bowzy wouldn't pay you a straight shot if his life depended on it."

"Let's not have any of that, Fergus. Siobhann? Nothing to say?"

"She's in a huff because you made her a whore again."

"Nieve, such language. And from my ingenue."

"Sorry, Dermot."

"Not to worry. Tomorrow I'll take it downtown."

"I wouldn't take it to the ash can."

"Siobhann . . . ."

"It's the same maggoty play you've always written. There are no changes, no improvements. The only difference is that this time you rearranged the sequence--and you didn't freeze in the middle of writing it."

Dermot sat immobile.

"I'll not mollycoddle you any longer. You're no playwright. You're a drunk. Plain and simple. Nothing more and nothing less."

He reached for the brandy.

"Go ahead and swill it down. See if it does you any good."

"Shut up."

"Go way. What are you going to do? You've tried just about everything. And failed miserably at all of it."

Her laughter, malevolent and metallic, rang in his ears. "I said shut up."

"Make me. Coward. Failure."

"Siobhann, don't."

"Stay out of this, Sean. All of you. This is between Dermot and myself. You have all babied him. I've told him. Told him more than once, about the play. Now I'll tell him about himself."

"What do you know about me?"

"Everything. I know you down to the last follicle of hair on your balding head. You're selfish, vain, greedy, a glory-seeker who's hungry for fame and success. You are also monumentally a coward. You've spent your entire life with people taking care of you, or in running away."

"That's a lie."

"Is it? Really?"

"You know bloody well it is."

"Think about it, Dermot. Your parents have always taken care of you--even now. They're here, watching over you. They've no peace. Joan took care of you until you drove her off, until she couldn't stand it any longer. And now us. We've been here a long time."

"Siobhann, you're going too far."

"Shut up, Dennis."

"No. He's right, Siobhann. You've gone too far this time."

Dermot drained the brandy from the bottle. "I'm through with you. With all the tripe I've put up with."

"You're running again. Like you've always run from anyone or anything that's crossed you."

"I've never run."

"Oh, haven't you? You started early, Dermot, very early to run."

"When?"

"The first time when the priest whipped you."

"I didn't deserve that."

"Then you should have gone back and faced him. But you didn't. Instead you quit, ran away."

"I was just a kid. How would I know? All I do know is that I did not deserve that beating."

"You never thought you deserved anything. What about London? Why did you leave?"

"Because I wanted to bring my new wife home."

"What other reason? There's more."

Dermot squirmed. He rose and walked to the sideboard, where he broke open a fresh bottle of brandy.

"What was the reason, Dermot? What about your job? You had a good one. Remember?"

"It was all right. Only all right."

"You were making good money."

"But I wasn't advancing."

"Why?"



He drank from the bottle, throwing himself down in the desk chair. "Because the bloody limeys are prejudiced against the Irish, that's why."

"That's not the reason, and you know it."

"It is."

"Liar. You left because you couldn't stand the heat. You didn't like your boss not being open-minded enough to let you work the hours you wanted to work, when you felt like it. Remember?"

"I came to work regularly."

"At noon."

"You're just like Joan. Always harpin', always grindin' away at me."

"Joan suffered as well."

"Like hell. I did whatever she wanted. Didn't I sell the business, move to Australia like she wanted? Move her family and our own there? Then move them back?"

"You moved. But only when you felt like it. Not before. Why did you move? You told her that you would only live here, in Ireland."

"I'm Irish. What's wrong with living here?"

"You moved though. Why?"

"She convinced me. It seemed right at the time."

"Why, Dermot? Why? You know the answer, don't you? Think, man."

The memory bored in at him, drove home Siobhann's point. He had been writing more and more after Joan's initial suggestion of moving.

She kept prompting, prodding him to write more. He had. She had wanted him to send some of his work to Australia, to show the people down there what he had to offer. Instead he had insisted on taking it around Dublin. To every theatre in the city. He took it to professionals, semi-professionals, to amateurs. He took it to everybody he knew of, all without success. After that he had taken it to surrounding theatres, to all the suburbs of Dublin, ranging ever wider and wider in his search. Piece after piece piled on his desk. Collected dust. Still he would not, steadfastly refused to, go outside of Ireland. He wrote more and more, and went out less and less, neglected his business. His brother ran it most of the time. Dermot would stay in and write day after day, churning out page after page. All of it stayed on his desk.

"Why did you leave, Dermot?"

He didn't like the memory. Its sharpness cut his numbed state, leaving him aching.

"Tell me, Dermot. I'd like to hear your real reason."

"You should understand this, Siobhann. I'm Irish. I live and breathe Ireland. But the atmosphere is not right, not conducive. Not now. Nor has it ever been. Not for writers. Writers, like me, love this country, love her history, her culture, her people. But she's a vicious woman. She'll destroy you if you live here. You get too close, too involved in what is going on. You want to write about it, to express the beauty of it, the power, but you can't. All the

history, the people, the everything pulls at you, tears you several directions at once, distorts your vision, and leaves you cut and bleeding. She'll bleed you raw. So you leave. Go to London, Paris, where ever. Just so you can get a proper perspective. I'm not the first to do it. Yeats, Synge, Shaw, O'Casey, scores of others. They all did it. All left. Then they wrote."

"You class yourself with them?"

"Why not?"

"Why not? History and intellect made them great. They didn't think of themselves as God's answer to the human race. They had talent."

"I don't?"

"You've a talent for the lie that won't quit. You left because you failed as a writer here. You couldn't sell any of your plays. Not even when you didn't do anything but work on them all day long. Your brother supported you and your wife and your children. When he said he wouldn't do it any longer, you sold your half of the business and ran to Australia."

"Siobhann, no more." He stood, the veins throbbing in his temples. "I'm through."

"You left because you sold nothing. Nothing. And that's why you came back. The same thing happened in Australia. You had some initial success, but then it died off because you were too busy being the party boy. When that happened and you didn't get your way any longer, you ran. Ran back to Dublin to cry in your beer about how

rotten it was away from here."

"I'll hear no more. I've had enough of you." Dermot, shaking and leaning on the desk, waved the brandy bottle in front of him.

"Tomorrow I'm going downtown, and I'm selling this manuscript." He slammed the bottle down. "Then you'll see. I'll be famous. And I'll be rid of you. When it's gone, so will you be."

"We'll see."

"No, damn you, you'll see. I don't even care any ore whether it's successful. I just want to get rid of it, to get rid of you."

"Yes, you do care whether it's successful. That's what you really care about--fame and money."

"No. No. That's not important. Not now. I just want to be shut of it, and you. Especially you."

"You'll never get rid of it. Because you'll never live down the humiliation of the Abbey. You might make it commercially successful, but not any other way. It's common. Like you're common. You're not even a good writer anymore. All you promise drowned in all those bottles of brandy. Oh, you've got money and you've got a name, but you don't have the lasting talent."

"You bitch." Dermot threw the bottle of brandy at the wall, shattering it. "You damnable bitch. I've talent. I'll make the Abbey eat its words. I'll be a legend yet. They'll regret they ever turned me down."

"No one will regret turning you down. They don't even remember you. Nobody does. You only remember yourself."

"Get out of here. Get out of my life." He lunged across the desk, falling on his hands and knees, screamed, threw anything that fell within his reach. Glasses, shoes, mementos, finally his manuscript found their way to various parts of the room.

"If I can do this to you, what do you think the rest of the world, the real world, will do?"

"Mam, help me."

"She can't help you."

"Dan . . . ."

"They're dead, Dermot. Dead. Like you're dead--from the neck up. You couldn't take the humiliation when someone turned you down. So you turned to the bottle; you crawled in and hid there. You relied on your memories and your fantasies to get you by. They're all fantods. That's all they've ever been."

Dermot crawled to the desk, ransacked the drawers.

"Looking for more support?"

"I'll destroy you, Siobhann. If it's the last thing I do, I'll destroy you."

"You destroyed yourself a long time ago by running away."

Dermot swept everything off the desk with his arm. The typewriter, paper, the phone. He began rummaging for the manuscript, throwing aside everything else, tearing everything from the walls, turning over the furniture. "Where is it? Where? I know it's here. It's here."

"Go ahead, crawl. You belong down there."

He muttered as he groped through the debris of his rampage, peered at every scrap of paper he touched. In the process he found a bottle of brandy that he dragged along with him. "I found it. I found it. Now you'll see, Siobhann. Now, you bitch, you'll get yours." He took the manuscript, tearing it apart, crumpling the pages, and mounded them in the middle of the desk. "Watch, Siobhann." He poured some of the brandy on the paper pyramid, dug in his pocket for the matches, struck one and dropped it on the pile. He struck another and dropped it, then another, repeating the action until there were no matches left. The papers caught quickly, flared up. Dermot threw more paper on the first set. Anything he touched went into the blaze. "You see? You see? Gone. No more." He watched the flames grow, spread across the desk. Charred flakes floated through the room, drifting, settling.

Dermot sat in the middle of the smoke-filled room, the bottle of brandy propped in his lap. "You'll not meddle with me any more. You gobshites." The flames licked up the curtains, across the rug, slowly, methodically moving across the room.

### III. TACTION

It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute for the force and beauty of its process.

--Henry James--

#### 1

Sebastian strained against the tie-downs. The covers, knocked askew by his tossing, slid off the foot of the bed into the moonlight that spread across the linoleum floor. He wrenched the straps that held his arms firmly in place. The effort showed in his muscles, in his tendons, and in the film of perspiration on his forehead. The cold light coming through the window marbled him, bleached him to a pale gray and white, making him one with the bed he was in. "No! God. Oh God! No!" His cry reverberated through the crystalline white corridors, dying slowly in the distance.

"Seb. Seb. Relax." Neara gripped the arched shoulders, attempted to force them back onto the bed, to calm his struggle. "Sebastian, stop it. Please, Seb, please try and relax. You're not doing yourself any good this way."

"Neara?"

"Yes, Seb. I'm here." Neara, tall and dark, hovered over him, talking softly, trying to get him to unwind.

"Neara. It happened again. The dream. The same one. It keeps coming back, every time I shut my eyes." His voice, barely audible, cracked. "Neara, help me. My hands . . . ." He tried to raise the one nearest her. "Throb . . . hurt . . . so bad . . . like they're on fire." A sob slipped from him.

"Do you want me to call the nurse?"

"No." He started fighting again. "Neara . . . ."

"Shh. Try not to think about anything. Just relax; try to sleep. If you'll sleep a little while, then it'll be better. Try. Please, Seb."

"What time is it?"

She checked her watch mechanically. "Four a.m., Seb. Try to rest now. It doesn't matter about the time."

"Give me a cigarette."

"You don't need a cigarette. You need sleep."

"For Chrissakes, give me a cigarette. Then I'll go to sleep."

Neara dug out the pack, lit one, extended it toward him. "You can't hold. . . ." She bit her lip, involuntarily drawing back as she did so. "I'll . . . I'll hold it for you. Here." She put the cigarette in his mouth.

"How long have I been here?"

"Two days. , Seb, come on, please, go to sleep." She leaned against the bed, soothing his forehead, running her long, cool fingers through his hair.

"I can't sleep. If it's not the dream, it's my hands."



She gave him the cigarette to drag on again, then took it back and drew on it herself. "Don't think about it."

"I can't help but think about it. One or the other won't let me do anything else."

"Sleep."

"Isn't there something you can do?" He twisted his arms in the cloth loops. "Undo the restraints. If I could move my arms, massage my hands, that'd help."

She shook her head.

"What the hell are these on here for anyway? Get them off."

Neara crushed out the cigarette. "I can't."

"Nobody'd know. Come on. Undo them."

"No."

"Then you massage my hands."

She paused, then began rummaging through her purse. "No. I can't."

"Neara, please . . . ."

"Seb, I can't . . . . I won't."

"Why not?" Irritation put an edge on his words. "Dammit, why not?"

"Because . . . ." She stopped herself, twisted away from him. In the silence she felt his eyes searching her back.

"Why? What's the matter with you? You always did it before. Why not now?"

"Seb, don't. Go to sleep. I don't want to talk about it."

Something in her tone betrayed her, grated against him. Sebastian

felt panic rising, tingling up his chest into his throat. "Neara. What is it? Why won't you do it?"

Silence.

"Why? Neara, why can't you massage my hands?" He struggled to sit up, but the straps prevented him. "Why?"

Nothing. Neara dug deeper into the bag, nervously throwing odd items on the table top.

"Neara. Neara, tell me why you won't do it." His voice grew louder. "Why?" He fought the tie-downs, making the bed jerk. "For God's sake, tell me." He heard her stifle a moan. "Why can't you massage my hands? Neara, tell me why!"

"Because you don't have any hands anymore, that's why." She stood, stricken, realizing that she had screamed at him.

The sharp finality of her words tore through him. "I don't have any . . . ." Sebastian's voice trailed off. He stared at her, paralyzed. "Jesus Christ Almighty, I don't . . . ." He sank back.

Fighting to control her emotions, Neara collapsed, covered her face with a kleenex. "Seb . . . Sebastian . . . I . . . I'm sorry."

"I don't have any hands. I don't have any hands. I don't have . . . ."

"Seb . . . ."

He mumbled the sentence, methodically, chantingly.

The pale pink sunlight filtered softly into the room, skipping

over the furniture, the rumpled sheets, the inert figure lying prone in the bed, his arms strapped above and below the elbow. Neara slept in the chair next to him, next to the bed, her arm stretched through the retaining bars to Sebastian's shoulder.

His eyes stared at nothing. He did not move, but his face, drawn and sallow, revealed the intensity of the night's realization. His mind raced flittingly over his career, his life, the events of the last ten days. He'd been gifted until two days ago. With talent, with a beautiful, understanding woman, with a moderate achievement of his goals. It was a life not without its minor, not unusual pitfalls, but a more than decent life, nonetheless. And his career, slow to start with, had begun to burgeon in the last few years. He had finally, really made it. Everything had turned out like he'd wanted. Now what? A sculptor with no hands. A faint shadow stole across his face, clouding the bright blue eyes, giving a grayness to him that reached beyond his physical discomfort. Nothing. All gone for nothing. Lost. Everything he knew how to do, everything he'd ever wanted to do, everything he'd ever studied. Gone. With those two hands.

It had begun at the Institute. Ten? No. Fifteen . . . fifteen years ago. On a lark. He had enrolled in the sculpture class for a change of pace from commercial art--and because there was a gorgeous, tall, dark-haired girl also enrolled in that class. He had always loved art, had always wanted to work in that field, for as long as

he could remember. She added incentive to his desire. So tall, lithe, and graceful, with the largest, greenest eyes he'd ever seen. That had been a semester for many firsts.

That class, under the direction of the crusty little Enrico Sorenciento, had been his first experience with the art form that he adopted as his own from then on, with the field that was to become his forte. He was a natural. From the very beginning the medium suited him as much as he suited it. Under the critical eye of the signore he had blossomed quickly. He has mastered clay within a month, making it do whatever he wished. His ideas were fresh and new, and he shied away from the traditional exercises that the rest of the class indulged in. Sorenciento encouraged him to explore, gave him extra time, provided the necessary hints that made the clay more responsive to his touch. The only problem that he had with the clay was its consistency. He didn't like its heavy, opaque texture. It was limited, cold. Even at its best, with the hints and the shortcuts from Sorenciento and the deftness of his own fingers, Sebastian couldn't achieve the liveliness in his work that he sought from the outset. The clay remained weighted, lumpy.

From clay he had moved to wax. That had proved a Godsend, had marked a turning point. The wax yielded itself to him completely. Under his caress, and Mr. Sorenciento's watchful eye, it evolved slowly in his hands into the tall, graceful figures that were to win him recognition and awards throughout his five years at the Institute.

At the same time that he had transferred to wax, he had moved

in with the tall green-eyed girl. Their little one-room studio, cluttered with the paraphernalia of their assorted seminars, was their retreat from the everyday hassles. There they had experimented with wax, with paint, and with pain. Their ideas clashed. She was more traditional and he would chide her for it, saying that she had no talent, that she was a copyist. She would cry; they would argue; she would leave. He'd mope for two or three days, wonder where she went, fall prey to jealousy, and apologize when she finally showed up in class again. It was funny--she'd never, not even one time, criticized his work. No matter how hard he'd been on hers. He'd gotten a lot of ideas from her and never thanked her for one of them. He hadn't even noticed when she stopped working--not until she hadn't done any of her assignments, until she dropped out. She'd encouraged him to go on, to keep working. She finally had gotten a job so that they could move into a bigger apartment, one that had a small studio attached where he could work without being disturbed.

Between the studio at home and the studio at the Institute he had developed the statuesque forms that had become his trademark. Thin, soft, delicate, the pieces filamented out into a three-dimensional vibrance that he never stopped experimenting with. The light had flickered over the wax, made it transparent at its thinnest, so that the light seemed to well up from within the piece. That had pleased him. It was the lightness and the airiness that he had wanted, but couldn't get, in the clay. He would tie all the airy webs together with the dark solid pedestals that grew upward, uniting

all the filaments into one piece. Yet there was no sense of inactivity about his work. It lived, almost breathed, in its delicacy. That he had liked most of all.

Mr. Sorenciento had thought enough of his work that he arranged for a special grant for Sebastian, one that allowed him to buy the materials that he needed, and when Sebastian hadn't had the money, Sorenciento had even arranged for two of his sculptures to be cast. The grant took care of the next year, the year he had moved full time into metals. The cold, hard glint of polished brass lent a tension to the thinness, the grace that he had achieved with the wax. Sebastian's figures, both cast and welded, grew larger, more dynamic. Light danced off them, catching every nuance, every gesture, as if the forms, suspended in time, carried a small electric charge of their own. Those figures gained him entry to the shows and contests around town, eventually around the state. More awards, more recognition.

What good would all that do him now? He looked at the bandages. The long, tapered fingers gone. He felt numb. Nothing.

Neara stirred beside him, her fingers instinctively reaching for his face to graze his cheek, as they had every morning for a long time now. The habit had started as a joke, a way to tickle Sebastian. The only way to get him up, so he could go to classes. Over the years it had become a daily ritual, a silent proffering. "Seb. You're awake."

"Yes." He turned his head toward her, gently cradling her fingers

between his chin and shoulder, exerting a faint pressure. That was the second stage of the ritual, his silent answer to her silent offering. He noticed that her face showed the ordeal of last night, of the last few days. A sadness dimmed her eyes, sharpening her softly beveled features. Time hadn't taken advantage of Neara. There was a little gray at the temple, with a stray here and there through the auburn hair; a few faint wrinkles traced quietly around her eyes. But she hadn't lost her figure, or her energy. And those big green eyes. Even through the sadness. If they had done anything, they had grown greener, more lustrous, like a fresh chunk of emerald. Greener than on the first day she'd turned them in his direction. "Come here."

She bent over him, her hair falling, making a dark curtain around them. She kissed him lightly, afraid that he might crack under too much stress. "Seb . . . I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to know, not right . . . ."

"It's all right." The brusqueness of his answer surprised him, separated them. He forced the allusion from his mind, made himself adopt a gentleness, a calm that he didn't really feel. "It's all right, Neara. You couldn't help it. I practically beat it out of you." She nodded--one of those sharp, short jerks of her head that he knew so well. "You okay?"

She nodded again.

"You sure? Come on, give us a kiss."

"Yes, Seb, I'm okay." She kissed him again. "You?"

He forced a thin smile, nodded.

"Do you hurt? Is there anything I can do?"

He shook his head, wondering why it was that the harder you tried to avoid something, the quicker it got brought up.

"Can I get you something?"

"No." He tried hard to swallow the lump in his throat.

The strain she heard in his whisper made her wince. She reached out, stroked his neck.

"Why, Neara? Why did they have to . . . ." He nodded toward his arms.

"The doctor said they . . . that they . . . they couldn't be saved. They were too badly mangled . . . too broken to . . . to put back . . . to reconstruct."

"When did he d . . . decide?"

"About four hours after you came in." She fought to maintain her composure as he lost his. "Let's not talk about it now. You need sleep."

"I can't."

"Please try."

"I told you, dammit. I can't. Get me a cigarette."

"If I do, will you try to get some rest afterwards?"

"Maybe if I . . . ."

"Sebastian, will you try to rest?"

Silence.

"Seb, answer me."

"I keep seeing that block of marble. Tall, cold, white."



"Forget about it, Seb." His tone scared her. Where was his mind wandering now? His eyes were, like his voice, far away.

"The chisel in that ecru vein, at the heart of the block. The fissure. The splitting off. The fall."

"Sebastian."

"I stood there. With my arms out. To catch it." A lop-sided half-grin-half-grimace twisted his features. "I caught it too, didn't I? What'd it weigh? Maybe a hundred and twenty-five, a hundred and fifty?"

"Don't."

"Took me right to my knees. I don't think I even screamed. It's like slow motion. The chunk floating down, then the instant . . . ."

"Stop."

"The instant pain . . . Jesus God, the pain . . . like . . . like . . . ripping my skin off."

"Stop it. Stop torturing yourself. Stop torturing me."

"I remember your scream, the look on your face when you came running into the studio."

"Sebastian! I can't stand this. Stop. Please stop it!"

"The pain was . . . was unbelievable. But I didn't, couldn't pass out. You stood there, screaming, crying, and I just looked at you."

"Stop it. Stop it! Now!" She shook him. The tears streamed down her cheeks.

"I saw the blood, all the blood. Like the marble was bleeding

to death. There was so much. It seemed as if it couldn't stop coming."

"Sebastian!" She whirled, left the room.

The trace of her fingers reddened across the side of his face.

He gave no heed. "You ran out, into the garden. I can see you running. I thought you were running away, going to leave me there. I called after you. Watched, waited. It seemed forever. The same slow motion. Then the gardener came, with the axe handle--you ran away, into the house--he lifted the stone. I stayed there, on my knees, my hands in front of me. What was left of them. They were split, the bones sticking out in a dozen different places. Little fragments of white, protruding out of red and pink. Two of my fingers were cut off, a third dangled by a thread. A vein? Skin? They didn't have any shape. Like so much clay. Just bloody, flattened, pulp at the ends of my arms. So much blood . . . so much . . . ."

## 3

The coolness of the sliding door seeped into Sebastian's forehead, soothing the ache he felt behind his eyes. The ache that forced him to keep his eyes closed against the light and the view. No. Not yet. He couldn't. It wasn't the time. He turned his back on the studio door, back toward the interior of the house. The dark passageway shielded and enveloped him in its softness. He stopped at the deepest point of the darkness.

Neara was right on one account. It had to be sometime. She

knew that he'd have to . . . . How long had it been since . . . ? Three weeks? A month? That was how long he'd been home from the hospital. And this was the closest he'd been to the studio since . . . since it . . . happened. He half-turned. No, it wasn't any use. He couldn't go in there. A pause. But he should face it. He had to face it. Sometime. He threw the sliding door back with a quick jab of his elbow and strode to the center of the room, not thinking, not opening his eyes until he felt the warmth of the sun where it came through the skylight.

In. First step.

"Oh, God." The first glimpse of the statuary around him caused him to step back, sent the electric charge of recognition, of the final realization, through him. Why? Why had he ever come in there? What could he do but look at these pieces and remember? What was he doing? Why had he let her talk him into it? She didn't know. Couldn't know. But why hadn't she realized?

"Son of a bitch." The words broke from him, loud, reverberating, as Sebastian kicked the small pile of marble chips at his feet, scattering them across the stone floor. The statuary stared, silent, aloof. What was the point? "Christ, Neara, how could you?" He shivered involuntarily. It was different. Colder somehow. It had been so warm there. The studio had given him many satisfying hours. Long hours, but hours that had made him feel alive, vital.

By forcing him in there, she'd made him remember all of it. He wasn't vital any more. How could he be? With . . . stumps. What

good was he? A sculptor without hands? Without the very tools that had made him what he was?

Damn her.

She never realized until it was too late. She wasn't an artist. Didn't have an artist's sensibility. That was why she'd given up in college.

College. Sebastian snorted. A short, cynical catch as the memory floated back. He'd worked, and worked hard. Not her. She quit. She got the nine-to-fiver, kept the routine, and liked it. She was content. Not him. Not with the ordinariness of it. He hadn't been then. He wouldn't be now. Now. What did he do? Everything was lost under that chunk of marble. And she couldn't understand, couldn't begin to imagine the feelings if she'd live to be a thousand. Hanna Housewife, that was her.

The image of soft, white stone, symmetrical and smooth, straight from the quarry, formed in his mind. The clean, virgin stone. His first encounter with it. The running of his hands over all the surfaces. The examination for flaws before the hammer and chisel ever came into play. The blocking of the idea, framed on paper and in his mind, so that the finished piece was photographed, distilled, and crystallized. Isolated in space and time. That way the image in his head transferred itself to the stone. That had been the secret. The preparation so thorough that the final sculpture would be flawless, almost secondary by comparison to the amount of work that went before.

Like the statuary around the room. All attestations to his care, his study. Then the execution. Slow and deliberate. Done with love and patience. With all the dexterity he could muster. Each sculpture became an affair, a woman to be won. The marble a mistress to caress, to croon to, to handle with infinite grace and leisure. That way the results were so satisfying. Excruciatingly pleasant, like making love. The remembered hurt caught in his chest.

Those had been the good times. To get up early and sling on the first thing that came to hand. The cup of coffee and that first cigarette. The languid stroll to the studio, where the particular "her" was waiting for him. Once there, he would smoke, drink his coffee, and look at "her," studying "her" shape, "her" outlines. Then that initial touch. The love affair would begin, and would last through the day, for however long it took. Nothing mattered but "her." Finally, at night, he would go back, exhausted, but with the quiet, warm, relaxation that he got nowhere else. There were even those times that he would steal back to the studio, in the middle of the night, to be with "her," to touch "her" once again, because he could not bear to be away from "her" that long. After all that came the bitter sweet end. The sadness and the sense of accomplishment, of something gained and yet of something irreparably lost . . . .

Sebastian pushed the memory deep into some sequestered crevice of his mind, and stood shaking in the warmth of the sun spilling in the skylight, his arms limp at his sides.

"Seb?" Neara's head peered around the door. "There you are.  
What are you doing?"

"What you asked, what you've been asking me to do for three weeks."

She sighed, stepped into the room, forcing the brightness into  
her voice. "Feel better?"

He shrugged.

"Ready to go?" She held a coat forward.

"Where?"

"You know perfectly well where. To the therapist s."

"Mother Hen. I don't remember you being one before. But damn,  
you're doing yourself brown now."

"Come on. We'll be late."

"I'm not four. Don't talk to me in that tone of voice. I'll go  
when I feel like it."

"Sebastian. It's getting late." The tiredness, the impatience  
tinged her words. "Let's go. Now."

"Go to hell. Why bother? Nothing's going to come of it."

She stared at his back; he stared at the floor. "Today they're  
to fit . . . ."

"Don't say it. I don't want to hear about it." His voice,  
sharp and level, rang through the studio.

"Seb, stop acting like a child. You've known all along that  
. . . ."

"Shut up! Shut up and get out of here." He trembled.

"Sebastian!"

"Get the hell out, Neara! You wanted me here. I'm here. Leave me alone now. I don't care about the therapist. Or his mechanical toys. They won't do me any good. They can't get back what's gone. So go--now--and don't come back in here. Ever." He listened to her bang the sliding door behind him, knew that she was probably crying. He could hear her routine. I only wanted to help. I'm trying to make it easier for you. There was no need for you to talk to me like that. It hasn't been easy for me either. I know you're upset, that you're trying to adjust. But you needn't take it out on me. The scene was so familiar; it had been played so many times. He sighed. "Stupid bitch." The martyr routine. Florence Nightingale and the Suffering Servant rolled into one.

## 4

The morning sun filtered through the kitchen window, glinted off the half-filled coffee cups. Sebastian stared out into the garden at the pink marble fountain that stood in the middle of the small pond. Its edges, softly beveled, sloped from one section to the next; the water cascaded down in a continuous, erratic line to where it slid noiselessly into the fluted black granite basin. His eyes followed the course of the water, across the surfaces of the smoothly finished marble, darting now and again to the polished metal arcs when they caught the light, and into the dark shining basin, where they flowed back to the top to repeat the cycle. He had played with that sculpture, though it had taken nearly a year to do it, most of the time being

spent in hunting for the right shade of granite, and a big enough piece of it. Then he'd had to design the plumbing system, and find someone to bore out the finished pieces of marble without cracking them. It had been a chore, but the delight he felt in sitting and watching it at breakfast more than counter-balanced the drudgery. He reached for his coffee, breaking his mood. He sneered at the mechanical hand wrapped clumsily around the cup.

"I'll never get used to the damn thing."

Neara glanced over the paper at him, snapped the paper back up in front of her. "More coffee?"

"No." Her tone irritated him.

"Mmmn."

"I'm going to the studio."

"Mmmn."

He shoved the chair back to the table, making the cups rattle on their saucers. She flipped a look at him, turned a page. Iceberg. She hadn't treated him like that since college. "See you later."

No answer.

Sebastian shrugged. He knew she was mad over the incident in the studio, but this was getting stale. The old Neara, the Neara that he hadn't seen in years, that he thought was gone, had suddenly reappeared. She had this aloofness in college, whenever he had yelled at her, whenever he had really criticized her work unsparingly. She would usually disappear and he would have to go hunt her down in one of the sleazy little hotels downtown, or at one of her friends' places.



The worst had been the final one, the time he had asked her to marry him.

It had been a particularly rough semester. And now jury grading was coming up. Neara had been having difficulty with her project; she couldn't get the piece to do what she had wanted it to. She had talked with her fellow students and with Mr. Sorenciento, but they had not helped. She just couldn't find the right line. She interrupted Sebastian at his sculpture. "Can I bother you for a minute?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

"Some advice."

"Shoot."

"I can't get the main piece for the jury-grading to do what I want it to. Could you look at it for me? I'm to the point now that I can't see what's wrong with it anymore; I only know that there is something not quite right about it."

He'd looked at it. And proceeded to tear it to shreds. "It's too massive for your design. There's not enough space and light in the work, which indicates too rapid an execution. You haven't thought enough about your design to make it come out of the piece; it's more like you are trying to put it over the material, to mold it. The design itself is weak, doesn't show any vibrancy or any fluidity. Too static, lumpy almost. I wouldn't have done it that way. Your best bet would be to ask for an extension and start over. This is

really kind of worthless."

"Thank you very much. I asked for advice, not a hatchet job." Neara tore the smock from around her, wadded it up, and threw it at him.

"You wanted to know what I thought, didn't you? I told you."

"You know damn well that I can't ask for an extension. I need to get this in now. You aren't making matters any easier."

"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

"Go to hell." She gathered up her supplies, throwing them into the tool box.

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

"Where?"

"What do you care? Just out. Leave me alone."

She'd gone. Hadn't come home that night. Or the next morning. It went on that way for a week. Sebastian thought that she'd come to her senses, but when she didn't show up on Saturday, he had decided to go look for her. He tried the hotels. No luck. Then her friends. They hadn't seen her, or said they hadn't. She didn't show at any of her classes either. By the end of the second week, Sebastian had begun to panic. He hadn't seen or heard from Neara, couldn't find any trace of her. Then she had just showed up at the apartment one morning.

"Where the hell have you been, Neara? I've looked everywhere for you."

"Away. Excuse me." She walked past him, into the bedroom.

"What do you mean 'away'? Where've you been? What are you doing?"

"What's it look like? Packing."

"Why?"

"I'm leaving."

"For good?"

"For good."

"Why? Just because I criticized your work?"

"You didn't criticize it, you butchered it. I'm through, Sebastian. I have feelings just like anyone else, and I don't have to stand around and let you trample on them. I'm a person too. If you think you're so God-Almighty-wonderful then you live by yourself. I'm not putting up with it any more. I help you when you ask for it. I've taken care of you, lived with you, supported you, and given you just about anything you've wanted. To have it all thrown back in my face. Well, no more, my little friend. You do it on your own now. I'm gone."

"Neara, let's talk about this."

"No more talk, Sebastian. We've talked about this before, and the same thing always happens. You apologize, everything's fine for about three weeks, then it all starts over again. Only not this time."

"What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It's all yours now."

"Come on, Neara, I love you."

"I love you, too. But not enough to disappear as an individual. If you think that you can use people as it suits you, you are in for many a disappointment in this life."

Her coolness unnerved him. He couldn't break through the deadly calm of her attitude toward him. "Please, Neara. Don't do this. I need you."

"You don't need anyone."

"Yes, I do. I want you here. Please. I'll change, I promise. I'll work on it. Just don't go."

"We've been through all this before."

"Please, Neara." She was really going to leave him, he could see that. "Marry me."

"What?"

"Marry me. I didn't know what to do this time, when I couldn't find you. I want you here, all the time. Please."

It had gone on like that through the day and well into the night. In the end he had convinced her that he would change, that he would make a conscious effort, that he really wanted to marry her. She finally believed him. Married him. But gave up her artistic career. And slowly, imperceptibly, she had allowed herself to slip into the role of housefrau. The independence was submerged, buried, for Sebastian's needs and wants. Now it seemed to be re-emerging. They'd fought over the years, she'd be angry, but the tone in her voice this morning hadn't been there for a long time. She didn't show any signs of leaving though; maybe she just wanted to dig at him for the other

day. He didn't have time to worry too much about it now. Besides, the situation was different from before.

As he walked through the house his hands trailed across the furniture, an ingrained pattern that he had followed. His fingertips grazed the surface of the objects he passed, lamps, tabletops, fabric, small pieces of sculpture, the walls, He stopped in the corridor to the studio, realizing what he'd done. "I just did the morning routine . . . and got nothing from it. No feelings, no impressions." He looked at the artificial hands. "Useless." He leaned against the wall, his breakfast turning over in his stomach. "Goddammit."

He tried to collect his thoughts. The pattern, the memory, of his life burned dully in his head. Sebastian slammed into the studio. Once there, he moved from statue to statue. He had to make the final confrontation, the one he had been avoiding all along. It was time to face the cause of everything he felt. The stone. The stone. The tall, white obelisk of marble he had been working on that day, the day of the accident. Where was it? He had not dared to pay close enough attention, when he had entered the studio the other day, to those particulars that made up his world before . . . . Had he . . . ? He forced himself to recall the events of the last time he had worked on the stone, the events of all the days since. Moved surely, but where to? That day he had walked to the studio as usual. The stone sat in the middle of the room. Clean, smooth, brilliant. Waiting for him. He had walked to it, run his hands over it, fondling the

soft coolness of it. The image of his design traced through the stone, a shadow waiting to be exposed to full light. The check for flaws, for weak veins, then the slow and deliberate raising of the hammer and chisel. That first blow. The gentle chipping away. Exact. Precise. Then that blow. He'd seen the slightly discolored vein, egg-shell colored in comparison to the pure, bright white of the rest of the stone. Strong enough to bear the stroke. But it hadn't been. The slow motion fall of that corner section. His hands reaching out. He blocked the rest of the memory, shut it off. When had the stone disappeared? Had he told Neara to remove it? In the hospital?

He wanted to see the stone again. To examine it. To see where he had misjudged. He searched the studio, checked the storeroom. Nothing. It was nowhere to be found.

Neara stuck her head in the door. "I'm going. Is there anything you need?" Her tone was formal, overly polite.

"Neara, where's that big block of white marble?"

"Gone."

"Where? When?"

"About three days after the accident. Do you want anything?"

"I want that stone. What happened to it?"

"I told you, it's gone."

"Did I tell you to get rid of it?"

"No."

"Then why in the hell isn't it here?" His voice rose, became more strident. He paced the studio, as if caged.

Her voice maintained the level calm. "I thought . . . ."

"Dammit, woman, I don't care what you thought. If I'd wanted you to get rid of the stone, I would've told you. What possessed you to . . . ?"

"Don't start, Sebastian."

He lunged toward her. "Bitch. I want that stone back. It's my one link. My one chance. I've had everything else yanked out from under me. You had no right to remove it. It was mine, not yours. Did you send it back to the quarry? Where is it?"

"Stop yelling. It's gone. What earthly good is it? It only brings back unpleasant memories. It's the cause of your nightmares. Which you never stop telling me. I thought it would be better if it wasn't here when you got home. So I gave it away."

"Gave it away! You gave it away?" He stared at her. "I hope you rot in hell."

Neara advanced on him. "Listen. This is it. I've put up with your temper tantrums long enough. Either you stop right now, or I'm walking out that door and never coming back. You understand that?"

"Go on. Go. You've ruined everything. Get the hell out. You're useless to me now. I can't trust you. You've never understood what I was trying to do. You . . . ."

"Shut up. Just shut up. I did everything you ever asked of me, and more. Now you blame me. Well, try blaming yourself, and your monumental ego. You're not the only living sculptor in the world. And you're not the only one to have a set-back. You'll get over it,

and probably work again. But you'll do it without me. I'm through being your lackey, your whipping-boy. From now on, you're on your own. I'll send for my things." She turned, walked through the door, never looked back.

"Goddamn bitch." Didn't understand anything. He was a sculptor. A sculptor. With artificial hands. He grabbed the nearest piece of statuary. "Nothing. I can't feel anything. How can I be a sculptor if I can't feel what I touch?" He looked at the hands on the statue. Everything seemed to swim around him. Trembling, he threw the statue to the floor, smashing it. Then he grabbed his right hand, tore it from his wrist and flung it the length of the studio. He watched it crash into the wall, bounce, and fall among the assorted pieces of his work that stood there.