

C.B.

A Thesis

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by
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May, 1976

INTRODUCTION

The often puzzling and complex human factor of conscience has attracted Twentieth Century authors as a efficient stage device interesting both as a subject and as reflection of the puzzling and complex century itself. A working and integral facet, the human conscience provides a ready entrance into the kaleidoscopic cosmos of contemporary theological concern and an accurate picture of its importance to the individuals who, without necessarily entering the larger arena of speculation and reform, intensely reflect in their own microcosms the importance of religious thought. While the "greater" arena of philosophic theology is of interest to me, as it may or may not be to my characters, as an author I--like my characters--am more concerned with the impact of religious questions upon the microcosm. Consequently, this novel written as my thesis in creative writing deals specifically with this orbit within one of those disturbed microcosms--the subject of Death and its impact, in both theological and psychological terms, upon the suddenly-widowed former Catholic, C.B. Bodenson, a man abruptly responsible for the deaths of two persons important to him in profound ways.

It is significant to the biography of Bodenson that the religious discipline of Catholicism was a foundation of his character that he abandoned in early adulthood. My version of his biography is less

concerned with his reasons for renouncing religion--no matter whether aversion or apathy--than with that action's results. While it may not be true of all individuals, many persons have been observed to react to the most serious of crises--isolation, death--by retreating into the emotional securities that religious conviction can dangle as a reward. (Sometimes that reaction has been seen in humorous and satirical light, but that is not the case with Bodenson's story.) Perhaps as often, any individual can rebel against a religion as an ineffective and meaningless panacea exposed by either the advances of science or the vicissitudes of an apparently haphazard fate. But this is not, either, the path Bodenson travels to come to terms with his guilt and his loss. He instead, and unwittingly, was propelled upon a path of penance that can be understood as both religiously and psychologically purgatorial. As an author, I am interested in the manner in which he threw off his burden of guilt, reorganized his psychological disorder, and answered the existential question: Why continue life? He, of course, decides on religious grounds, which may immediately render his conclusion unthinkable for an existential audience, but that in no way reduces its import--or perhaps its truth.

My guides in this undertaking were, primarily, Graham Greene and Francois Mauriac, both masters in dealing with the workings of the individual conscience, but the map of C.B. Bodenson's journey was drawn long ago by Dante in the Divine Comedy and colored by Charles Baudelaire in Les Fleures du Mal. Purgation should occur in Purgatory for reasons of Catholic theology and literary history, but the final

assessment of the rituals and instruments of purgation may be best understood in the light of the French poet's Flowers of Evil, which finds in Evil a perverse beauty that may finally be the very heart of purgation and redemption. It may be of no importance to the reader that Bodenson, now known as C.B., was named after this same French poet, but it is of more importance to Bodenson than even he knows. The coincidence of names is never explicitly given in the book, only referred to once, but the actuality of the purgatory in which C.B. suffers may occasionally, I hope, be seen to possess elements of Baudelaire's evil beauty.

Yet, religious themes and literary ancestry aside, to escape the condemnation of "Oh, another religious novel," the details of the plot must be believable, and the psychology of the characters both significant and comprehensible. To this end, I have avoided any effort at elaborate architectural parallels with any literary masterpieces whose themes C.B.'s story might share, hoping to tell primarily a realistic and perhaps worthwhile tale. Equally to be avoided were any attempts at major stylistic innovation, I thought, which might detract from the necessary interplay of action and whatever suggestive second levels of meaning were needed to add any final worth to the novel. That decision immediately made three technical demands: the story line must justify itself, certain characters must be drawn well enough to become more than integers in an equation, and, finally, the prose style must evolve to a degree that it could integrate the plot, the characters, and the intended second levels of meaning beyond the point of obvious artifice.

The first problem faced by the writer here was to make his character's plight real enough to involve him in an elaborate path of penance. Two things were required--a personal loss of obviously great magnitude and an equally significant awareness of his own responsibility for that loss. As the novel was planned, this portion of the plot was to be virtually a prologue, a device to introduce the actual subject of the novel, C.B.'s efforts to work out a guilt that already existed. But as the novel developed, it became apparent that the reasons for the guilt must be clear, for without a compelling clarity here, the reader would be asked to assume too much and the drama of the penance would lose perhaps most of its significance.

At first it seemed that the rendering of the violence--with the religious backdrop of a murder in a monastery and the character's former and his wife's present Catholicism--would be enough to justify C.B.'s plunge into the waters of the bar called The Buoy, but time (and the advice of a more impartial audience) proved that the easier mechanics of the prose of violence and action were not alone sufficient to convince the reader of the final importance of Marian, wherein lies the key to C.B.'s guilt. The problem of making Marian a "real" character for the reader is complicated by the story itself--Marian is, after all, her "real" self for only the first chapter. But that does not lessen the need to show, rather than describe something of Marian's relationship to C.B.

The path of C.B.'s steps from the monastery in the mountains to the white sands of a Florida beach rests on a logic dominated by the

psychology of his problem, and there seems to be little difficulty in accepting this pilgrim's "progress" through the story. Yet for the writer's intentions the second half of the novel had to achieve an atmosphere suggestive of C.B.'s psychological drama. The answer was found in a dingy waterfront bar that, at least for the character, became a stage as much metaphysical as theatrical, embodying a negative-positive religious dualism that is at the heart of both Catholicism's Purgatory and Baudelaire's poetics.

Charles Baudelaire's contribution then is an attitude, an attempt to find beauty in the sordid, divinity in the damned, flowers of evil, and its force should be felt most in this character's purgatory, the bar in which much of the novel takes place. If the first requirement of this plot has been met--and the reasons for C.B.'s intense feelings of guilt are realistically portrayed--then its success depends upon the Baudelairian dualism of *The Buoy* becoming real for both C.B. and the reader. The character's sense of guilt alone should be enough to make him susceptible to the fate he meets there, but the machinations that actually draw him into the vortex of the bar and Maggie's dilemma must be simultaneously magnetic enough to attract C.B., complex enough to reveal an enmeshing dualism in Maggie herself, and demanding enough to become penance--at least for C.B.'s mind, if not his soul.

The logic of the novel and the completeness of the characters were only two major hurdles, a third remained. Even after everything else is acceptable, the writer must polish and polish his prose--perhaps the final distinction between just a novel and a good novel. For whatever

progress I have made in this last third of the race (as well as for the numerous illuminating criticisms and suggestions about the first two-thirds) I am in debt to my thesis director, Mr. Sylvan Karchmer, and am awed by his untiring good will. For their helpful comments about both plot and poetics and their gracious tolerance of my demands on their time, I must thank Dr. James Cleghorn and Mr. John Meador. And finally, for the awareness that a character's religious trials can be both uniquely personal and still hidden from him, I can only thank Graham Greene and Francois Mauriac, writers whose influences are obvious to me and, perhaps even more so, to the reader.

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CHAPTER ONE

"You'll get our support, Senator. We'll back you again." The editor's certainty was evident in his smooth voice, as he professionally put at ease the man sitting before his desk.

"We've always admired the soundness of your fiscal policies, and, of course," C.B. continued, "you're a great figure in the state. Georgia needs your moral stature, here and in Washington. Your opposition is strong this time, but we dislike the disruption they might bring." He casually glanced at his wrist watch. It was almost three.

The senator, less rustically than he would have before his constituents, mumbled his thanks and a promise or two, using C.B.'s editorial we's, and then it was time for him to go. They shook hands, almost solemnly, and C.B. walked the senator out through the newsroom to the elevator by which he would descend to the streets of Atlanta.

When the interview was over, C.B. Bodenson hurried back to his office, the senator dismissed from his mind. He was unusually impatient, the ship's captain with important decisions before him. It was Friday, and time for his annual fall fishing trip to the mountains. He needed to straighten his office before leaving. Two weeks was too long for anything to be untidy, and he always tried to leave his desk orderly, if not, as the news staff had been heard to joke, immaculate. The neatness of his office was reflected in both the tidiness of his editorials

and the inside humor of the staff. He had been accused of being more concerned with the desk's appearance than with the newspaper's content.

C.B., within the walls of his sanctuary, began filing away papers that no one would need during his absence, and he soon had the desktop cleared. He refrained from emptying the ashtray of the remains of the senator's cigar. The maid would do that.

There was a knock at the door, and a man more rumpled than C.B. came in. He was in his late thirties, perhaps eight to ten years younger than the editor-in-chief.

"Almost ready, I see," Ben said.

"Just about," he said, pleased. "I think I am. And none too soon. I can smell the mountains already." He took a deep breath, and they both smiled at his enthusiasm.

"I wrote down those suggestions I made earlier, Ben," he continued. "Some of the stories might not pan out, but who knows? Just make sure Marian's church drive gets some coverage." A little sheepishly, he added, "You probably would remember all this, but I didn't think a note would hurt."

Ben chuckled softly. "It won't hurt. A news editor can't remember everything. Things may be rougher while you're gone, but we'll call you if we get stuck."

This time they smiled together, and he was glad that Ben hadn't been irritated by the list. He meant no insult by what might have been interpreted as a lack of faith. It was just that C.B. was a painstaking worker, conscientious, meticulous, always leaving notes to

himself, always concerned about every aspect of the newspaper.

There was another knock at the door. It was an older man, this time, a distinguished-looking, grey-haired man at least as much older than C.B. as Ben was younger. His name was Jordan; he was the newspaper's publisher. Jordan smiled at both men when he entered the room.

"I'll bet you can't wait. You catch a couple for me," he said, almost rubbing his hands together as he referred to the fishing trip.

"I will, Mr. Jordan," C.B. answered. The publisher's vicarious excitement pleased him for Jordan's position drew his respect. He had worked with the publisher for years, but had always called the older man by his last name.

"Tell your writer friend hello for me. Hensler, isn't it?" he nodded, and Jordan continued, "He struck me as an intelligent man the time I met him. Probably good company on a trip like this."

"Zeke Hensler is a fine man." He smiled and added, "It's also his land we're going fishing on." All three laughed. "He and Madeira, his wife, live on a farm he inherited. At least when he's made enough from a piece he's sold, or saved enough while teaching. They have a young daughter, too."

"Sounds like the best of company," Jordan said.

"Zeke is," Ben joined in. "I've met him a couple of times. A trip with him would be a great time, I think. Something to remember."

C.B. finally pushed his chair under the desk, and Jordan and Ben walked him to the elevator. They sent their regards to Marian.

As the car neared his home, C.B. thought less often of the trip to the mountains than of the newspaper that had been his life for more than half of his almost fifty years. He had prepared well for the upcoming vacation. His occasional editorials had been conscientiously written for the two weeks that he would be gone, a duty that he didn't have to perform, yet always did, and if a more timely piece were needed, the editorial page had its own staff. The newspaper would run itself during his absence. Yet a vague uncertainty, which must be connected to the newspaper, he was sure, made him uneasy; he was near home, however, and the neighborhood itself worked to dispel his restlessness. The stately homes on large, wooded plots were reassuring. He had always admired the various large houses along his route home and was quite satisfied with the two-story, red brick building before him when he turned into his own driveway. He liked the solid-looking house, the large oaks which sheltered it, and the extensive lawn that shielded it from what little hubbub the quiet avenue ever provided.

Marian must have heard him open the door--she always did--for she called to him before it closed. She was in the kitchen, and when she came through the dining room into the living room, she smiled and kissed him on the cheek. She wore a fresh apron over the front of her white dress.

"You're home early, fisherman. Well, everything's ready, anyway. I've packed your lunch." He could see the wicker basket on the dining room table.

"I guess I rushed home today. I'm always in a hurry for these trips,

and I had one last interview that seemed to drag on and on."

"I'll miss you, Charles." Only Marian called C.B. by his first name, and almost no one else even knew what it was. "Two weeks is a long time to be gone."

She held the basket out to him and giggled. "I feel as though I'm sending you off to school. It's all ready to go, since I knew you'd want to eat on the road. This is the only time you're ever in a hurry."

He was happy. She usually knew what he wanted or was thinking, and he loved it when she pampered him. They had been married almost twenty-five years with no children and had learned to play, almost unconsciously, the roles of parent and child in their conversation. He was happy and laughed.

"I'm still sorry you're not going, honey," he said, setting down the basket and taking her by the shoulders. "Change your mind. The church drive will still succeed, even without its most able chairman. And the church has enough money to make up any difference that might result." He knew immediately that he had used the wrong words. Her serious look showed that she had missed the humor he had intended, but she didn't speak reprovingly.

"I can't, you know. All I can do is wish it had been scheduled some other two weeks. I don't like being apart that long. But I know how much you love fishing, and you know I can't leave."

"You could never leave when your church needs you, old lady. You should spend the time with your less-religious husband, though."

"Somebody has to go to Mass for you, you old backslider," she

answered, and he was relieved by the humor in her response. He hadn't intended to upset her, and he knew that beneath her light tone lay seriousness that, in this single area, kept him at a respectful distance. The subject was an old one; they had both been raised as practicing Catholics, even attending parochial schools until going to college. But C.B. had moved away from the church and its religion, while Marian had become more and more involved. His attention had turned to journalism, which had become, he finally realized years later, almost an ersatz religion for him, as he developed a passionate vision of the newspaper as guardian of the community's morals. He had first met Marian when, as a young reporter, he was forced to cover a story for the church page editor. Marian had been helping in a church drive then, too, and a curious forcefulness beneath her bouyancy had attracted him. He had never known what had drawn her to him. The longer he lived with her, his respect for her religious convictions increased more and more, even as his own diminished. Other than occasionally teasing her about the always present religious activities, he had carefully avoided the subject, and he had conspicuously refrained from any attempt to influence her beliefs. That wasn't really enough for Marian's unwavering faith; however, the issue had never come between them destructively, for she could forgive C.B. almost anything. That was her nature, he knew, besides being a result of her religious principles. He believed that she would have become a nun if she hadn't met him, and he sometimes felt an awesome responsibility for her peace of mind and happiness.

"I have to get out of this suit, and then I'll leave," he said.

She kissed him again, and he went upstairs to their bedroom. He changed clothes quickly, taking care to hang his suit neatly and set his shoes in the closet. When he returned to the kitchen, Marian was cleaning the counter. The wicker basket was on the table by the door.

"I feel almost like a fisherman," he said. He meant it, though he had only changed to casual slacks and a sports shirt. He could have been going to a neighborhood lawn party.

"Well, fisherman, enjoy your late lunch--two sandwiches, hot soup in the thermos, some fruit, and a slice of cake. I don't want you starving to death before you get there."

"It's less than a three-hour drive." He kissed her on the forehead. It was the kind of lunch Marian would pack for him--more than he would ever need.

"Be sure to tell Zeke and Maddy that I'm really sorry I can't come this time, but I'll probably see them before they come for Christmas. I know you'll want to drive up some weekend between now and then."

She walked with him to the car and watched him put his suitcase in the trunk and neatly arrange the fishing tackle beside it. He put the lunch basket near him on the front seat. When the engine started, Marian stepped out into the lawn to watch him back the car into the street, and as they waved to each other, she called to him.

"Be careful, angler. And enjoy your lunch." He waved and smiled.

Marian was still standing beside the driveway, an island of white in the expanse of green when she and the house and lawn faded from sight as the car moved around a gentle curve. The image of that

white island was the last to disappear.

When he was on the highway headed north, and the traffic had thinned, he remembered Marian's last remark about the lunch. Curious, he opened the lid of the basket. On top of the plastic box that would hold the sandwiches, she had taped a picture of a whale. It had been cut from a magazine, apparently, and above the fish she had printed, "Only the first of many." A great pleasure surged in him, and he remembered the face of the woman he loved so much. He saw several napkins folded in the corner of the basket and knew that they, as usual, would be covered with love notes to him. He couldn't help smiling, and he settled into the drive, his mind moving forward eagerly to two weeks of fishing in the crisp, Fall-morning air and the companionship of Zeke and Maddy.

CHAPTER TWO

"You shouldn't leave tonight, in this rain. Are you sure you can drive out there?" The motel manager gestured toward the wall of the motel room.

"I'm a good driver, and C.B. insists on leaving," Marian replied. "I'd rather wait until tomorrow, but it's only ninety-odd miles to Atlanta."

"Well, there won't be any traffic until you get to the freeway, but still go slow."

She nodded. They watched the white bandage bob out of the room, as C.B. went into the bathroom and closed the thin door.

"He wants to get away," he heard her say. "I can't blame him. It must have been terrifying." She had said earlier that it made her feel cold inside, thinking of the things that C.B. had seen, had lived through. She knew from his talks with her the past two days, and from the sounds she said he made in his sleep, how much everything still bothered him. Twice he had awakened in her arms late at night, crying.

"The clothes and fishing tackle are in the trunk," the man said. "How about gas? There aren't any stations open tonight. There are only two in town and none for twenty miles--not until you get to the freeway."

"Yes," she said. "The tank's full. I really want to thank you for packing the car for me. C.B.'s still too weak--I didn't want him

out in the rain."

"No trouble, ma'am." He paused, and then said, "Tell your husband to forget the killer. They'll catch him."

But the man couldn't be certain, C.B. thought. The Hensler family had been the second group of people murdered near there in the past two months. Five people. And the mountains were too near. Whoever, whatever, had killed the three Henslers--had mutilated their bodies, and had wounded him--could have come down through the mountains from Georgia, Tennessee, or the Carolinas. There was no way to know, and the deputies hadn't mentioned any clues. C.B. had seen the killer, but his description had been vague and had seemed to be no help. He kept remembering the man's straight brown hair and his smile. He always went back to the man's smile, in his description and his thoughts.

"I hope you're right," she said, turning from him as C.B. re-entered the room. His head ached, and his pale face was whiter now. Even he had been able to tell that when he looked in the mirror, and the white bandage about his head made it seem even more pale. He'd lost blood and was still weak, but he knew he could travel. He felt he must travel.

He didn't want to stay in this small town any longer. Three days in the motel bed. He wanted to be back in Atlanta, in his own bed, protected by the anonymous walls of his city. Standing in the motel room, he couldn't see through the walls, or if he'd been outside, through the night and the rain, but he felt the presence of the land, the black rocks towering above the town. He wanted to go down the

slopes, putting behind the town and the farm that now haunted him.

"Are you ready, Marian?" he asked. "It's eight-thirty. We can make Atlanta by eleven-thirty, even with wet roads."

She nodded and turned back to the manager, extending her hand.

"I hope they catch the man," she said, and then added, "I'll pray they do before someone else is killed." She turned back to C.B., picked up her raincoat from the chair, and handed him his. "Don't forget your hat and gloves," she said, hovering about him as he donned his coat.

Marian steered the car onto the two-lane highway a minute later and then past the few buildings of the community. The rain was steady and the structures were ghostly at the edge of the car lights. The water on the windshield and the clicking motion of the wipers shut out the night; here C.B. felt more secure than he had in the tiny motel. The rain seemed almost a wall around the car; in the rain the car lights were a fog in a tunnel through which the car moved.

Ahead of the car, in the rain and mist, C.B. could almost see Zeke's face, the red beard, the hesitant smile. He thought of the years he'd known the writer and suddenly felt weak from the sense of uncertainty that Zeke's and Madeira's deaths brought to his mind. He thought of the quiet writer, the years when Zeke had alternated his residence between the farm and various colleges, unable to eke a living from occasional publications in small magazines. Zeke had been his friend in college, his chief supporter when he himself had tried to write, his conscience-in-conversation later, when C.B. gravitated to newspapers. He could remember Zeke's voice from the last time they had

really talked, Sunday, the night before the event his mind wanted to avoid.

"I'm not sure you're right," Zeke had said in response to C.B.'s defense of an editorial he had written. "Politically you may be right, but the moral question seems uncertain. At least as far as I can see. I don't think anyone can really say."

He had vehemently shaken his head. "No. The morality is in the politics. There has to be some standard for society, and Castro broke the rules. You can't defend a dictator, anywhere, anytime."

"I don't think all moral judgments are that easy," Zeke had said.

"Sometimes they are. Look at it the easy way--in the decade the Cuban communists have been in power, how many people have they murdered? You know about the assassinations and executions of prisoners."

"Yes," Zeke said. "I'll admit that. But examine the situation--not to mention the system--Castro attempted to replace. Talk to any Cuban who remembers the Batista period. The island was a base for organized American crime, drugs were on every corner, prostitution was the national profession. Now, if you really want to clear my mind of doubt, tell me how many people would've died from drugs, murders, and starvation during the same period. The drugs and prostitution are gone, I hear. The deaths may balance out and be fewer in the future. The moral questions just aren't as easy for me as they seem to be for you, C.B."

The argument faded into the red beard, and the beard into the night, as C.B. became aware of the road and the rain. As the thoughts faded, he grew more confident that the decision to return to Atlanta

immediately was right. He had to get away from the mountain region, from the rolling foothills in which the Hensler's farm was located. That was the only way he could calm his mind, he felt. In the city, back at the paper, everything would be simpler; he would be further away from the sad events, from the thoughts that pursued him.

While he watched as the car moved slowly through the wet night, his mind returned to the subject it hadn't been able to escape for the past two days, the fixed center around which it had orbited furiously, now close, now far, but always returning. Ezekial Hensler had been his best friend, and the Hensler family the closest to him for years, despite the frictions caused by their different temperaments. And Zeke's life could not have ended this way; he had so carefully planned: the proper education, the proper occupation, the essential trip to Europe at the proper time; all for the goal of writing, the preoccupation that never became an occupation. And Madeira; Madeira the beautiful, the smiling girl, then woman, whom he had known longer than he had Zeke. Their daughter was less important in his mind, at least now that the deaths were so close to him, close in every sense.

The smiling man! That thick smile, the straight brown hair, the wiry body. That was the center of C.B.'s circle, the point around which he lived now, the thing he seemed destined to. He had tried to rethink that Monday afternoon for the sheriff, the deputies, had tried to reconstruct the events the way his newspaperman's mind always had before, but kept returning to that smile. The cold lips, the cold face that bent so close to the bodies to study them; that leaned over

the fallen, bending forward from the waist, the hands almost motionless, while the smiler's cold eyes devoured each face. The smile was what C.B. had noticed immediately that afternoon when Zeke opened the door to the knocking, and his friend seemed to recognize the smiling face, had started to speak. And then the blow, the swift falling of the hand ax that so quickly changed Zeke's face as he fell back into the room. C.B. had not been able to move until the man was inside, and then he turned to the kitchen counter for a weapon. He almost didn't see the blow that came as he turned back to the killer, moving sideways instinctively. He really didn't remember being hit by the ax, and he didn't remember anything for what must have been minutes after that.

He couldn't recall the first thing he had been aware of when he came to, just that he had lain there with his eyes shut, again the little boy hiding from the ghosts, taking refuge behind his eyelids. For minutes he had been listening, without being aware of it, and he had heard nothing until the sound of something hitting a slab of meat. He opened his eyes then--the fear was too real--but luckily the killer had been bending over another body, staring, smiling into Madeira's face where she lay, where her body lay, near the back door. When he could finally move his eyes around the room, he saw the daughter's slender legs sticking from the edge of the counter, and he quickly closed his eyes for protection.

The car moved through the tunnel of rain. The sound of the

windshield wipers brought C.B. back to the car, the Fall night. The narrow road threaded through the countryside, sometimes beneath trees, he knew, sometimes beside farms. But tonight the farmland and the trees were the same, a gray-black mystery beyond the walls of rain, and the road that led back to the freeway and Atlanta seemed to diminish ahead. He touched his head as though hoping to still his headache. He felt his patch.

He was still scared and didn't have to close his eyes to see the killer's grin, to hear him strike one of the bodies, to hear his footsteps on the wooden steps.

When he heard the killer descend the porch steps to the gravel, he opened his eyes. Despite having heard the man leave, he cautiously inspected the room without moving his head. Reassured, he tried to lift his body, but his head throbbed from the wound, and he was forced to lean back against the wall to rest. The knowledge that the killer could return at any moment rushed his recovery, gave him the strength to lift himself from the wall and move to the window. He could see the wooden steps leading from the kitchen door to the gravel walk. Across the dirt yard, the barn door stood open, and he was certain the killer would be inside. Faster now, he stepped to the sink for a dish towel and pressed the dry cloth against his forehead. He wiped and could feel the towel slide across his skin. He pulled it away and stared at the glistening red stain. C.B. knew he would have to hurry.

Without pausing to do anything else, he turned from the sink and

hurried through the house to a front window. The yard was empty. Quietly, but quickly, he opened the door and pushed the screen before him. Still he could see no one. The killer must be in the garage. The body of the family's dog lay away from the house, on the edge of the driveway, the ground beneath it damp, dark. He took a deep breath. There was nothing he could do here: the family was dead. He started for his car, parked at the corner of the house, looking over his shoulder at the horror-house he was escaping. He almost dropped his keys and had to fumble for the ignition key. He opened the door as quietly as possible, feeling weak as he strained against the faint noise, then feverishly lowered his body onto the cool, plastic upholstery. It felt so safe he almost cried as he pulled the door closed and pressed the lock. He was safe. The feeling of freedom made him dizzy. He closed his eyes a moment, knowing he would live now, and turned the car's ignition on. At the engine's sound he opened his eyes; the lids were heavy; he felt feverish as something told him to turn his head to the right.

The face immobilized C.B. Pressed against the passenger's window were the thick, grinning lips that had smiled into his closed eyes in the house, the killer's nose bulbed by the window, as his smile chesired beneath it. A sob tore itself from C.B.'s throat and in slow motion he forced the gear shift lever into reverse while the killer straightened, letting a shovel drop from one hand, as the other slowly raised an ax to the sky, where it hung above the car. Slowly the car moved away, as the ax fell, too short now to reach the glass, onto the hood of the engine, twisting as it struck, wrenching out of the

wiry hands and caroming, now faster, across the car into the yard, as C.B. backed and backed and backed away. He threw the car into low gear and spread a fierce shower of gravel over the land, the house, the sullen figure on the lawn in the rear view mirror. Only the thick, gleeful smile followed him.

C. B. shivered from the cold and came back to the night and the rain.

"I'm cold," he said.

"It's warm in the car," Marian replied. She leaned over a little to check the thermostat controls.

"I can turn it up more, if you like."

"I'm shivering."

Marian began to pull her right glove off. "Let me feel your forehead."

Her hand felt cool.

"I must have a fever," he said. "I feel woozy."

"You have, and we haven't anything for it. I'm going to stop at the monastery for help," she said.

C.B. didn't reply. He remained quiet while the car moved slowly through the rain. They had been on the highway for almost half an hour, but the driving was slower than expected, and they hadn't covered even the seventeen miles to the Trappist monastery they used as a landmark on each trip to visit the Henslers.

It seemed only another minute before the gray stone monastery

loomed blackly in the night. Its outlines were vague, and it seemed larger than usual in the rainy night.

Marian drove into the driveway and stopped before the heavy wooden front door. She covered her head and then left the car. He watched her through the rain. Her knocks were answered after several seconds by an old monk, who opened the door and stood attentively, waiting for her to speak. Marian knew the Trappist monks usually took vows of silence, so she was not surprised and spoke comfortably. At the sound of her voice, the monk moved his head toward her, as though he had to locate her with his ears.

"My husband is ill. He was injured and has lost a lot of blood. May we speak to the abbot?"

The monk nodded, and Marian immediately turned back to the car for him. She opened the door, and he stepped out and into the monastery; the white bandage beneath his tilted rain hat must make him an almost comic figure, he thought. His face felt feverish; his eyes felt swollen from heat. But, Atlanta. . . .

"I'm sure I'm still strong enough to travel," he said, "if I can get something for this fever."

The old monk led them to a nearby room and motioned for them to enter. He signaled for them to wait and pulled the heavy door halfway shut. As the monk backed away, C.B. watched the dull surface of his blind eyes and felt a moment of pity.

The room was very small, barely larger than Marian's kitchen pantry. Though neither of them had been there before, Marian obviously

felt at ease within the stone room, as she cared for her husband, feeling his head for fever, taking his rain coat off and holding it. Her only concern was for him; here in the monastery, she felt at home.

He was restless waiting for the abbot. He sat on the small wooden chair for perhaps thirty seconds, stood up to pace, realized there was no room, and sat down again. Everything would move slowly here, he thought. In a few more seconds he rose again to stand in front of the empty fireplace, staring at the ashes and black coals. There had been a fire in the fireplace earlier, and the coals were still warm.

Entering the monastery had quieted his fantasies for a while, but the stillness of the room stirred his heated brain. His head throbbed, and the thoughts that had been his for two days flushed his face again, as he remembered the Hensler fireplace and the friendly talks before its warmth at night; they had talked of the day's fishing, he of Atlanta, and Zeke of his writing. They could never again talk, he realized, suddenly thinking of the kitchen, the bodies, and the blood, the scene willed by the smiling killer. It was the smile that came back now, again, making C.B. more feverish. His head swam, as the cold spread of lips that C.B. would never forget swirled before him in the dark fireplace: the cold smile behind the falling ax, as he backed away, away, not fast enough, not fast enough. But somehow he had gotten beyond the ax. He felt that he might never get beyond the smile.

The gentle sound of the heavy door closing slowly began to bring

him back, and he started to turn, hearing Marian speak, "Abbot, my husband . . ." C.B. didn't hear the rest of her sentence.

The smile! He turned from the fire to find that same cold smile. It was the same smile, the same brown hair, the same face.

Turning faster now, he reached back for the poker standing beside the fireplace. The cold metal was reassuring in his hand as he turned, raising it to the sky as the killer had the ax. The abbot's hands stretched half toward him, half toward the poker; they were thin and wiry. They couldn't stop the poker, which fell once, rose again, then fell once more.

C.B. froze, faced with his act. He had never before killed a man, and the fact of his action struck him dumb as the Trappist monk had been. He turned to Marian, as though for help, and saw her pressed against the wall, staring at him in her disbelief, trying to pull further back into the stone.

He discovered a new strength and jumped toward Marian as she opened her mouth to scream. He stifled her voice with his palm and whispered fiercely.

"It's him, the killer. The priest was the killer."

She stared at him with dulled eyes. He shook her to get her attention.

"That's the man who killed Zeke and Maddy. He killed their girl. He did this to me," he said, dipping his head.

Marian's eyes were clear now, but she was rigid in his arms. She did not, could not believe him, he saw.

"I tell you, that is the same man. Could I ever forget that face, that smile?"

She would remember the smile; she would have liked it, liked the face; but she could see how he could never forget it.

When he saw that she believed him, he removed his hands.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "You've got to call the police."

He shook his head. "No," he said abruptly. "No one would believe me. Who could believe a monk was the killer?"

"You've got to call the police. You've got to."

He continued shaking his head; he would not call.

"We've got to get out of here," he said. He looked around quickly for his coat and discovered his wife was still holding it. He took it from her.

"Let's get out of here," he said again and took her elbow. He could see that she didn't want to leave. He pulled her elbow, but she turned her face back toward the fireplace and the body. Her eyes glazed again; he pulled her along.

He opened the door quietly. There was no one in the hall, and it was a short distance to the front door. Leading Marian, he headed toward the front door. She didn't fight him; she just didn't want to move, it seemed.

In seconds they were in the car. He drove now. He backed away from the monastery, then turned the car onto the highway toward Atlanta. The rain quickly washed the monastery from the mirror.

He felt better today. Four days of rest had enabled his body to recoup, and he knew that he would be in condition to return to work in a day or two. The doctor said his headache would disappear. Then everything would be better. He would be able to escape those three days of terror, three days that had become confused in his mind. He could remember everything that had happened to him, but the order of events was jumbled. Whether he was awake or asleep, he couldn't always remember if the killings had been at the farm or the monastery, if he had backed away from the falling ax before seeing those horrible bodies, or after--or ever, for that matter. He knew that he had seen the bodies, the clippings Marian had saved from the paper told him that, but now, at least once in his dreams, he had become uncertain whose bodies they were. There were two women, or was it a woman and a girl, and a man falling away from an open door, the frame for the one thing he could not forget. The smile kept coming back again and again. When Zeke fell back, only the smile remained in the door, and the room became smaller, and stone, and thick with his breathing as he lifted the poker again and again.

Marian couldn't forget either--the clippings she had saved testified to that. She had called the office for extra copies of the newspaper and had clipped out the copies of the stories each day. And in the evening she watched the news on the television while C.B. sat before the fire; each seemed to be looking for something that he couldn't remember, couldn't identify. She was growing thinner, too. C.B. had noticed that Marian's small frame seemed to shrink daily. He

knew she must be worried that he would be caught, but he had been wearing gloves, and only the blind old monk who had met them at the monastery door could be a witness. They were safe. But flight had been necessary. No one would have believed their story about the abbot.

C.B. knew, too, that Marian was feeling guilty for the act. She was a devout Catholic, and even though she believed him when he said the monk was the killer, somewhere inside she must feel that it could not be true, and that they had killed a man of God. C.B. knew this, but he couldn't know how much he cared. He was sure, though, that her feelings of guilt would disappear with time, much as had his religious beliefs. She had seen the smile on the monk's face, and she must understand why C.B. swung the heavy poker. But they hadn't talked at all since their return, limiting their communication to the most banal of daily concerns, except when the doctor visited.

C.B. was feeling stronger now, and he felt sure of himself this time when he sat up in bed and then swung his feet to the floor. It was now late in the afternoon, and even the doctor had approved his moving around. He put on his robe before going downstairs.

Marian was out in the yard, and he watched her from the window. The small figure he had so often observed with a curious affection was sitting in a lawn chair, despite the cold air. She was heavily wrapped, yet, even at a distance, he could see how she looked older than she had a week ago. Neither of them had smiled even once since their return, but on her the effect was more noticeable. C.B. watched for a few

minutes while Marian sat motionless in the glare of the cold sun; he felt somehow guilty when he turned back into the warm room to face the fireplace, even though he knew he had been right in what he had done.

After heating some water on the stove and getting a cup of instant coffee, C.B. returned to the living room and his seat before the fireplace. He had always loved to sit in one particular chair, and for the past four days that chair had held his body whenever his bed had not. He had tried to read to escape his turbulent memories, but that hadn't worked; and even though he could see the television set from his seat, only sporadic parts of the news programs had captured his attention. Marian had spent most of the last four evenings up in their bedroom, but she had always come down for the ten o'clock news. They would sit quietly in their matching chairs, she watching the whole news program, and C.B. watching the fire until there was any news about the abbot's death or about the police hunt for the unknown killer of the Hensler family. They watched the newsmen show pictures of the monastery in one story, and the house, the Henslers, and even C.B. in the other. The terrible coincidence of the murders, occurring within a few miles and a few days of each other, drew some comment, but only from the newsmen on the camera. C.B. and Marian never mentioned it after the first time C.B. had spoken reassuringly of their safety. She had remained silent. Now they said nothing.

An hour had passed before C.B. heard Marian come in the back door. He heard her begin moving about in the kitchen preparing something for him to eat. He was afraid, for a moment, that she would again

not want any supper, but he soon forgot his worry, as his mind slipped back to the Henslers, the killer, and the killings.

When Marian entered the room to tell him his food was ready, she had to repeat her message before C.B. understood. He looked at her a moment before moving.

"Are you going to eat?" he asked.

"No. I'm not hungry. I had a late lunch while you were in bed."

C.B. had no way to know if she were telling the truth, so he went to the table alone. She had re-heated the meatloaf a neighbor had cooked for them their second day back. The peas and corn had come from a can, but he did not notice. He ate steadily, using the ritual of the meal to shut off his mind. When he finished, he cleared the table of the few dishes. Marian would wash them later. He began to fix himself a pot of coffee. Being in the kitchen unsettled him a little and started his mind on the familiar path again. He knew Marian would be upstairs, and he was certain she would be going through the latest clippings, perhaps rereading all the news stories. He didn't need the stories to recall the events; they returned of their own will, in their own fashion, in their own order, and soon he was lost in an eddy of cold smiles, memories of his friends alive, glimpses of a slowly falling ax, the act of lifting the poker again and again, the fearful flight back to the car and to Atlanta. The memories continued even after he sat in his favorite chair to drink a cup of coffee. Again and again his mind would circle about the memories, and each time it got close to them, C.B. became chilled and pulled his robe closer about

him. If he remembered his coffee, he would take a sip. The black liquid would be cold long before he could finish the cup, and prior to going to bed he might make three or four trips to the kitchen for more.

Shortly before ten o'clock, Marian came into the room, turned on the television, and sat in her chair. C.B. suddenly knew he had to begin some conversation with her, but he didn't know how. They had grown very silent over the four days. He wondered for a while how to begin.

"I'm sorry I went," he finally said to her.

Marian looked at him but did not answer for a minute: finally she replied. "I guess you had to do it," she said.

"He killed Zeke and Maddy. It had to be done. I'm just sorry the whole thing happened." He paused, then added, "You've got to stop brooding about it. We've both got to. We haven't talked since we got back."

Marian turned to face him. "What good would talking do?" she said. "The abbot is dead. You say he killed the Henslers, and I'm sorry. They were my friends, too. But I still think we should have gone to the police."

"No," C.B. said, for the first time vehement. His headache throbbed. "They would never have believed me. I saw the abbot, but you can't even believe me. He would have killed us, but how could I prove that? I know I did the right thing."

C.B. had half-risen from his chair, afraid. He knew he had to

convince Marian that there had been no choice. She must agree with him on this, or they might never begin talking, living together again, and that he couldn't face.

While he searched for something else to say, the television station's music announced the Monday evening news, and C.B. and Marian both turned to the screen to watch the announcer preview the stories for tonight. The one or two-sentence summaries would tell them whether or not to keep the set on.

The music faded and the young woman on the screen mentioned the President in a sentence, while the familiar face flashed on the screen. C.B. and Marian barely noticed the image, but they instantly recognized the Henslers' farmhouse when its picture appeared.

"Sheriff's deputies have solved the recent multiple murders in the northeast corner of our state, but the mystery surrounding Abbot O'Conner's death remains." A picture of Abbot O'Conner flashed on the screen.

The announcer's voice continued with other news, but C.B. and Marian did not hear her. Neither could completely understand what they had heard, and both had leaned sharply forward as though to be closer to the house that had been on the screen.

"What do they mean?" Marian asked, almost hysterically, turning to C.B. "What could it mean?"

"I don't know, damn it. How can the mystery 'remain,' if . . ."

The hysteria that had been in Marian's voice echoed in C.B.'s. "If they've solved Zeke's and Maddy's deaths, they must know about the

abbot being the killer."

Marian said nothing, and C.B. grew quiet. They waited impatiently through the commercial. Again, neither could follow the words concerning the President when the program resumed.

But each knew immediately when it was time for the newscaster to switch to the murders. The woman's face appeared on the screen, and she began to bring the viewers up to date on the deaths. Although she was ostensibly speaking to much of Georgia, C.B. knew she addressed them personally. The newscaster's obvious interest in the story suddenly seemed to be equally an interest in the one living room and its occupants.

"Deputies revealed that they have known the killer's identity since shortly after the Hensler killings. Fingerprints left in the house and on the murder weapons were traced and discovered to belong to Earl McCrory, a convicted murderer who six months ago escaped from prison in Illinois."

With the mention of the name McCrory, the announcer's face faded from the screen to be replaced with a black-and-white prison photograph. The numbers on the man's chest stood out strangely on the screen. But they were no stranger than the face itself.

C.B. and Marian stared dumbly. "Who is that," she finally asked. And then she understood.

"That's not the killer," C.B. said, his voice suddenly growing weaker. He felt numb.

"It's not the abbot. It's just not the abbot. He wasn't the killer, C.B." Her voice grew shrill, without growing any louder.

"You killed the wrong man."

They could both see now. The man looked nothing like the dead abbot they had stared at just a moment before. McCrory's hair was dark and straight, perhaps brown like the abbot's. The mouth twisted strangely into a smile, even in the prison photograph, but it looked nothing like the abbot's smile.

C.B. felt that he was falling from his chair, although he had merely leaned forward. He felt a tightness in his stomach, and his body grew cold. A pounding started in his head as his headache intensified.

A weak whimper from Marian caught C.B.'s attention, and he was aware suddenly that his wife had been making a whining, whimpering sound ever since her last words to him. He turned to her. She had turned away from him, away from the television.

"Mary," C.B. called, but she did not turn to him. The sounds grew more intense. They hurt his head.

"Mary, Marian," he said again as he rose from his chair. Now his voice seemed to plead. He placed his hand on her shoulder to draw her around. Her body turned toward him, but her face did not.

"Oh God," C.B. almost cried, "don't turn away. Marian, I didn't know. It was the same smile; I thought it was the same face." He paused, then said, "I'm not mad. They must be wrong," but he knew they would not be. He had killed the wrong man, and a priest. No one could know what he had done, but he had killed a priest. He almost began to cry.

Marian turned her head towards him now and stared silently. He

reached again for her, and she pulled back from him. Her face didn't change expression as she stared at him as at something she could not recognize, almost couldn't see.

He suddenly realized he couldn't reach her, and he sank, loosely, into his chair. His wife didn't move her eyes from his face, and they seemed to burn into his skin. In self-defense, he turned toward the fire, but now he felt uncomfortable before its heat, and feeling weak and drained again, C.B. shrank back into his chair, staring harder, feverishly at the fire before him.

CHAPTER THREE

He felt powerless, sitting before the fireplace. He knew that the voice from the television was right, that he had killed the wrong man, that he had killed a priest; but he felt as if the responsibility were misplaced, not really his. He felt limp, his muscles loose from the bone, and he sensed that his life, for the moment, at least, was out of his control. He had made a mistake. That wasn't like him. He had thought two men to be the same, thought himself an avenger, even as he struck in fear.

Despite his headache, he seemed to be very much in control of his mind now, however; cool-headed, as though his thinking were inhumanly clear. The same precision and certainty had possessed him after he had killed the priest, when he had struggled to convince Marian that no one would believe their story that the abbot had killed Zeke and Maddy. He felt that way again. Somehow, he seemed to know that a confession wouldn't help, at least not a confession to the law, and for years he had been able to consider no other. Even if a jury believed his story, it would mean only that the charge would be lowered from murder. He was certain that he would still have to spend time in prison, and that he couldn't do. He couldn't live with such shame. As for any other confession, none was needed. He had been ill and frightened, out of his mind with grief; he couldn't be condemned for

his acts. Even if there were a God, He couldn't hold C.B. guilty.

There was little to fear, then. The door to the monastery had been opened by a blind monk. Only the abbot had seen them. There was no way to identify them. In a piercing clarity after the act of swinging the poker, C.B. had felt intensely grateful, perhaps to the chill weather, for the gloves he wore. And he and Marian had driven away, escaping into the faceless rainy night without seeing anyone else. If they had been observed, if someone had taken their license plate number, the police would have been asking questions before now. No, their secret was safe.

Safe from discovery, perhaps; but he wasn't convinced that it would be safe with them. Marian was still a devout Catholic. The act would have special significance for her. The silence that had separated them since their return mutely testified to the changes in her. To have killed a man guilty of murdering a family was one problematic situation. To kill an innocent abbot in his monastery was certainly another, proposing a special guilt her Catholicism would magnify a million times. Her urge would be to confess, he knew, at least to the God she still believed in, if not to the law. He must convince her that silence was vital.

He had noticed vaguely that Marian had left the room, but suddenly he was uncertain where she had gone. Perhaps to their bedroom. His flaccid muscles responded erratically, and he strained to rise. The first few feet to the stairs made him feel old, old. A man not yet fifty shouldn't feel this old, he thought. He again sensed that he

wasn't in complete control of his world, that he had lost that special feeling of control, of security, that he had lived with for years; its absence left him a feeling of nakedness. He must convince Marian. They had spent years together, almost twenty-five years growing closer to each other; even now he could think of no other way of living; he wanted that stability; her stability.

He called up the stairs, but got no answer. She must have gone upstairs. He walked to the kitchen, but it was empty. She had to be upstairs. He slowly climbed to the second floor. The bedroom door was closed. That in itself was unusual, for the doors were almost always left open when they had no visitors; they had never hidden anything from each other. He tried the door knob. It was locked.

"Marian?" There was no answer. "Marian." This time his voice was more positive.

"Yes?" came the weak response.

"Mary, we have to talk. I know how you feel--we were raised the same way."

He was silent for a few seconds, but she said nothing.

"I do know. You must feel damned now. It would be bad enough to kill a murderer, but an innocent monk in his own monastery?"

"It's not his monastery," she replied.

"You know what I mean. But it was my fault, not yours. If there's any sin, it's mine, not yours."

"No. I saw it and just stood there. I've kept quiet. If I don't confess now, I'll be damned, C.B. You know that. You were raised a

good Catholic. And you haven't changed as much as you think."

It was his turn to be silent. She might be right, but that didn't matter now. What was important was convincing her to keep still.

"It was an accident. I was hurt, sick with a high fever. But who would believe I didn't know what I was doing? I know you love me, Marian, and you've got to help me. I thought he was the killer, I swear."

"C.B." Her voice was soft. "Maybe it's not your fault, legally. Maybe not even morally. But it will be if you don't confess. We both have things to confess now."

"No! We can't even tell it in a confessional. Somehow it would get out. No one could keep this a secret."

"You know a priest would have to," she said, her voice scornful. He had never before heard that tone. "I'll go to confession, C.B.; I have to." Now, her voice was pleading with him, asking his forgiveness.

"Can you wait, Marian? We've got to talk about this."

"Wait?"

"Just until Sunday. Okay? Sunday. If you still feel that you have to go to confession, I'll drive you to a church in another parish. The most important thing is that you go outside this parish."

"That's almost a week." Uncertainty was a tremor in her voice. "I'll try, C.B. But I keep seeing the look on his face just before you hit him. He had such a warm, secure smile, as if nothing like that could happen while God was protecting him, in God's monastery. I can't forget the cell, either. That quiet stone room. I felt so secure

inside its gray walls. It felt so . . . safe . . . holy. I don't know how long I can wait, C.B."

"Just try, Marian. You have to try."

"I will."

"Will you open the door now?"

The door cracked quietly, as slowly as a heavy stone door in a castle; it started almost before the question ended, and he knew that she had been standing on the other side of the door while they had talked. Her voice had seemed much further away, though only the wooden door had been between them. She had been crying; her eyes were red; her cheeks streaked. He wanted to hold her and reached out, but she turned away, silently. He could say nothing now that he was facing her, and his head hurt.

The silence of the days before the newscast had returned the next morning. Breakfast was prepared when he came downstairs at nine, but the food was cold. He could tell that it had been fixed probably much earlier. He had not slept well. Twice he had awakened, and Marian hadn't been in bed. She might not have slept at all, and she had slept fitfully and only occasionally since their return. He felt a moment of pity, but it passed. She would recover. She had to.

He had only a mild headache this morning, but he took two aspirins before he sat down. He ate quietly and took his dishes to the kitchen when he finished. While he rinsed and stacked them in the sink, he glanced out the window. Marian was outside, sitting in her lawn chair

again. She was still in her pajamas, but had donned a coat against the chill. Usually, she would have been dressed before now; so much had changed. That was his sorrow. That damned trip, he thought. If we can only return to normal and forget what happened. She looked so alone. He wanted to cheer her up, but could think of nothing he could do. Unable to watch her sitting quietly, lonely, he turned away from the window. When he discovered that coffee had been made, he poured a cup and returned to the dining room table. But something was still missing. He needed his morning paper, the one he always scanned before going to the office. He found it, still lying on the front steps. Until this morning, Marian had brought in the paper to read, and eventually clip out, any story about the killings. But this morning, now that the murders had been solved for them, the paper remained outside. He returned to the table and his coffee and his normal routine, but reading the paper only increased his restlessness.

He didn't want to leave Marian alone, but to stay in the house any longer was impossible. He had to get back to the newspaper. He suddenly realized how much he missed the sounds of typewriters and reporters, the trips out to the city desk or into the machine-laden backshop. He was still weak and his skull still bore an ugly patch, but he could go in for a few hours, at least. The trip would be therapeutic. Escape from the house was necessary.

When he had dressed, he put on a coat and went out the back door to tell Marian where he was going. She was still in the lawn chair, and he was certain that, despite the sun, she must be too cool. She

had always needed more warmth than he did; may be she would go indoors when he left. He realized what he had thought, and was frightened. Is she really afraid to be in the house with me? He looked at her sitting quietly in the chair on a patch of lawn, and again the image of an island shimmered into his consciousness.

The parting was quiet. He couldn't think what to say. There was nothing to say, perhaps. He only told her that he was going to the newspaper for a few hours and even forgot to suggest that she go indoors; he didn't realize that he had forgotten until he was a few blocks away. That was disturbing, and defensively, his mind rushed forward to the newspaper. The morning traffic was still heavy, and he had to drive slowly, twice almost hitting stopping cars, as his inattentive mind sought the sanctuary of his office. He was excited when he arrived at the building.

The elevator's steady ascent seemed stately after the recent confusion in his life. He had been warmly greeted by the receptionist on the first floor, and he knew that the newsroom staff would have been alerted to his arrival. The opening elevator doors proved him correct. Ben was waiting.

"How are you, C.B.?"

"Still weak, but I had to get back." Ben smiled knowingly. "We received a paper this morning," C.B. continued, "so I know it's still coming out." He smiled. "I just had to come down to see how."

As the two men walked into the newsroom, C.B. was greeted enthusiastically by the staff. When the greetings and questions quickly tired

him, he again sensed the extent of his weakness. He moved toward the safety of his office, where, inside, he hung up his coat and slipped into the chair at his large desk, resting his hands on the dark, solid wood he had always liked. He slid the chair under the desk and began to shift nervously in the broad seat, unable to find a comfortable position; he was confused by the lingering unrest that he had hoped the office would dispel.

His office was exactly as he had left it, but now it projected an unexpected atmosphere of emptiness. He had never liked to stay for any time in an empty room; he enjoyed, perhaps needed, the comfort of a room filled with furniture and space-consuming decoration. Empty rooms left him feeling ill at ease and vulnerable, if he remained in one for any time, especially if he weren't preoccupied with something else. Now, for some reason, when he had depended upon his office to serve as a retreat, it only seemed to intensify his discomfort, even when he sat at the desk he loved.

"Come in," he said quickly when someone knocked at his door. As he entered, the publisher smiled at C.B. Jordan seemed pleased to see him, but concerned, nevertheless.

"Good to see you back at work, C.B., but are you certain you're strong enough?"

"I'm not back to full strength yet, Mr. Jordan," he said, rising as he spoke, "but I thought I should come in for a few hours at least. I get bored just lying around the house."

Jordan quickly urged, "Sit down, sit down. You've got to take it

easy, my boy." Jordan was less than fifteen years C.B.'s senior, but he had reached an age where he began to take a fatherly attitude toward everyone younger than himself.

"You are supposed to have another week of vacation. If you feel at all weak, take a few more days off. Take a week or two. Get your strength back first. It can be written in as sick leave, rather than vacation time, and you won't lose anything." He smiled reassuringly.

"I know." He did too, and was grateful. Jordan was truly a nice man, everyone agreed, always willing to make concessions for others. The man's warm greeting pleased C.B., but it simultaneously made him uncomfortable. He couldn't tell Jordan the real reason for his early return, and he wouldn't mention his headaches. He began to wonder if Jordan, even while greeting him warmly, were observing him with suspicion. Feeling spied upon, he looked closely at the publisher, but could see no difference in the man. Jordan's concern was no mask, but C.B. still felt uneasy, on trial. Perhaps that explained his sudden urge to return to the paper. Perhaps it was not the strangeness at home, any uneasiness between Marian and himself, or even any stirrings of guilt about what had happened--those feelings he could handle if they did occur--perhaps it was nothing more than the sense that he was avoiding the duties of his job, disappointing Jordan. That must be it, he thought.

"I'm back to do some work, Mr. Jordan. I know I'm a little weak, but I can return to normal faster, I think, if I put in a few hours each day, getting used to the pressure again. It shouldn't be too long

before I feel like a real newsman." He smiled and hoped that he sounded sincere, more certain of himself than he really was.

"Just take care of yourself, Charles," Jordan said, for the first time using C.B.'s first name. They had known each other for years, even meeting socially on occasion, but C.B. had always been C.B. He felt even more uneasy under the gaze of his given name. Only Marian called him Charles, now. His mother had, too, but she had been dead for years. Even his father had called him C.B.

When Jordan finally left, C.B. again tried to sink into the padded chair's comforts, but still, he couldn't relax. To distract himself, he began rearranging the top of his desk and then turned his attention to the paper's final edition, the same one he had tried to read at home. Concentration was beyond him, however, and he soon dropped the paper to the desk. He found himself on the verge of rising, perhaps to pace nervously about the room, and he didn't like that. The image of Marian sitting quietly in the wide green lawn flashed in his mind. He would force himself to sit quietly at the desk, to concentrate. He must discipline his mind, he thought, and began a close examination of his office. He had always thought his office to be impressively large, but the room was simply empty and barren, with only a few pieces of furniture to occupy the space. How could he have so admired this room? Other than the desk, and the two chairs before it, there were only a small bookcase and one filing cabinet in the room. The bookcase, about three feet tall, had been set against the wall separating the office and the newsroom. It held a few reference books. On top of

the bookcase was a picture of Marian, a snapshot that had caught perfectly her relaxed smile. Although the picture had been taken more than twenty years ago, the smile hadn't changed. It was warm, human, and seemed, as more than one person had commented, to sum up Marian's personality. He wondered if she would ever smile like that again? He felt a pressure growing in his chest and began to move his eyes around the room. It was as though he were seeing it for the first time. The early strangeness had increased. The gray filing cabinet against the wall across the room from his desk looked efficient, but awkward, interrupting the smooth flow of the wall from the door in one corner to the wooden coat stand in the other. The wall to the right of the desk was bare except for another picture of Marian, a wedding picture that he had always thought had dominated the room, but now seemed much too small against the gray wall. It was his favorite picture. Armored in the purity of her white gown, Marian was solemnly placing part of her wreath at the foot of a statue of the Virgin Mary. The picture had a magic quality inherent in it for C.B., but now it seemed isolated by the grayness of the wall. He must have this room repainted, he thought. A decorator must do it over.

The room depressed him. He didn't turn to look at the framed front pages from significant issues of the newspaper, hung on the wall behind him. He had always received a sense of pride when he saw the display of the first issue of the paper, of the issues announcing the end of the two world wars. Now, they didn't seem to have anything to do with him. He looked at the desk calendar and turned over the dated pages.

How few there were. He felt that he had been away for weeks or months, not just seven days.

Perhaps Jordan had been right. He should've stayed home. Maybe he would feel better tomorrow. He spent a few minutes trying to think of notes to himself that he could write on the calendar, things he could do tomorrow, but he could think of nothing. It was as though he didn't belong here. He finally retrieved his coat from the corner. Yes, tomorrow he would feel better. He didn't look back, as he closed the door behind him. The excuses in the newsroom were easy to give and graciously received, and he rode the elevator to the first floor still hearing Ben's order to "get some rest."

The traffic was congested again, and he remembered how busy it had been that morning. He would have Marian drive him to work tomorrow. It would be good for her, too. They both needed to get out of the house.

As he stopped the car before the garage, he noted with approval the empty lawn chair. The house, too, seemed empty when he opened the door, however; that disturbed him again. He forced himself to hang his coat in the hall closet before calling to Marian, as though he expected no answer and were afraid of what might lie just ahead. When he did call, there was no answer. He expected to hear his voice echo. Like a tomb, he thought, immediately angry with himself for admitting his fear. In the kitchen, he noticed the morning's dishes still in the sink. That was very unlike Marian, to leave any part of the house untidy.

There was no sign of anyone downstairs. As he climbed to the

second floor, he felt his chest tighten as a sudden fear overtook him, a premonition that something terrible awaited his discovery. He wanted to call out again, but was afraid. He hurried to the bedroom door, again strangely closed, certain that it would be locked. It opened easily.

He almost cried with relief when he saw Marian sitting in bed, surrounded by newspaper clippings.

"You scared me when you didn't answer. I thought something might have happened." As he approached the bed, he recognized the clippings.

"You have to get rid of those. Zeke and Maddy are dead. You can't bring them back by being morbid. Nothing will change, Marian. I'm sorry I killed the monk, but it wasn't really my fault. My head . . . I didn't know."

She was silent for a few seconds, as she looked at him dully. Her head moved a little, as though she were shaking it to clear it.

"You're right, I suppose. Maybe it was my fault. I don't know, I just don't anymore. What am I going to do, C.B.?" She apparently had been praying. Her left hand rested loosely on her thigh; her Rosary lay across the limp, pale hand. It looks dead, he thought, frightened, and began angrily to collect the clippings. They hadn't been spread haphazardly, but were arranged by date. Only the clipping from that morning's paper, which told of the captured convict, was missing. A story without an ending. He felt his anger.

Marian made no protest as he gathered the slips of paper, wadded them into a ball, put them in the trashbasket. They didn't seem to

matter to her anymore. He was relieved. Perhaps she was beginning to return to her senses. It'll be all right, he thought. We can force everything back into a normal order. We have to.

"I love you, Marian." How strange that sounds: I haven't said that at all lately. "I really and truly love you with everything inside me."

"I know, C.B." There were tears in her eyes. He wanted to cry.

"I was so scared when you didn't answer. I thought, for a second, that . . . maybe . . ."

"I couldn't do that. It would be a sin."

"But I was so scared. I want everything to be all right again. I just want what's best for you."

"Do what's best for yourself now. You've got to tell them what happened, C.B. You've got to."

"Them"? Who? He tried to speak and couldn't; his body began to shake, as though from a great chill.

"I can't, Marian." He began to cry. "I'm afraid to. I'm afraid for both of us."

"I know," she said, as she extended her arms. But he turned away, crying harder. "And I know you love me," she added, "maybe more than you can know. I love you so much, C.B. But I have to go to confession. I can't live with this on my soul."

He gave up. "But will you go to another parish?" This time he was just asking, not making a demand. "I could never take you to church again if I had to face the priests. I'd never know who had heard your

confession. One of them would know. It might even be Father Donovan. I wouldn't want him to regret marrying us. I think he always hoped you would bring me back to the church."

"I'll go somewhere else," she said. "I want to do what is best for both God and you. I think I know where to go."

The conversation ended there. His crying slowed, stopped. He was relieved. Marian seemed to be more at ease, as though she had resolved some difficulty, had found an answer to a question.

CHAPTER FOUR

The deafening clanging began abruptly and was obviously intensifying. His desk had begun to grow, and he had to take his hands from his ears to hold on to it. It moved away from him as the room expanded, becoming wider and taller, the grey walls now mountainous, higher and higher; Marian's white gown flowering from the frame that once held it, grown suddenly above his reach and still rising; the smallest cracks in the grey paint deepening to great rips through the surface, menacing caverns throwing shadows toward him, until only the desk was in the light, beyond the greyness of the walls. And then the clanging alarm, crying "danger, danger," exploded.

He threw his arm out again and hit the corner of the night stand. He was out of the dream now; the pain in the bone told him that he was awake. The electric clock lay on the floor, silent at last, its cord limp. It had come unplugged when his arm had knocked it to the floor.

Morning light leaked into the room around the closed blinds, and he looked again at the clock. It was 8:30. Marian was not in the room. He sat up and tried unsuccessfully to recall the dream that had left him damp and weak. He could still feel the fear, but its cause escaped him.

His mind revolved to Marian's absence; he remembered that she had been gone from the bed earlier, when he had awakened in hours still dark.

Leaving the bed, he went to the railing of the staircase. Sounds from the kitchen: the screen door shutting, then the wooden door. Good. She had been coming into the house. He thought of the white island in the sea of grass. Good, coming in. Back in the bedroom, he returned the clock to its stand, neglecting to re-plug it. Still slightly disoriented from the disorder of his sleep, he sat on the edge of his bed to plan the day, as always. He should go to the newspaper, but the idea of driving through the heavy traffic again did not appeal to him. Perhaps Marian could take him to town. If not, a taxi. But she had not slept a full night; the bed had been empty again. The irregularity of her rest since the return from the mountains showed in her face. Perhaps the cab; no, she could return to the house and sleep. Leaving the house might help her. Yesterday she had been so tired. Yet, the bed had been empty.

Moving from the bed, toward the chest, quieted his mind. He began to feel better as he dressed; the night was forgotten by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs and could smell breakfast cooking. The hearty odor of frying sausage awakened his hunger. This was a change for the better, in the direction of normalcy. Since coming home, he had been getting cold breakfasts, or quick ones that he fixed himself. Marian must be feeling better; the smell of the sausage, and the hunger it had awakened, made him feel more alive. His head even felt fine this morning.

Marian was at the stove, as he had expected, already dressed, and when he entered, she looked at him. For days she had seemed to be

avoiding him with her eyes, but not they did not turn away. She even spoke first. "I forgot about the alarm. I was going to turn it off and call you when I put the eggs on. Scrambled?"

He nodded, almost afraid to speak. Marian still appeared tired, but this was the closest to her old self that she'd been since their return. He didn't want to change that. He just wanted everything to be again what it had been. He needed that. He needed her. I must tell her that, he thought.

"You seem to feel better," he finally said.

She nodded.

"I'm glad," he added. He noticed the coffee. "Is the paper in yet?"

"On the table, but breakfast will be ready in a minute or two," she said, as she lifted the sausage from the pan. She deftly cracked two eggs, dropping the yolk and white into a mixing bowl and discarding the shells. He watched her add milk, salt, pepper, stir the mixture and pour it into the skillet.

"About two more minutes."

The table was set as always. He moved to his chair; the paper lay, folded neatly, beside his plate. A glass of orange juice; the vitamin pill beside his spoon. He put the pill in his mouth and washed it down with juice. Normal, everything back to normal, he thought as he set down the glass. Almost, anyway; he touched the bandage just above his left temple. The kitchen seemed warmer this morning, very comfortable.

"Looks good, cook," he said, when Marian brought his plate of eggs and sausage to the table. Nothing for her, though. "Aren't you hungry?"

"I had coffee and toast earlier. Oh, almost forgot the toast." It was ready, warming on a plate atop the toaster. She set the plate in front of him and then added a jar of jelly from the refrigerator.

He took a forkful of eggs. "Delicious. I must be a condemned man to get such a hearty meal." He ate steadily.

"I haven't been taking care of the house very well," Marian said. "I thought you needed a good breakfast."

"My stomach tells me I did. It finally feels content. I need something else, too. Driving in that traffic yesterday took a lot out of me. How about taking me to the paper today?"

"Fine. I was going to suggest it."

"Are you sure you feel up to it? I know you were out of bed pretty early this morning. You looked more peaceful last night, and do this morning; but I worry about you, old girl."

"I still had trouble sleeping, but I think I've got everything worked out, C.B. And I do feel better this morning. Maybe I just don't need as much sleep anymore."

The subject changed, but they did talk while he ate and she cleaned the stove and washed the cooking utensils. When he finished, she washed his silverware and dishes, and he had a second cup of coffee. While the dishes were draining she took off her apron and hung it on a hook on the wall. I'm going to have a dishwasher put

in, he thought, as she dried and put away the dishes, and for a moment wondered where he could have it installed. The dishes done, Marian went upstairs and returned with her purse under her arm. It was 9:30, time to leave. He thought of the dishwasher again, and decided against telling her. Let it be a surprise.

The traffic did not seem as heavy this morning. At least, the trip to the newspaper was uneventful, and he was able to turn his thoughts to the day ahead. There was something about his office, he felt, that he was supposed to remember, but couldn't. Was it the displeasure it had prompted yesterday? He would have it changed. The decision made, he dismissed the subject, for the moment pleased with himself. He had made two decisions already this morning. He was anxious to return to the newspaper routine that he loved so much, to a life of activity and importance; when the car stopped in front of the building, he stepped out expectantly. The day was warmer, too. Felt good.

"Goodby," he said, as he got out. "I'll call you to come get me. Okay?"

"Yes." He closed the door. It was not until the elevator doors closed that he realized what he had forgotten. I didn't kiss her, he thought. Forgot. Wanted to kiss her and tell her how much I need her. Maybe the first time in ten, fifteen years I haven't kissed her in the morning. She should know how much I need her. Call her later. Tell her. This morning was good; more peaceful, yes, she looked more peaceful, he thought, though still tired. A lot of strain, past few days. More on her, probably, surely, than on him. No conscience. Do I have

no conscience? Maybe she is my conscience. Definitely call later. Tell her I need her. Haven't said that in . . . The doors opened.

When he walked into the newsroom, the greetings matched those of yesterday, and he talked for a minute before drifting down to his office. He started to close the door behind him, but for some reason, perhaps to be able to watch the movements in the newsroom, he decided against it.

The grey walls displeased him again today, but this time they suggested something to write on his calendar: a note to have the office painted and to find some decorations for the walls. That made him feel better, and he turned his attention to the morning paper's separate editions. The next hour and a half were spent comparing the editions and examining other newspapers from the city and the state. It was as though he had been out of the world for the past week. He knew almost none of the stories. Even after returning to Atlanta, only one subject had interested him, and he had much to catch up on. He made a note to look at the front pages of the final editions for the days he had been out of the office. That would be a good beginning.

At 11:30 Jordan came by, and the two men talked for almost half an hour before they realized that it was time to have lunch. They decided to eat in a cafeteria near the newspaper and walked there together. All through lunch, the conversation concentrated on the newspaper. The few times Jordan asked about C.B.'s strength or about Marian, C.B. would answer him and then instinctively would turn the talk back to the paper. It wasn't until they returned to work after one o'clock, that he

remembered his intention to call Marian.

He closed the door to the office this time and dialed his home number. There was no answer, although he let the phone ring nearly a dozen times, and that worried him. Past time for her lunch. Perhaps she had already eaten and was outside the house. Since the weather was nicer, it was a possibility; she could not hear the telephone then, unless she were standing beside a window. The thought satisfied him. He wrote a memo to telephone her later.

Next he called for the final editions for the period he had been away. But they failed to hold his attention. His mind was again uneasy, with a growing feeling that was not simply displeasure, but closer to fear. Suddenly he felt closed in, as though he were suffering from a wave of claustrophobia. It came to him finally that he wanted the door open again. The dull grey room offended him. The door open, he stood for a minute, staring out into the newsroom, where the rows of reporters' desks--despite the occasional clutter of newspapers, coffee cups, and packages of cigarettes--seemed neat and orderly, arranged where they had always been. That was better. Leaving the door open, he returned to his desk and the stack of newspapers.

When he had caught up on the news, he phoned the desk. It was early in the afternoon, and the bulk of the work for a morning newspaper is done in the late afternoon and early evening. He would have to check to see if the news editors were already at work.

"Ben?" he asked, when the phone was answered. "This is C.B."

"What can I do for you, boss?"

"Harvey in?"

"He's here. Want to get the rundown now?"

"Yes. Can you two come in?"

The news editor and city editor came into the office and took the two chairs in front of the desk. The next thirty minutes were spent discussing the stories that the two men knew were "working," that would be the morning edition's biggest stories, if nothing unexpected happened. New developments in a civil war in Africa. The Mideast. President to speak at seven. Local political races. The half hour's discussion made him feel that he had truly returned to work. He did not realize how much he enjoyed the conference, until the two men left. His mind, during the talk, had been free of his other worries; as though for thirty minutes, he had been able to escape the reality in his mind. He loved his job, and now that he had caught up on the news stories, he could turn his eyes to the editorial page. He was content to be where he was, doing what he was.

It was almost two thirty before he remembered to call home again. His head had begun to hurt some, and he thought of aspirin and home. When he thought of Marian, he immediately reached for the phone. He let the phone at home ring and ring, glancing at his watch several times while the buzzing continued. She might have gone to visit someone, or she still might be outside. But he was worried again. She was so tired, so tired. The phone seemed to grow louder, as it rang in his ear. Even if she were asleep, she should hear the phone in the bedroom. She had seemed better last night and this morning, he thought,

but the thought didn't reassure him. He finally hung up. Someone can drive me home. She has to be there. He called the city desk.

"Ben. Do you have someone free to drive me home?"

"I can get someone. You sound worried. Anything wrong?"

He hesitated, and then said, "I'm concerned about Marian. She's been very upset lately--not getting much sleep. She's got a lot on her mind. I've called home several times with no answer, and I'm afraid she might be sick or hurt."

"Are you sure she went home?"

"No, but I think she was too tired to go anywhere else. I've got to go home and check."

"Why not call a neighbor to see if the car is home?"

He jumped at the suggestion. "Thanks." He was grateful and a little embarrassed for not thinking of it himself.

The wife of the family who lived across the street from them answered his call. She left the phone a few seconds and returned with the information that the driveway was empty. The car might be in the garage, she said; the door was closed. He thanked her and hung up. The car would not be in the garage. Marian never liked to drive into the garage, because she thought the doors too narrow for comfort.

Not home then. An accident? He would call the police, although Marian should have been able to call him by now. Unless she were really hurt. He picked up the phone nervously. But if there had been a serious accident, the police would have notified him as soon as they discovered her identity. He would still feel better about it if he checked himself.

He was dialing when Ben came through the open door.

"Did you find out anything?"

"She's not home, according to the people across the street. I'm calling the city police to see if there's been a wreck."

"I'm sure they would've called you."

"Yes, but I'll feel better for checking." He spoke into the telephone then, told the operator who he was, and asked for the dispatcher. When the connection was made, he explained what he wanted to know. There had been only two wrecks reported, the officer said. He told C.B. the make of the cars involved. Not his. Relieved, he thanked the dispatcher before hanging up.

"That's good to hear," he said to Ben. "She must be visiting a friend. It was stupid of me to worry."

"I'm glad that's taken care of," Ben said. He turned to walk out the door and asked, "Do you want the door open?"

"Yes. I'm tired of the color of this room. It's drab, and the door lets in a little life from the city room."

Ben agreed and left. C. B. wondered again about Marian. Usually, she stayed at the house, when not involved with some business at the church. She wouldn't have gone there today. Not until she'd been to confession. And that she was going to do out of town this weekend. She had agreed. He thought again of the dishwasher and made a note to call about one. After taking two aspirins from a bottle, he went out for some water.

He worked almost another hour, before he realized that he had read

a paragraph three times and still didn't know what it said. He yawned and rubbed his temple. Slight headache still. In his pleasure at returning to work, he had almost forgotten that he was still weak. It was time to go. He would call Marian to come after him. She had to be home by now. If not, he could get a ride.

There was still no answer; the phone just rang. He was confused but not so worried this time. He was too tired to worry. Marian was all right. She would be visiting someone and could have forgotten the time. That wasn't usual for her, but it wasn't a usual time in their lives. He would get a ride home.

This time he walked to the city desk to explain to Ben what he wanted. Luckily, a photographer was preparing to leave on an assignment; Ben called the photo lab. The photographer would be right up. C.B. waited for him to arrive. He was exhausted, more tired than he had a first thought, and having to wait irritated him. He felt adrift. The exhilaration he had felt earlier had faded, and he was left feeling empty. For some reason he thought of being in a boat drifting freely, drifting. The sensation came to life in his mind and brought with it, first, memories of warm days of fishing, the lazy movements of a boat floating, and then pictures of him and Zeke wading after bass.

The thought of Zeke made him unhappy. For two days he had kept his mind from the horrors of his trip. He wasn't going to think of them now. Not now when his life was regaining its old balance. He would forget what had happened. His mind would protect itself. That was natural. Self-defense was the first rule of life, and he would

follow that rule.

He guided himself back to the present, but not before the thought of Zeke had led, faintly but quickly, to a hint of the smiling face bulging at the car window, to another face falling beneath the swinging fire iron.

"Where is that guy?" he finally said, his tone sharp.

"Let me call again," Ben said, but just as he lifted the phone, a man carrying a camera and two leather bags came into the newsroom. When the photographer spoke, his voice was apologetic.

"Sorry I took so long. I was loading film when you called and had to finish before I could turn on the lights."

"Let's just go," C.B. said abruptly. The photographer, apparently surprised, glanced at Ben and turned to walk to the elevator. C.B. followed.

They waited silently for the elevator. C.B. could only think of how tired he felt. His headache was worse. The excitement of the day was completely gone now, and he was almost sorry he hadn't stayed home to rest. Maybe he would tomorrow.

He pushed the elevator button, and the machine proceeded downward, slowly. Its trip seemed interminable, and he was angry again by the time it stopped at the first floor. He stepped faster toward the main doors, glad to see the sunlight beyond the glass. Then he heard his name, someone calling him back from the light.

"Yes?" he said. It was the receptionist. She was gesturing with the telephone. He slowly realized that there was a call for him. He

didn't want to answer it. He wanted to go home. To sleep. He did not want to answer.

He forced himself to take the receiver. He heard Ben's voice and suddenly felt threatened.

"C.B. The highway patrol just called. It's bad news. Marian's been in an accident. We're having the operator switch the call to you."

He didn't want to wait for the new voice to come. He didn't want to wait at all. His head hurt, and he was tired; very, very tired. And he felt threatened.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Mr. Bodenson?"

He could hear the voice distinctly, more clearly than a voice from a telephone deserved, and he knew that it must be calling for him. The name seemed strange, however; he had heard that name, but he suddenly didn't know why. It seemed foreign to him, as though it could not be his real name, and he wanted time to think of what his real name must be; wanted to hang up the phone, until he could answer that question correctly; he might not be Mr. Bodenson after all. Why should he answer? Maybe the caller wanted the real Mr. Bodenson; why should he take his place? He had no desire to be Bodenson; he didn't want the voice to be asking for him, to hear a message for him only. But he knew that it was for him alone, him alone.

"Yes."

"Mr. Bodenson. Capt. Harrelson of the Georgia State Highway Patrol. I have some bad news, sir."

So formal, always so formal at a time like this. He already knew what the news was. Ben's voice had told of an accident, but that wasn't it. He remained silent while the Captain's voice paused, seemed to search for words. When it resumed, he knew what it would say.

"Is your wife Marian Bodenson?"

"Yes."

"There's been an accident, sir."

The voice didn't say that Marian or even "she" had had an accident, or even that she had been "in" one. It was as though she and the accident were unrelated, or that she were only the recipient of an action. Impersonal. She wasn't to blame. He knew who was. He knew everything, but he still had to play the part. He knew his lines, too. So formal, he thought again. Self-defense. Do we always react that way?

He heard himself ask, "Was it bad? Was Marian hurt?"

"Mrs. Bodenson was killed, sir. Her car ran off the road, out on Interstate 85."

He knew everything now. He could see the road, the country around the highway rising into distant mountains, and knew where the road led and where she would have turned off onto the smaller country road. "I think I know where to go," she had said. He had been satisfied by that, had asked only that she wait until the weekend, in order that he could drive her to another parish. But not that parish. Why back there? Why? But he knew, even as his question echoed upon itself.

The elevator doors opened, and Jordan walked toward him, the publisher's face showing concern. Ben must have told him. The thought made him angry: Why did Ben do that? Mr. Jordan would blame him for Marian's death, probably. He didn't want Mr. Jordan to blame him. Why should anyone? How could they know anything? But they all would think him guilty. He couldn't take that. Guilty enough already. Had his share.

Gradually, he realized that the voice on the phone was still speaking. "How did it happen?" he interrupted.

"Apparently she just ran off the road into a ditch. The car turned over. She wasn't speeding or anything, witnesses said." He paused; his voice was quieter when he resumed. "There was a fire, but she didn't feel anything, sir. She was dead before the fire."

He was grateful for that information. A moment of anger touched him: she should have waited for him to drive. She had been in no shape. But he was relieved that she hadn't suffered. Not from the fire, anyway. But she shouldn't be dead. Just so tired. He had planned to drive her to confession. Too tired. Could have saved her. What would the judgment be? May I did drive her to it. No, quite guilty enough already.

As he placed the phone in its cradle, he seemed to be growing smaller, smaller. Everything was much larger now, out of proportion. His clothes bulky, too big, too heavy. He wanted to remove his coat, but Mr. Jordan was standing there, and he might think it inappropriate. Everything else was inappropriate--the wrong size, uncomfortable--he must fight to keep something normal. He must blot the tears. Nothing. Nothing must show. A sudden pain tore at his chest, a ripping, as though some organ were being wrenched from him. He clutched at his chest. "Mr. Bodenson," the receptionist cried out. He staggered, leaned into Mr. Jordan. He began to cry harder and barely felt the older man's hand take his elbow and steer him toward the elevator. The small cage loomed ahead of him. He wanted to draw back, to avoid the enclosure that would force him to be with himself. He felt torn inside. Maybe there is a God, he thought, and this is damnation. I can't live without

Marian. Not without Marian.

It's what I deserve, he thought next, and didn't resist. Jordan led him onto the elevator, and the door whispered shut behind them.

* * * * *

After everyone else had walked back to the cars, he and Jordan remained at the grave, silent. Even Father Donovan had walked discreetly away to wait. Jordan stayed at the grave a minute longer, as if he were uncertain about leaving C.B. alone. But then he, too, walked back to the car.

C.B. stared at the mound of fresh earth, the brown soil contrasting with the still-green grass, fainter this time of year, but alive. It looks like a cocoon, he thought, some caterpillar working on becoming a butterfly. Marian would have liked that. He could see the site very clearly, with a precision, a definiteness, that would make the experience impossible to forget: the Fall chill, the cloudy sky, the muted colors. He looked down at his brown top coat and wondered what a modern painter would have done with the scene.

Was he that callous now? He'd just buried her, and now he was thinking about the scenery. He began to cry. Goddam, Marian. No, not that. God damn me. He wanted to lie down somewhere. He turned away from the grave to stop his crying.

Jordan and Father Donovan were waiting for him, the chubby gray-ing publisher and the stocky priest whose ruddy Irish face was without its usual grin. He looked lonely standing there, waiting, all in black.

He was mourning, not the priest. What gave him the right to wear black all the time? Why should he be lonely? He had his god. And his dog. He remembered the priest's large Dalmatian, an aging, uncoordinated animal famous among the parishioners. He's got God and a dog, he thought again; how can he be lonely. One had his god and a dog, the other a wife and a newspaper. Nothing ever disturbed their lives. They were settled and secure forever. If anything is forever, he thought. He was suddenly without a place to be settled and secure. Marian was dead, his family dead; he had grown past gods, and maybe away from newspapers, now; he was alone. He felt a faint jealousy mingled with his despair.

And then he felt a touch of fear. Seeing the priest in his black clothes, he thought, for the first time in days, of the abbot. He felt even more uncertain about the future now, and could only hope that Father Donovan couldn't see that anything was wrong. Somewhere, he thought. Must lie down, rest.

"She was a fine woman, C.B."

"Yes, father. The finest," he replied.

"I'm sure you'll want to know that a priest was called to give Extreme Unction, as soon as they found her Rosary."

She would have wanted that; he had forgotten to ask about it. The ceremony could be performed after a person's death, since no one could say when the soul left the body. Unless she were decapitated. Thank god that didn't happen, he thought. Extreme Unction. Final. It would not matter to him, but Marian would have wanted to have the

rite. She would have had it performed for him, if he had died first. Would the priest think it odd that he hadn't asked?

"I'm glad you told me. I've been so disturbed by it all"

"She was a good woman. You have nothing to worry about. About her anyway."

The last remark must have been intended to worry him--what could Father Donovan know? Marian hadn't talked to him, he was certain. At least he had been certain. Maybe she had called him on the phone before she left for the monastery. Or one morning, while he was at the newspaper. But that wouldn't be confession. Yet, he had to find out.

"Father, did you talk to Marian the last few days before her accident. I mean, did she go to confession?"

"I don't know about confession, but I talked to her. Once. I called her after she brought you home to let her know that she didn't have to worry about the church drive. She seemed very upset about something."

"I would think so." It was Mr. Jordan. "After what C.B. had been through?" He silently thanked the publisher for coming to his rescue, even if unwittingly. He felt as though he were on the witness stand. Let his lawyers fight it out; he couldn't help now. He felt too weak to do anything. Judgment was out of his hands. Leave me alone, he cried, silently.

"No, I know that would upset her terribly. But it seemed more than that. There was something else. Do you know what, C.B.?"

He felt trapped, as if he were being baited. "No." How weak

his answer must have sounded to them. The clarity that he had experienced by the grave was gone. The grayness of the sky had descended and engulfed him. What could he say, but no? He had been feverish, out of his mind that night. No one could blame him. But the priest would, and the jury.

"I've got to get C.B. home to rest," Mr. Jordan said. "He needs to get a great deal of rest now. As a matter of fact, I'm glad this came up now. I've been thinking, C.B., and I want you to go away for a few weeks to rest." Marian is resting. Laid to rest. The word hung inside his skull, like a bat, at home in the darkness. He needed rest, but where? He couldn't stay here. And the mountains were impossible. That was where he and Marian always went, to Zeke's farm; but no more. Where, then?

"It will be good for you to get away," Jordan continued. "I want you to fly to Florida to use our house on the coast. Stay a few weeks; get rested up before you have to decide what else to do."

Mr. Jordan had a second house in Florida, in a city in the state's northern panhandle. Pensacola, he remembered, their governor's home town. He wondered why that random thought had come into his mind. He seemed to have lost control. Rest was what he needed. A long rest. Marian was getting a long rest. She had been so tired. She had needed rest, too. He nodded. He would prepare to leave. Take care of any business, stop the paper, pack. No family. No one to notify. Put everything out of his mind. Leave the day after tomorrow. Monday. Forget everything. Even Marian? No, never. Get some rest. Laid to

rest.

Mr. Jordan and Father Donovan did the talking, what little there was, as the three men walked to the cars. He had to endure the last mourners' condolences, and then he watched the priest's black-clothed back move away. He was cold, now, and got no relief when he moved into the back seat between Jordan and his wife. That's what life would be without Marian, he thought. Cold. But this would all end. He would rest.

* * * * *

His watch showed that it was almost five o'clock Atlanta time when he walked from the plane toward the small airport terminal. He had gained an hour. It would be almost four here. Did that mean he was an hour younger? If he went fast enough, would he go back in time before . . .? Of course not. He concentrated on the ritual of entering an unknown airport to distract him. The one-story building ahead contrasted with the elaborate Atlanta terminal and underlined his movement away from the city. He was fond of small towns, for vacations, and their, it seemed to him, slower, less penetrating pace. Almost like a rest home. But that was not what he wanted; he dreaded the idea of growing old now, a solitary old figure in an almost solitary confinement. Without Marian, that's how his future would seem. Rest was all he wanted; a long, quiet, unending rest.

The plane had only been half full, but everyone crowded around the wagons to find their luggage, and he spent almost fifteen minutes

searching for his suitcase. It was in the third cartload from the plane, and most of the passengers had left the luggage area to enter the terminal by the time he found the suitcase. He had brought little other than the suit he wore--several changes of underwear, two spare pairs of slacks, two shirts, toiletries, aspirins. He didn't expect to need much of the clothing he did bring, but habit dominated. He would at least need the aspirins--for a while.

Leaving the terminal a few minutes later, he found a taxi. The driver put his suitcase in the trunk and held the door for him.

"Where to?" the driver asked, as the cab left the driveway. He had to look for the address that he had stuck in his wallet. He read it aloud, and the driver repeated it into the microphone on the dashboard. When he had returned the microphone to its hook, he settled expertly behind the wheel.

"Where you from?"

He didn't want to answer, but years of civility, and his respect for the conventional, forced him.

"Atlanta."

"Nice town. I've been there. You'll like it here, though. Beautiful area for a business trip."

He didn't correct the man aloud, but thought: Atlanta is a city, not a town, and I'm not on a business trip. I'm here to rest. I need peace. Peace. He rubbed his temple--his head had begun to ache again.

"Know the area? Been here before?"

"No."

"Well, there's more to see than you might imagine." He could tell that a list was coming. He would almost rather leave the cab and walk, but he stayed silent.

"You'll love our beach. The most beautiful in the world. Waikiki looks sick beside it, I hear. Not as good as it used to be before they built the motels and condominiums, but there's still a lot untouched. There's the historical district in town, the Naval Air Base, and some of the best bars in the world. If you'd like, I can take you to a great place tonight. Just ask for my cab number, 39. Or, I'll take you to The Buoy now. Just drop off your bags, if you'd like. It's too early for the strippers, but . . ."

He finally interrupted the man. "I just want to go to the address I gave you."

"Okay," the driver said. "But it's a great bar." He made no response, so the driver fell quiet, and in a few minutes they stopped before a house on a corner lot. He tipped the driver after the man got his suitcase and walked toward the front door, puzzled by an older car parked in the driveway.

The front of the one-story, red brick house was broken by jealousy window after window, typical of the ideal Florida homes he had always seen advertised. The front corner room nearest him had two walls, the front and side walls, that were almost completely glass, they had so many windows. The house had been built on a large lot, back from the street. The windows and the broad lawn gave the house a look of openness. He hurried to get inside out of the sun. It had been cloudy

when he left Atlanta. It was warmer here, but not so much--this was not the south Florida of vacation mythology; however, the sun seemed brighter than he would have expected. His eyes were more sensitive to the light than usual. Perhaps from crying. It was odd, because he had always liked the outdoors; the fishing trips with Zeke . . . no need to recall those, now. He opened the door and set the suitcase inside.

"Hello?" came a voice from the kitchen. A heavy black woman came into the living room. "Mr. Bodenson?"

"Yes."

"I'm called Coe. Coe Johnson. Mr. Jordan phoned to let me know you were coming. I take care of the house for them when they're here. He wanted me to get it ready for you."

That was like Jordan, he thought.

"I bought some groceries to stock the pantry, but not too much. Mr. Jordan didn't know if you'd want to cook or eat out. I could come over and cook in the evenings, but I have another job in the mornings when the Jordans aren't here."

"No. That's all right. Did you pay for the groceries?"

"Yes, but Mr. Jordan said he would send me a check in the mail."

He fumbled in his pocket for some money.

"That's okay, Mr. Bodenson. Mr. Jordan pays me."

He insisted that she take the money.

"Could you leave me your address and telephone number in case I need you some evening?" He had no idea of needing a cook; he was just

trying to be polite.

"Yes sir." She returned to the kitchen. He followed and saw her take a piece of paper from a small rack on the wall. She wrote on the paper and then handed it to him.

"I got the place vacuumed and put towels out and clean sheets on all the beds. There's some stuff in the pantry and milk, eggs, bacon, and a few other things in the icebox."

"Thank you, Coe. But you didn't have to do all that."

"I don't mind doing anything for Mr. Jordan. He's a very nice man. I'm sure his friends are, too."

"I hope you're right."

"I'll be going now, Mr. Bodenson, unless you need me."

"No. Thanks for what you've done."

She left through the room with all the windows. The back door was in another wall of windows. He saw a small brick patio, a wire table and some chairs. There was a small fish pond to the right of the steps. He closed the door after saying goodbye again.

He looked around the room through which he had just come. It had apparently been built as a porch and later closed in, becoming what was called a Florida room. The Jordans had turned it into a dining room. When he had entered the house by the front door, he had seen a small dining room that had been made into an extension of the living room. The dining room-Florida room was bright with light coming through the three walls filled with windows. It would be a pleasant place to eat. But he would not be here that long.

He returned to the kitchen for a glass of water and took two aspirins from a tin case. Then, for lack of anything else to do, he checked the food in the refrigerator. In the pantry he found several cans of vegetables, a box of detergent, some more cans. A bread box on one shelf held a loaf of bread. The discovery of a can of coffee sent him in search of a perculator, which he soon found under the kitchen counter. He would make coffee later. He would need things to do to keep him occupied. Too soon to make any decisions. Or were they made already? Too soon. What could he do now? Too tired to enjoy cooking, he would go out for dinner. He wasn't hungry now, but later he would need something. He had to guard his strength for a while. He was weak. He would need to be stronger than he was now.

He had left his bag in the living room. Now, after making certain that the door was locked, he carried the suitcase in search of a bedroom and chose to use the largest of the three. The bed was inviting, and he would rest. Life was no longer comfortable. He needed rest and would sleep. Later, he could go out to eat. And when he had slept and eaten, he would be able to think. There was so much to think about. He rubbed his aching temple.

Before taking off his suit, he closed the blinds. The day was still bright, younger in this time zone. But he would sleep now. He stripped to his underwear and climbed into bed, hoping to sleep despite the sun that insistently slipped in, around the closed blinds.

CHAPTER SIX

He couldn't sleep. He wasn't certain that he had slept since Marian's death, despite the doctor's pills, although he must have. His life had always been most conventional, according to the clock, beginning daily at the decent hour of the morning, his energies devoted to the daylight. Only for a short time as a young reporter had he found himself active for long periods of the night. He had been reporting for a morning paper, and his duties were performed, usually, at night. When he was through work for the evening, he would often be too keyed up to go home and to bed--he was a single man and dreaded spending several hours alone at home before he would feel like sleeping. Occasionally, he would accompany another reporter or two to a bar for a drink, or to the same all-night diner for a late meal. Yet even then he felt out of place. The people he saw in those places disturbed him. He was more at home in the bright hours of day, when the world was rational. Luckily, with his progress at the paper, the late hours were soon behind him. By the time he had become a news editor and was again required to stay at the paper for part of the evening, he had moved to the newspaper that would become his home and part of his identity, had married, and had Marian waiting at home.

But now again he had been spending the night hours awake. Sleep was a frightening land of monsters, and when his weakness forced him

to lie, exhausted, hoping for rest, fear of his dreams kept him awake. When he did begin to doze, Marian's face might appear, her eyes closed peacefully, as they had been when she lay in her casket, and he would know that she was dead. He would jerk wide awake again, and the empty bed would wrack him, drive him out to pace and drink coffee, until he could muster again the resolve to sleep. Surely he had slept, but he could not remember when, and now the light slipping around the closed blinds was too bright for him to slip into the dark unconsciousness that he needed.

He closed his eyes, determined to rest his head, even if sleep proved impossible. But his shut eyelids seemed to be a screen onto which his mind flashed pictures he didn't want to see. A brown mound of earth, cocoon-like, contrasting with the fading green grass, would appear out of the projector in his mind, the image growing stronger, until he opened his eyes to escape. He would stare at the ceiling, look at his watch--anything to avoid the thoughts waiting for him.

The doorbell saved him. He looked at his watch again; he had been lying down for less than half an hour. As he began to put his pants and shirt on, he wondered if perhaps the maid had come back for something. Maybe he would have her cook something for him after all. That might help him sleep.

He opened the door. A stranger stood before him. Perspiration had beaded at the man's hairline, and his round face, below short-cropped, faded blond hair, was oily and glistening in the light. He cleared his throat.

"Mr. Bodenson."

"Yes."

"I'm Andrew Cranston." He didn't recognize the name. Cranston seemed disappointed.

"Managing editor of the Press, the local paper, you know."

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm here for John Jordan, your publisher. He and my publisher are old friends, and he called down to get us to look in on you. He told us about your wife. Terrible, sir. I wanted to come by to meet you and welcome you to town."

"How did you know I had arrived?" He realized that the man might be uncomfortable standing on the porch. "Come in, won't you?"

"Thank you. My car's air conditioning is broken, and I should've taken this coat off," he said, doing just that. "Your publisher called last night. He didn't know which plane, but he said you'd come in today. I just took a chance that you'd be on the afternoon flight and came by. I tried to give you time to get unpacked."

He remembered that his bag was still packed, as though he would not need the contents. He looked at the stocky man who had put his gray suit coat on the back of one of the chairs. He was about his own height, but a protruding stomach and broad hips would increase the man's weight to half again his own 165 pounds. Cranston's pale cheeks bulged to give a slight puff of air at the beginning of every third or fourth sentence, as though he had run to the door. C.B. wasn't certain what a newsman was supposed to look like, but Cranston looked to him more like a used car salesman. The man was staring at

him and making little effort to hid his curiosity. When he realized the object of Cranston's interest, he self-consciously touched the bandage over his temple.

"It's not as big as it used to be," he said.

"I'm sorry," Cranston said. "I didn't mean to stare. That's where the killer hit you?" Mr. Jordan must have told them everything. Did he tell them of his guilt? Did he know?

"Yes." He said nothing more and was glad when Cranston changed the subject.

"You'll like our town. It's got a lot of action. Of course," Cranston looked embarrassed, "I guess you'll want to rest. Maybe you can go to the beach to get some sun."

He tried to make the man more comfortable. "That may be good for me. I know I need rest," and then he added, "but I've found I'm having trouble sleeping." He paused again. "My wife and I were very close."

"Have you tried sleeping pills?"

"The doctor gave me a prescription for some, but they don't seem to help much."

"I've got what you need. Just a minute." Cranston seemed lighter, as he moved toward the front door. "Let me get something from the car." He sat down to wait, and in a minute Cranston returned, carrying a small brown bag.

"You need a drink. This'll relax you." He reached into the bag and pulled out a pint bottle of a brown liquid that looked as though

it might be bourbon.

"I don't drink, Mr. Cranston. Very little, anyway."

"Call me Andy or Andrew or Buddy. Nobody calls me mister. If you don't drink often, this will help you even more. It will go right to the problem. You'll sleep." He smiled and moved into the kitchen. C.B. could hear him looking for glasses and then getting ice from the freezer.

He didn't want the drink, but to be polite, he could take one sip. Cranston returned with two glasses while he was debating what to do.

"I couldn't find anything to mix yours with, so I added water." He offered the glass. "Take it. It'll help."

"But I can't drink straight bourbon."

"This is Southern Comfort. It's really a sweet drink. It might be a little strong at first, but just think of it as medicine."

He took the glass from Cranston and looked at the liquid inside. He could see no way to avoid taking a drink. It was strong, as he expected, and he choked a little.

"That's not too bad, is it?" Cranston asked. "Take another sip to get over that coughing." C.B. followed the man's instructions, taking less than half a teaspoon of liquid onto his tongue. He found that he could survive that quantity without coughing. He tried another. Maybe his visitor would leave when the glass was empty.

But as soon as the glass had been drained, Cranston reached toward him with the bottle. He protested very little; he remembered how empty

the house would be if the man did leave. Maybe this would help him sleep.

"How much will it take to put me to sleep?"

"Not much, in your condition. I mean, you still must be weak from your injury, and you haven't been sleeping, you said. Just think about something else." That was exactly what he didn't want to do. He knew where his mind would wander. Luckily Cranston changed the subject.

"Coming from the airport, did you get to see much of the town?"

"No, mostly homes and a few small stores."

"It's a nice area. Good climate. Not as hot as further south, and it doesn't get cold in the winter--too close to the water for that. Warm air from the Gulf, you know. Keeps the northers off."

"I guess so."

"It's probably ten degrees warmer than in Atlanta right now. People still go to the beach. That's what you should do. A little rest in the sun would be the best thing for you." Cranston had started to add something else, but caught himself. Probably about the girls at the beach, he thought, watching Cranston carefully. He forced himself to remember that the man was just trying to help.

"You might want to visit the newspaper, too. Mr. Benson said to invite you to stop by."

C.B. was starting to feel warm and more relaxed. He looked at his glass; it was almost empty. He couldn't remember having drunk that much. Then he realized that Cranston had stopped talking. What

was the last thing he had heard?

"Benson?"

"My publisher. He's editor-in-chief, too. Likes to stay in the game. You'll meet him during your stay. He and your publisher are old friends, I understand."

He suddenly realized that he was yawning. The strain of the last few days had drained him of energy; he was exhausted; had he ever been this tired? If he could only keep his mind from Marian. And away from the trip and that monastery. So many things to forget. But he might be able to sleep now. He finally realized that Cranston was standing and had his coat over his arm.

"I can see the medicine is working. I'd better be going, so you can get to bed. Come by the paper when you feel better, and I'll be back to see you in a day or two. You just rest." Cranston glanced at the coffee table. The capped bottle was there. "I'll leave it."

"I don't think . . ."

"It's all right. You just get some rest. I'll stop by again."

When Cranston was gone, C.B. felt even more tired. He was thankful for that; as he walked toward the dark bedroom, he knew that he owed Cranston something.

* * * * *

When he awoke, the bedroom was no longer dark; light seeping past the blinds diffused throughout the room. He realized that he didn't have a headache this morning. That was a good change. He had slept

all night. If there had been dreams, he couldn't recall them. The pint bottle came back to his mind. No hangover even. It was the first full night's sleep since . . . his mind turned away from the shadows that were obviously still there. He sat up; weak still, and there was a decision that had to be made. But not now. He would face that later. As he sat on the edge of the bed, he remembered that he hadn't bathed yesterday. In the bathroom, he found towels waiting. The maid had prepared everything for him. He started the shower.

After the shower, he unpacked his clothes, putting on slacks and a short sleeve white shirt. When he had dressed, he went to the kitchen. There were eggs and bacon in the refrigerator. He started frying bacon. When the eggs were almost done, he poured himself a glass of milk and put in two pieces of toast to brown. He had put on a pot of coffee, and it would be ready before he finished eating. He carried the food to the large table in the Florida room.

The curtains were still open, and the windows on three sides made the room more a porch than a formal dining room. The flood of light revealed that the sun was brilliant again today. He remembered the gray sky that he had left in Atlanta. The sunlight was warm on his arm when he walked to the windows. It felt good on the skin. Perhaps he should rent a car and drive to the beach, if just to see it once. No, there was too much to think about. What he had to plan needed the solitude of a quiet room. It was a big step, would take all his courage. What courage? he asked himself. Did

it really take courage to die, when he didn't have enough to live without her? It took no courage: life without her wasn't possible. He needed time to plan. He had killed her. How could he live with that? But it would still take strength to do what he must. Time. He would be strong enough soon. He must rest.

The warm sun on his arm made him think again of the beach. The waves. Fishing, surf-casting. He had never fished in salt water before, by habit returning to the mountain streams with Zeke.

The thought of Zeke made him skittish; it had sneaked into his consciousness. He had to forget those events and faces until it was time. They would resurrect the horrors hiding in the memories of that farmhouse, that monastery, that mound of brown earth. Too much. He wouldn't think of those things now; he couldn't. Not until it was time. Turning his eyes to his plate, he forced his mind back into acceptable channels. He wouldn't go to the beach, but would stay at the house to rest. He must put his mind in order. Must rest.

When his plate was empty, he cleared the table and poured himself a cup of coffee. After the first cup, he would change the bandage. Then a peaceful day at the house.

He was proved to be wrong. Only when occupied with the tasks of changing his bandage or cooking a meal could he keep his mind at peace. In only a few hours, the energy spent forcing his mind to stay at rest took its toll, and his headache returned. Tired, he slept for an hour; awoke, tried to eat, but couldn't; slept again. When he awoke again, the sun was setting. He had gotten through his day.

He thought of dinner and rebelled at the idea of cooking. Eating out would be less trouble, and would take time. When he returned to the house, he could spend the evening watching television. He remembered the bottle Cranston had left. He would be able to sleep, too. He called for a taxi, dressed, and waited. In a few minutes, he heard a car horn.

"Where's a good place to eat?" he asked the driver. "Nothing fancy, just a quick meal."

"Does it matter what's on the menu?"

"Only that it's good."

"Okay. Hopkin's Boarding House. The food's great."

He thought of a boarding house dining room, groups of strangers sitting together at a big table. He wanted to avoid people.

"No, try something where I can eat by myself."

The driver soon turned the taxi off the wide street they had been following onto another the same size. In a block the street divided to envelop a small park and monument, and reunited at what proved to be the top of a hill above the town proper. He could see the lighted downtown in the distance was larger than he had expected.

"Is this the main street?" he asked.

"Yes, Palafox. Leads down to the bay and the waterfront. The downtown's not as alive as it used to be, with so many stores moving to shopping centers in the suburbs, but this is still where most of the action is."

"I don't want any action, just a quiet meal."

"Coming up."

The taxi turned away from the downtown and in a few more minutes pulled up before a frame house overlooking a small bayou. It had been converted into a seafood restaurant, he observed. Good, he was on the coast, and the food should be fresh. The meal, happily, turned out to be both good and uneventful; he was glad for both the fried shrimp and the lack of disturbance. After dinner, he had the cashier call for a taxi. The driver took him home.

At the house, he soon became restless. He had brought nothing to read, and television failed to occupy his mind. He remembered the small bottle Cranston had left but decided against a drink so early. His restlessness grew, however, and when for the third time he thought of the bottle, he had changed his mind. Perhaps a drink would help again. He poured himself a small amount and returned to the television. Remembering last night's experience, he took only small sips and didn't have any difficulty.

By the time he had finished the first glass, he could already feel the alcohol taking effect. He poured himself another small drink, smaller than the first. As he walked back into the living room, the telephone rang. He hurried to answer.

"Mr. Bodenson? This is Roberta Benson. Mrs. Joseph Benson."

"Mr. Benson, the publisher?"

"Yes. I called to find out how you were adjusting to our town. We heard about your tragedy and want to do anything we can to help."

"I think I'm feeling better now, thank you."

"I understand my husband talked to Mr. Jordan. They're old friends."

"That's what Mr., uhh, Cranston said."

"Well, I know it must be hard on you to be alone in a strange place under the circumstances, so we'd like to have you come to dinner tomorrow night. Don't say no; it would mean a great deal to us."

He weighed his mixed feelings. He had no desire to go, but even less did he want to spend another night alone. And Benson was supposed to be a friend of Jordan's, although he couldn't recall Jordan ever mentioning him. He needed to be alone to rest, but then he was forced to fight his memories. He would go.

"Yes, I'll be glad to come, Mrs. Benson. Will you tell me how to get there?"

"Oh, that won't be any problem. We'll have Andrew Cranston pick you up. He's already agreed to."

"What time should I expect him?"

"Seven-thirty."

"Well, I'll be looking forward to the dinner."

"We're looking forward to meeting you. Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight, Mrs. Benson."

At least it would be better than television alone. He looked at his glass. Perhaps he should have another before trying to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They ushered him into a small gray room. As the door closed behind him, he stared, bewildered, at the bench and counter before him. A glass partition rose to the ceiling along the center of the counter which cut the gray room into halves. A door in the opposite wall led into the room from somewhere beyond, a door like the one he had been pushed through, an opening into an anonymous gray wall. A small gray room, then, cut into halves by a high counter, the counter itself bisected by a glass partition; it seemed very familiar, yet illusive. He should know where he was, but that knowledge lay just beyond him . . . and then the window in the wall, at one end of the counter, answered his question. He knew they were watching, someone was watching; knew, in that moment, where he was. Prison. The room where a prisoner would receive a visitor. He could not understand why he was here. Did he know someone here?

He looked away from the glass plate in the end wall, back to the counter and was startled to find a woman sitting there. Graying hair circled her face with a familiar halo. Slowly he realized that it was Marian. He was shocked, and his chest tightened painfully. Marian? But she could not be a prisoner. Marian would never have done anything to deserve being here. She could not be here, because The reason escaped him. She was not smiling; wasn't she happy

to see him? She must enjoy getting a visitor. It was lonely in a gray cell, curled up inside the close walls. How, he wondered, did he know that? It was all such a mystery. But it was good to see Marian: he must tell her, even if he could not touch her through the glass. He must get closer to her to tell her. She was wearing her favorite dress, a bright, flowered print that he had given her one Easter. How could she dress that way here? How? He knew, immediately, even before he looked down at his shirt front. The gray uniform that he wore was no more, no less than expected. He couldn't remember putting it on--he just knew that it was his.

He crawled to the counter. Marian still did not smile. There were tears in her eyes. She was crying for him, something that hurt him to see. Mary, Mary, his heart cried aloud. He could hear it. Finally his mouth moved.

"Mary, what am I doing here? How did I get into prison? Is that what this is?"

She cried harder now, without making a sound. The tears ran down her cheeks and fell to her bosom, where they were soaking into the dress. It was wet now and dark from her tears. He wanted to tell her to stop, but she might leave; he couldn't mention her tears. He opened his mouth to ask her again why he was there, even though he knew, he knew, he knew; he opened his mouth and sang, "Mary, Mary, never contrary, how does your garden grow?"

Still crying, she sang back, "With silver bells, and cockle shells, and tombstones all in a row."

The refrain reverberated through his head as he awoke, lost, at first, in the darkness of the room. When at last, he thought of turning on the lamp beside the bed, he realized for the first time that he had clenched the muscles in his body until he was rigid, stiffened at attention in the bed. It took an effort to relax his fists and to move his stiff muscles. In the sudden light, he looked for the time. It was after five in the morning; the sky would be graying outside, and the world coming to life . . . with tombstones all in a row.

The refrain attached itself to his thought; he remembered his dream. He needed no reminders--something seemed determined to keep his memories fresh. He must shut the past out, shut that something out, at least until he made a decision that must be made. Tombstones all in a row; were there any more? One more? All in a row. He was very weak now, and strength was needed to make that decision. His head had that persistent ache this morning.

He tried to eat the eggs he fixed--he had scrambled them in hope they would be more appealing--but his stomach didn't want food. He pushed the plate into the center of the table and went after a cup of coffee. He opened the cupboard where the cups were stored and found them hanging . . . all in a row. He slammed the cupboard door, angry at his weakness--his mind was his; he should be able to control it. He opened the cupboard again, got a cup, and filled it with coffee.

It was a long day. Only repeated efforts to anticipate the dinner that he was to attend that evening kept his mind steady. He didn't want

to go to the Benson's, to have dinner with them and Cranston--would Cranston bring his wife, if he were married?--with the hours of polite conversation that promised, but he was more afraid to spend the evening without conversation, unplanned, alone with his memories. He thought of Cranston's bottle. That was not the answer. He had to go; he wouldn't have known how to get out of the invitation under any circumstances. He was always at a loss socially; Marian had controlled that part of his life, too.

Yes, the day went slowly, and he had bathed, dressed in his suit, and mentally stepped out the door almost three quarters of an hour before Cranston arrived. Waiting, he grew nervous and the doorbell, which came unexpectedly, startled him. He found Cranston standing on the porch, running his hand over his shortcropped hair.

"We'll be getting there a few minutes early," Cranston said, as they walked to Cranston's car. C.B. glanced at his wrist watch; it was only 7:15.

"But that won't matter. Everyone will get there early to meet the guest of honor."

"Everyone? Do you mean there will be other people?"

"A few."

"How many?"

"I don't really know. Mr. Benson told me his wife had some friends who wanted to meet you. He was a little apologetic on the phone."

He felt a touch of sickness, a nausea in his chest. Meeting the Bensons alone would have been hard enough for him now. He felt for

the first time this evening the headache pain that had become so familiar.

"Did you know this was becoming a surprise party?"

Cranston was obviously embarrassed. "No," he said, "but there shouldn't be too many people. Mrs. Benson means well. They haven't met you yet, so they don't have any idea how you feel."

"If they've invited one person it's too many." He was quiet while they drove across town, and Cranston remained diplomatically silent.

"If there are many people around tonight," C.B. said, "you've got to help me, okay?"

"Sure, I'll stick with you."

"No, that's not it. I've never liked groups at parties. I don't really like parties, even. I may not be up to this thing. If I start feeling bad, I'll excuse myself and go to the bathroom, and if I'm not back in a minute, you come after me, all right?"

"Sure," Cranston said, but he was obviously puzzled.

"Think you could make excuses to get us out of there? I don't want to hurt their feelings, but this could be too much strain. You could just say I'm feeling ill."

"I can handle that easily," Cranston said, rubbing his right palm over his hair and steering the car with his other hand, smiling at some joke.

The Benson house, C.B. could tell from a distance, was more impressive than he would have imagined. Three stories and brick, it

had a large landing opening outward from the front steps toward the circular driveway that Cranston steered into; as he and Cranston walked toward the house a minute later C.B. could not help admiring it, despite his reluctance to enter.

"A beautiful house," he finally said.

"Family home. He inherited it, along with the stock that gave him control of the paper. His father started the paper and built this house after both the newspaper and he proved to be financial successes." Cranston stopped and turned his bulk halfway around toward the street that passed in front of the property. "That's a large city park across the street, and if it were daylight, you could see the bayou beyond the park. It's polluted now," he added, "but it looks good. You just can't swim in it."

Marian would have liked this, C B. thought. She had been satisfied with their financial security, but had appreciated still the levels of taste that only money could support. She had been a complex and occasionally intense woman, yet with a power to enjoy life that was both simple and straight forward--she could have admired the house without a whisper of jealousy. He looked toward the bayou. Anyone who lived with this loveliness should be acceptable. He wished he could see the bayou and wished too that Marian could see it. Perhaps she could, he thought.

He pushed Marian into a corner of his mind. He could not cope with those thoughts now: later later. The present offered enough problems, he thought, as he observed the other cars parked in the

driveway. They were expensive models, and he knew that the other guests would not be newsmen. Two Cadillacs, a Chrysler, a Mercedes--their friends had money too, he realized.

"There must be some money here tonight," he said.

"Yeah," Cranston said. "The Mercedes is Judge Burkley's. He's president of the junior college. He's okay. The Chrysler looks like Don Booker's, president of the second largest bank. The gray Caddy is John Hunt's and the black one looks like his brother Fred's--stockholders in the paper. I know them all as a newspaperman--born country-clubbers, except for Burkley. He's a pretty nice guy, but as college president, he's got to play politics."

Marian could handle them easily. Smiling, witty; everyone would have liked her. He was less comfortable under these conditions. He felt weaker now, wanted to turn back.

"Remember," he said, as Cranston rang the doorbell, "if I'm more than three minutes in the bathroom come after me."

Cranston nodded just as the door opened to reveal a fleshy face that C.B. knew from somewhere. The man smiled at C.B. and reached to shake hands with him.

"Hello, C.B. It's good to see you." The man seemed to remember suddenly that his guest was not enjoying a vacation and stopping by to socialize, and his face became serious. The soft skin grew even more puffy.

"We were terribly upset to hear about Marian. Of course, Roberta and I never met her, but I've always admired you, and we felt as though

we knew her. It's terrible." The man's voice was a soft, but pronounced, nasal twang. The softness was more from lack of volume than from any quality of tone. His round face was pink, though not young, and his bald head shined as if its surface had been polished within the perimeter of thin hair. The face's softness extended to the man's slightly sagging body.

He remembered Benson now. Once in Mr. Jordan's office in Atlanta, they had been in the same room for a minute, though without being introduced. Later, when he and Jordan were alone, C.B. was told that he had been spared by not being introduced to Benson, who would have strained to corner him for a "friendly chat" in which C.B. would have had to listen and listen and listen. Jordan couldn't always escape contact because his vacation home was in Benson's town, but there was no reason for anyone else to suffer.

"It was kind of you to invite me over," he forced himself to say.

"Not at all. It was the least we could do. And Roberta has been dying to meet you. I'm afraid she told several friends that you were coming over for dinner, and they insisted that they be introduced, too. Everyone admires your newspaper, and John Jordan speaks highly of your role in it."

He remembered now that he'd not liked Benson's voice which, despite its twang, seemed to cling stickily to you. Benson hadn't released his hand, was still shaking it, and the man's soft palm was wet and much like his voice.

Benson finally released C.B.'s hand and turned to lead them into

another room. C. B. noticed then that they had stepped into an expensively furnished foyer. Against the wall, facing what seemed to be a closet in the other wall, was an ornate, carved table garnished with an enormous, elaborately painted oriental vase filled with artificial flowers. He had seen such vases advertised for hundreds of dollars. On the wall behind the table hung a giant mirror, perhaps eight feet tall and nearly as wide. The mirror, framed in a wood as dark as that of the table and just as carved, itself had a pattern cut into it, dividing it into six-inch square planes. The array boasted an expensive elegance. Marian would have loved to see that, he thought, at first pleased and then irritated. This was not the time to think of her. Later.

But his judgment that Marian would have liked the house was reinforced when he was directed into the living room. Its high ceiling supported four huge chandeliers, and he could see that they had three mates in the adjoining dining room. Both rooms were large and expensively furnished, and one wall of the dining room contained glass doors that permitted a view of a patio and a lighted pool. The walls of the rooms weren't painted but papered, while the brilliant chandeliers illuminated an elaborately parqueted floor that was as beautiful as any he had ever seen. The patterned wood of the floor was matched in elegance by the woodwork in the mantel about the fireplace--one larger than the winters would warrant. He apologized silently for his sense of irony; Marian wouldn't have been that petty. But she wouldn't have liked Benson either.

He counted eight other people in the room. The dinner was becoming a party, and he grew more unhappy at the prospect of spending the evening with strangers. Without Marian to intercede, the setting would have made him uncomfortable at any time, but now it was almost unbearable. The men rose to greet him. One of the ladies stood up also.

"This is my wife Roberta, Mr. Bodenson--may I call you C.B.?--and these are our best friends." Benson had continued the sentence without waiting for a reply. How sure Benson was of himself, he thought. Mrs. Benson came forward. "It's a pleasure to meet you, C.B. Joey speaks highly of you." She was a slender woman, with shoulder length, dark brown hair. Neither notably attractive nor remarkably unattractive, she had two outstanding features--a prim, possibly petulant mouth, and an expensive dress.

"Thank you, Mrs. Benson. I'd never met your husband, but my publisher speaks well of him." What else could he say?

"Let me introduce our friends, C.B.," she continued, taking his arm as the hostess at a party would do in an old movie. "Mr. and Mrs. John Hunt, stockholders in the Press." He shook hands with the two men, mumbled "hello" each time, and then again as the men introduced their wives.

"Don Booker is president of the Booker Commercial Bank," she said of the next man he shook hands with. Booker also introduced his wife.

"Last, but not least, is Judge Burkley, president of our junior college." A slender man with a thin gray face smiled at the introduction.

His wife is beautiful, C.B. thought as he was introduced to Mrs. Winnie Burkley.

Mrs. Benson led him to a chair where he obviously would be the center of attention. He began to feel as if he were in a glass cage at a county fair, a curiosity for the locals to exclaim over and then forget as soon as they left the tent. He wished they would forget him now.

"A drink, C.B.?" It was Benson's sticky voice.

"I can't drink yet. Doctor's orders," he lied. He didn't look at Cranston, but the newsman must have turned toward him, catching Mrs. Benson's attention. She had yet to speak to Cranston.

"I'm sure everyone has met Andrew Cranston, Joey's managing editor."

Cranston mutely nodded to the people. It was apparent that Cranston was being used as the chauffeur, if not as the exhibit's handler, for the evening, and C.B. felt sorry for the man. He had intended to ask Cranston if he were married, and if his wife would be here, but even if she existed she wouldn't have been invited. Mrs. Benson, Cranston dismissed, turned back to C.B.

"That bandage looks terrible, C.B. It's a miracle you lived, being attacked that way."

"It's something I don't even want to remember," he said, hoping that he was both being tactful and sounding like the afflicted patient, a role that he didn't have to reach for.

"Now, Roberta, honey, we don't want to force C.B. to relive that tragedy." Benson looked at him, smiling condescendingly. "I'm sure

you'd like to forget all about your wife right now."

I never want to forget her, he wanted to scream. She was his life. But he simply nodded to Benson, afraid that his voice might sound angry, even more so because he had been trying to do what Benson was suggesting. He'd been pushing Marian out of his mind, as he'd tried to kill memories of the abbot's face falling beneath the poker, or the frightening face that had pressed against his car window. She was my life, he wanted to say; I lived for her. Benson turned to a less disturbing subject, asking about C.B.'s present accommodations. He trusted that C.B. had everything he needed at Jordan's house.

"Yes. Mr. Jordan was kind enough to have someone open the house up before I got here. Coe, their maid when they're here, even stocked the pantry for me."

"Good, good," Benson said. "We all need help at times like these. I'm sure you'll need someone to . . . uh, take care of the little things that have to be done."

C.B. nodded, hoping at the same time that Benson would change the subject.

"If there's anything we can do for you, C.B.," Mrs. Benson broke in, "just let us know. We'd just love to help in any way."

"Thank you, but I can't think of anything I need." Except an excuse to leave, he thought. Hoping to remind Cranston of their pact, he mentioned his visits from the local newsman. Cranston had said almost nothing since their arrival, and C.B. could only hope he hadn't forgotten his promise to help C.B. escape. Again to remind Cranston,

C.B. mentioned that he had been having difficulty sleeping.

"The headaches make it hard just to drop off to sleep."

"Headaches?" C.B. could see that he'd made a mistake--Mrs. Benson obviously wanted to pursue the subject.

"Uh, yes. A mild concussion from my head injury. I get bad headaches that seem to stay for hours, but the doctor says that's to be expected and they'll stop."

"You're a noble man to be holding up so well under all the strain," Mrs. Benson shook her head sorrowfully. "Two such awful tragedies so close together." Three tragedies, he thought. Not two--the thin hands of the abbot stretched toward him again, and C.B. closed his eyes to escape.

"Are you all right?" One of the other women asked the question.

"Just tired," he replied.

"I'm certain something to eat will help," Benson said cheerfully. "Shall we move to the dining room?" There was a general murmur of agreement as Benson turned to lead the way.

At the table, C.B. was maneuvered to the seat at Benson's right, across from the hostess. Too close the source of the disturbing questions, he felt. He thought it best to prepare an excuse if he did find some way to leave.

"I'm starved," he said to Mrs. Benson. "My stomach's been disturbed by everything, and I haven't been eating well lately."

"Oh I do hope you can try Mary Lou's dishes, C.B. She is a wonderful cook." He saw someone else nod at Mrs. Benson's words. "Would you

tell Mary Lou we're ready, Joey?" she asked, and Benson left for the kitchen.

For a moment C.B. was free from questions as the others carried on the easy conversation people who have known each other for a long time. He was grateful for the respite and tried to think of a plan to escape the party early. He looked for Cranston and saw that the newsman had been seated at the other end of the table and on the other side. Cranston had been ignored by the Bensons, but now the man was obviously enjoying talking to Judge Burkley and his attractive wife, Winnie. She was laughing at something Cranston was saying as the stocky newsman waved his hands apparently in explanation. Cranston seemed engrossed in the moment; C.B. could only hope that he would remember to help.

A large black woman followed Benson from the kitchen with a tray of food and a stand for the tray. She was soon moving from person to person with a plate of hors d'oeuvres.

"Thank you, Mary Lou," Mrs. Benson said when she had picked several pieces for herself. "Make certain you take care of our guest of honor, Mr. Bodenson."

"Mr. Bodenson," she said politely when she presented the plate. He took two olives, ignoring the baked pieces that looked too rich for him now.

"They look delicious, Mary Lou. But I've been having trouble with my stomach lately and . . ." He shrugged his shoulders and bowed his head a little to the side with his apology.

"Mr. Bodenson's here for a rest because he's had a bad shock to his system, Mary Lou. He'd just been attacked by a madman with an ax, and then Mrs. Bodenson was killed in a car accident trying to escape."

"No, no. That wasn't it at all," he almost shouted. He felt lost in a sudden swirling confusion. The faces along the table turned to stare at him, pity in their eyes.

"Marian was killed in an accident days later. Out on the highway north of Atlanta. I was at the newspaper."

"Oh, yes. I forgot," Mrs. Benson said. "I don't remember--what was she doing?"

"Just driving, Mrs. Benson. Just driving. She was very tired. Marian hadn't been sleeping well and . . . and the car just ran off the road." He was close to tears. No one else said anything, and Mrs. Benson looked embarrassed. C. B. didn't know what to do next until he thought of Cranston.

"Excuse me, Mr. Benson," he began.

"Call me Joey, C.B."

"Joey?" He would prefer to continue with Mr. Benson. The formal distance of the last name made it easier to plan his escape.

"I need to use the bathroom for a minute. Would you point the direction?"

Benson insisted on showing him. "I hope you're feeling all right," he said when they were in the hallway.

"It's probably just that I forgot to use the bathroom before I

left the house. I'll be back in a minute."

"Good. We don't want anything to upset our guest."

You mean your main attraction, don't you, C.B. thought as he stepped into the bathroom. He stared at the door after it was closed and for a moment felt better, even free. He couldn't go back. Cranston had to remember. Remembering the past few minutes, he grew angry and began to feel dizzy. He sat on the toilet lid to wait for Cranston and for the first time since he'd arrived at the Benson's realized that his constant headache was present in full force. He took two aspirins from the small case in his pocket and washed them down with water from the faucet, caught in his cupped hand. Now where was Cranston? A knock at the door and a voice answered him.

"It's me . . . Cranston. Open up."

"I've got to get out of here," he said when he closed the door again. "Will you make an excuse for me? Tell them I'm feeling sick-- it's no lie; my headache is back."

"Okay, but it's not all that easy. I still work for Joey."

"I know. Does he really work as editor-in-chief, too?" That was his own title in Atlanta.

Cranston smiled. "He keeps the title, but that's all. Occasionally, he writes for the editorial page or picks someone to do stories for a charity drive of something. I handle the daily operations."

He felt relieved. He and Benson had the same title, but C.B., at least, had remained a working newsman. He didn't own the paper; he just worked there. At least he had. For a second, he tried to remember

what he had done at the newspaper, but the problems of the present pushed to the front of his mind.

"Tell them I'm getting dizzy and should go home to rest. My head hurts." He did feel dizzy and his headache had worsened, but that was nothing unusual lately. That seemed almost normal for him, ever since . . . since what? Marian. Marian, help me get out of this, he suddenly asked. He had grown weaker since he had entered the house. If a minor discomfort could even momentarily keep him from remembering Marian, he must be much worse. Or was he just unfaithful? Marian, get me out of here, he thought, and I'll start trying to work everything out in my mind. It won't take long.

"Will you?" he asked Cranston.

"Okay." Cranston smiled. "But you've got to promise me a job-- if I get fired for this."

He saw the point but missed any humor intended.

"I promise. I'll promise anything."

He closed the door behind Cranston and prepared to wait a minute before going back, time enough for the excuses. He flushed the toilet for sound effects and ran water in the sink. His face, in the mirror, was tired, thinner than he remembered. He leaned closer to the glass. His hair had grayed, too. He looked at his thin body, shocked at how much weight he had lost. His clothes fit too loosely now. On his way back to the dining room, he strained to make his face look even more stretched and tired. He had been walking more slowly than normal; he slowed even that pace.

Benson met him at the dining room entrance. "I was just coming to see if I could help, C.B. Are you sure you must go home? A little rest--you could lie down here."

"No, I've not been sleeping well. I should try to get some sleep."

Mrs. Benson, rising from her chair at the table, said, "Oh, C.B. promise to come back. And tell us all about Marian. She was a wonderful woman, I'm sure."

Goddamn you, I'm in mourning, he wanted to scream. The most perfect woman in the world is dead. I killed her, and you want me to eat olives and tell you how she dressed and what charities she supported. Do you want to see a goddamned picture, Mrs. Benson?

He could say nothing until, confused, he finally stammered something close to an acceptance of the invitation to come again and turned to go. The departure was no more marked, externally, than his reply to the invitation had been, and Benson finally closed the door behind them. The cool night air was brisk and refreshing as he and Cranston walked to the car slowly, and without speaking. Then the car door closed and put another defense between himself and the Bensons. This, he felt, was his first real peace of the evening.

"So the bayou's polluted. I'm not surprised."

"They were a little tactless, I've got to admit," Cranston said.

"Tactless? They were damn crude. I couldn't work for someone like that." He was immediately sorry for putting Cranston on the spot.

"I've never seen that before," Cranston said. "Usually, their manners are perfect."

"Do you have much to do with them socially?" He was already certain of the answer.

"No. I've been in their house once or twice--Christmas parties for the news staff."

"How long have you worked at the Press?"

"Almost twenty years. I dropped out of college when my father died to support my mother. I played baseball at the university, so I got on as a sports writer."

"Thanks for bailing me out tonight."

"Ah, that's nothing."

"It was. I should've been able to get out of it myself, without involving you. I really mean the thanks."

"I was glad to do it," Cranston said. "At least, I'm glad now that I did it." He was silent for a minute while he rubbed his palm over his head. The gesture was familiar by now.

"Do you really want to go home? I mean, if you're still having trouble relaxing, I can show you a great place to do that. It's where some of us from the newspaper--some of the reporters, I mean--go after work."

He thought a minute. If other newsmen were there, it might get back to Benson that he hadn't gone home. But he really didn't care. And he owed it to Cranston. Cranston would feel that he was doing something to help, and if Benson heard about it and fired him, C.B. would damn sure give him a job in Atlanta.

"Sure, let's go."

CHAPTER EIGHT

He knew where they were when the street divided to envelop the tiny park. From the taxi carrying him to dinner, he had seen the bushes clustered at the base of the park's central monument, but he realized this time that he could not see the statue itself. The top of the hill that the street crossed was heavily wooded, and the small, oval park had weak lights at either end. He could see the shrubbery clearly, but the statue was only a dark shadow pointing into the night.

"What monument is that? I noticed the park the other night, but you can't see the monument."

"Lee Square," Cranston said. "Pensacola has an interesting history. Five different flags flew here--Spanish, French, English, Confederate, and the U.S. It's an old town, the first settlement in the New World."

"I thought, uh, St. Augustine was." His response was polite.

"No, it's the oldest permanent settlement. Pensacola was abandoned and relocated on Santa Rosa Island. Later it was moved back to the mainland.

"It's really a beautiful area, too. This is the town's main street, Palafox. That's the First Baptist Church."

C.B. recalled seeing the large building to the left of the road before. As the car neared the bottom of the hill, Cranston continued

talking about the town. He's beginning to sound like that cab driver, C.B. thought, immediately recanting: That's unkind. I probably get as bad talking about Atlanta. Cranston pointed ahead to a large building--the faint yellow haze from a street light barely illuminated the elaborate Spanish-style architecture and reflected off a stained glass window. "That one's a beauty," Cranston said.

A town of churches, C.B. thought. But the small part of the building that could be seen was elegant, its Spanish style mysterious. It's probably beautiful in the daylight, he admitted. He pushed the idea away.

The road divided at the bottom of the hill; a dark, wide island of grass and shrubs rose to separate the lanes of traffic. For two or three blocks ahead he could see identical dark islands that within themselves contained smaller islands of light, faint pools of yellow thrown by tall street lamps. The night's blackness was cavernous, and the dim yellow fogs of illumination revealed little but the scenery around the base of each lamp pole, leaving the bulk of the world a mystery. Several blocks farther, he could glimpse the lights of the downtown stores, but until that area were reached, the night seemed blacker. He realized for the first time that the sky had become overcast, and no starlight was visible. He wondered if it would rain.

The darkness of the wide avenue lay like a quiet lake beside the car. Across it was the Post Office building; ahead and to the right, was a large hotel, something with a Spanish name; he didn't hear Cranston clearly and wasn't interested enough to ask. As they approached

the hotel's block, he stopped listening, vaguely looking ahead to the lighted section of shops, until he sensed that he had missed something important.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" He turned toward Cranston.

"St. Michael's, the oldest Catholic church in town. That makes it, I guess, our oldest church." He followed Cranston's glance and looked to his right, toward the first half of the block dominated by the hotel. The black mass that rose there could almost be felt, solid, an ancient, impenetrable shadow beside the road. Startled by his sudden recognition of the shadowy shape, he felt himself start, as though afraid. Even though the hotel beyond it was taller, the church building seemed monstrous in the night. The two buildings were separated by a smaller one, apparently the rectory, which kept the hotel's size from dwarfing the church spires stretching upward into the darkness, lingering shadows in the reality of the night. Almost frightening. It wasn't even that big, he thought, as he measured the building again with his eyes. Jumping at a shadow. It was only a building, but he had jumped as a child might at a fairground horror show. More nervous than he realized. Jumping at shadows. Next it would be ghosts.

"It's a big building," he said to keep the conversation alive.

"Beautiful, too," Cranston replied. "Especially the inside. The exterior is less impressive, and of course, you can't see anything at night."

Marian would have liked to see the inside. He recalled the Spanish architecture only a few blocks back; the thought he had suppressed then

returned. Marian loved such beauty. He could sense the faint beginnings of a depression and was grateful when the car didn't slow.

The divided road merged to become a three-lane, one-way street between well-lighted shops; the brightening was simultaneous in both the street and C.B. He became aware, instantly and unexpectedly, that he was pleased to move out of the darkness. But the lighting was an artificial aura, a false brightness that could have been lighting in a dream, and the glass fronts of the stores had become both windows and mirrors, uncanny angles of glass and perspective intruding into the walkway and the private lives that would pass there. He could see the car's dark image in the windows, floating past displays of dresses and shoes, men's clothing; the moving image silently slipped from glass front to glass front, disturbing nothing behind those mirrors, an ineffectual spirit. It's like passing through someone's dream, not touching them, he thought. No, that's backwards. Marian again moved into his mind, as though called, and he closed his eyes trying to remove her image. Not yet. He was not ready for that. She faded away. He opened his eyes again and saw the car's reflection moving across the display in a men's store window, the sleek body of the automobile swiftly disturbing nothing as it passed among the fashionably dressed, headless torsos. Not all ghosts go so unnoticed. Marian. Maybe it's not a dream. Maybe it's really more like life. Marian. He pushed the memory away again, then thought: This was wrong. He loved Marian; he sought to recall the face that had floated into his mind only seconds before, but it was gone. Even if you're dead, I love you, he thought,

but couldn't force his mind to bring forth the image of Marian. He felt as though he would cry. Maybe it was all a dream. Nothing more than that car on those windows. A dream. Maybe he was the one who had died. Hadn't someone written a play about some people who died and went to hell and didn't know it? He couldn't remember if he had read it or just heard of it. Some Frenchman? Maybe this was the street to hell.

"This runs down to the bay," Cranston said, seeming to answer him. "The usual wharves, seafood shops, a few bars. That's where we're headed. The Buoy, best bar around. Belongs to a friend of mine."

He had heard the name. Yes, the cabdriver at the airport had said something about girls.

"I don't know. Is this a strip joint . . . or something like that?"

"I see you've heard about it in Atlanta." Cranston sounded pleased.

"No. A cabdriver here recommended it. The place may be entertaining, but I'm not sure I'm up to it."

"Maybe not yet, but they'll get it up for you." Cranston laughed, but the crude humor repelled C.B.

Leaving the area of lighted shops, they passed a one-block-square park and moved into an older, rougher architecture--square or rectangular buildings that with no attempt at glamour housed antique shops, marine supply stores, a pool hall, two or three small bars. The street was wide and the area open, but the simplicity and decay of the older buildings became the atmosphere of the section, harsher than he cared for. The change from the lighted store fronts to this bareness was

abrupt, and he thought again of a dream.

"Is this a safe area?" he asked. It looked deserted. The streets were empty.

Cranston laughed. "Does this look dangerous? It's just not fancy. It's a pretty old section but that's all. There's no danger of getting mugged or hurt as long as you stay on the main street. Unless you get into a fight in a bar, and that won't happen. Roy takes care of his better customers, and I'm his best." Cranston laughed again. "He likes newspapermen."

C.B. couldn't find any sign advertising a bar, and when Cranston parked the car and they started back the way they'd come, he realized that they had passed the bar without his noticing anything. The front of the place was of the brick and weathered wood of the rest of the block. When he finally saw the sign above the front door, it was worn and almost illegible, faded to the color of the gray wood wall.

"This?" he asked.

Cranston chuckled. "Don't worry. It's a respectable place, and you'll like Roy. It's impossible not to."

Cranston pulled the heavy wood door, and the darkness beyond freed a billow of noise and warm air that seemed to prohibit entry. C.B. felt his spirit weakening, felt himself pull away from the opening, but Cranston's voice guided him inside.

"Wait until you meet Roy. He's the real spirit of this place." He had to move closer to hear Cranston clearly above the music and voices. "I think he was an immigrant from Hungary. He won't say, but

he came here from Miami sometime before the second world war."

He listened, but was more concerned with adjusting his vision to the interior of the bar to keep from bumping into anyone. Just inside the entrance, the floor was lighted enough for his eyes to become accustomed fairly easily, and for a few paces, he could identify various objects. Past that small safety zone, however, the bar remained dark and forbidding.

The aura of an old warehouse, one haphazardly filled with artifacts collected by a mad junk man, seemed to grow from the unadorned concrete floor; the walls and portion of the bar that he could see were of wood no less weathered than the front of the building. Broad wooden pillars supported both the roof and a lower, artificial ceiling of fish nets, the heavy nets of a deep-fishing vessel. The nets, hung only two, perhaps three feet above the customers, had collected apparently hundreds of odd objects unidentifiable from a distance.

From where he stood just inside the door, he could see down the middle of the large bar counters that faced both to the right and to the left. Had he walked straight ahead, carefully stepping around one pillar and two or three trash cans, he could have walked past several bartenders and barmaids busy serving customers seated at either counter. He couldn't see the customers to the right as well because of the pillar, but those on the left were seated in what seemed to be large barbershop chairs, as though they were here for both entertainment and a haircut. Against the wall only five or six feet behind the large chairs was a long glass case filled with model airplanes and ships.

The wall above the case displayed dozens and dozens of framed photographs of uniformed pilots--he remembered that there was a Navy base here. Most of the pictures had been signed. A deep sea diver's helmet rested on one end of the case, in effect among the pictures of the pilots. C.B. shifted his gaze to the right of the bar, and saw that the wall behind the customers there was only half a wall, simply a heavy wood partition. He could see where the half-wall ended but nothing past that.

The partition was decorated in the spirit of the real wall to the left. A fisherman's net, smaller than the one forming the false ceiling above the bar, draped beside an old harpoon and a rusted lantern. Above the net, from an oblong box or crate, a skeleton so small that it could only have been a child's grinned at him.

"Is that skeleton real?"

"Yeah. It was a gift. We did a story on it one time, but I forget the details. It was an exhibit at a college before it was given to him."

His eyes returned again to the grinning skull. There was something indecent about hanging a skeleton, a real skeleton, on the wall of a bar. Once more he had the urge to leave. Never had he stumbled into a place even remotely like this. The murky darkness, the unfinished wood seemed dirty, even evil. He should leave, he thought, but Cranston's voice bid him follow, and he moved in the direction of the sound, forcing his eyes away from the small box on the wall.

"Let's get a seat," Cranston said, starting down the left of the

bar past the barber's chairs, which were, C.B. saw, only the first few seats at the bar. Cranston led away from the lights aimed on the photographs and into the darkness again, where they found two barstools free.

"Hey, Tulip," Cranston called to a girl behind the bar, and when she turned around, he raised two fingers. The girl bent over a case and extracted two bottles. When she brought the bottles and two glasses to them, C.B. saw that she was oriental, a small figure raising a delicate oval face to them.

"Hello, Andy," she replied in a heavy accent.

"This gentleman is a close friend of mine, Tulip. Anything he wants goes on my tab, okay. Say hello to Mr. C.B. Bodenson, a big newspaperman from Atlanta."

"Hellwo, Mr. C.B. You need anything, just holwa for Tulip." She gave him a businesslike smile and moved away.

"Tulip?" he asked.

"No, but it's close enough. Nobody could pronounce her real name, and this makes it easier for the customer."

Everything must be easy for the customer here, he thought. He could see more easily now; lights from below the bar established a murkiness that the eye could penetrate. The bar itself was old, of unpainted wood that had been cracked and carved by both time and customers. Cranston had led him past about two-thirds of the bar, and now he could get some idea of the whole place. Past the partition, the floor opened to become a large area filled with small tables and chairs. Customers were clustered about many of the tables but in the darkness

were little more than shadows. Only those near the small stage in the far corner could be distinguished as individuals, and the colored lights of the stage gave their faces an unreal, reddish tint. The room was still so dark that he couldn't determine the features of the far wall and could only see where the room ended.

"Sorry, I didn't ask if you drink beer." Cranston's voice broke into his examination of the room. He could see Cranston's face well enough in the faint light emanating from below the bar.

"I haven't had one in years." He could remember the beers he had drunk every now and then as a young reporter on occasional trips to bars with other newsmen. But the bars had been nothing like this. He picked up the bottle to pour himself a drink, looked at the glass, set it down. He wiped the top of the bottle and pushed the glass away. It might not be clean. He sipped the beer. It's acrid taste was sharp in his mouth, and he recalled that he had not particularly liked it when he was younger either. But he could sip it. He did and found it easier to take.

"Good, good," Cranston said. "Now isn't this better than the Bensons?"

C.B. thought back to the dinner; the beautiful house didn't make up for the insensitive reception. Even this was better. "At least I'm not on stage here," he said.

A movement at the end of the bar to their left, in the darkest part of the room, caught his eye, and Cranston said, "There's Roy." A man moving toward the stage was greeted with whistles and calls. A

squat, shadowy figure as he trudged toward the lighted stage, the man began to call loudly in the sharp tones of a sideshow barker.

"Hey, hey. Rest period's over. Linda Lane's on now, and you're in for a great show." He drew out the word great, as though it had two or three a's in it. "You've seen this little girl before. Treat her right, gentlemen, and maybe she'll treat you. Let's give her a big hand." He started clapping his hands, then turned to flip the switch on a tape recorder. A girl was moving toward the stage as music began to pour from speakers on the wall behind the short man who applauded again as the girl climbed onto the stage. He smiled at her and stepped off into the darkness. Applause and whistles greeted the tall girl and continued as she started to throw her hips to the beat of the popular music coming from the speakers. She was a tall blonde wearing only brief red shorts and a halter top. A scarf draped about her shoulders; high heels made her even taller. He turned his eyes away, aware that he was both shocked and embarrassed. So this was a stripper. There were girls dancing like this in Atlanta--he had published editorials against allowing their profession to flourish--but he had never before seen one dance. Even when single he had gone only to bars boasting at most a band and, perhaps, a singer. Although older and supposedly more sure of himself, he was embarrassed and glad that Marian could not see him. Even she might not be able to handle this. The thought of Marian watching him further unsettled him.

"Hello, Andy." It was the man Cranston had called Roy. C.B. hadn't seen the shorter man approach and was surprised to discover in

the feeble light at the bar that Roy was older than he might have expected. His face was full and appeared even rounder beneath the short cropped hair; wrinkles that formed a pattern of shadowy lines disappeared when he smiled, shyly, out of place here.

"Roy, C. B. Bodenson. I told you I'd bring him by."

Roy smiled broadly over the bar. "A great pleasure, Mr. Bodenson," he said, reaching to shake hands.

"It's always great to meet newspapermen. You guys do a terrific job, and yours is a famous newspaper. Everything's on the house for you two tonight."

"Thanks," he said. He was surprised by the man's soft voice. It sounded as though a laugh were hidden in it, yet not as though he were laughing at anyone. A merry sound, C.B. thought. "I've never seen a place quite like this before," he said and then, afraid he might have offended the man, added, "I mean it's unusual."

Roy just smiled even more broadly, and looked at the fish net a few feet above their heads. "I've been adding things to that collection for years and years." C.B. glanced up. He could identify a few of the objects from this distance--a lantern, an oar, the skeleton of a large fish. He recalled the skeleton on the wall. No, he wouldn't mention it.

"I change the place a little from time to time," Roy went on, "but it stays basically the same. You mustn't have been to this area before. Everyone's here sooner or later."

Cranston laughed. "Roy's is a legitimate landmark. The most

famous place in the area since World War Two."

At least one battle must have been held here, C.B. thought, glancing up at the net. In the dark, all but the nearest objects looked like so much debris. The wood in the bar, the other fixtures that he could see, could have been far older than the decades mentioned. Again he felt a dream sensation, as though he had stepped into a far older world. Like the feeling he'd had seeing the car's shadow bending, slipping along the glass windows. He took a sip from the bottle without saying anything.

"How long are you going to be in town?" Roy asked. "I hope it's long enough for us to get acquainted."

He swallowed the beer.

"I don't know," he said. "It's not a vacation. I'm supposed to be recovering from" He touched the bandage on his forehead and suddenly realized that his headache was gone.

Roy nodded without replying. He understood, no doubt, more than had been said. Cranston must have told him, he thought. At least Roy didn't push to talk about it. Good. He didn't want to be talked about. His life was no one's business. He wouldn't bother them, and they could just leave him alone. What did surprise him was Roy's attitude. It was, he recognized, a pleasant surprise. He seemed to mean well and had taken C.B.'s reserve for granted. He must have known Cranston would bring him by. Why not? Maybe everybody did come here sooner or later. He sipped his beer again and was startled to find it less than a third full. Nervous, drinking too fast despite the small sips. Got to watch that, he thought. In the same moment he saw Roy

setting two more bottles in front of them; Cranston had already finished his first beer and must have signaled for another. C.B. took another swallow, as though he were hurrying to catch up, then cautioned himself again. It wouldn't be good to drink too much, not in a place like this.

The music had changed. The tape had moved to another tune, a slower, more guttural sound, louder with the change. So was the audience. Almost unwillingly, his eyes were drawn to the figure in the lights across the room. The tall blonde wore only the bottom half of her red costume now, and with thumbs hooked in the top of the brief panties, a hand above either hip and her elbows jutting out to the sides, she moved slowly from the rear of the small stage toward the audience. The small, spangled patches covering her nipples seemed to lead first one breast and then the other, while her thumbs pushed the top of the panties down. He turned his eyes away, confused by feelings of shame and anger. He felt as if someone in hiding were watching him do something wrong.

Certain that Roy and Cranston would be judging him, he cautiously took another sip from his beer. It was the last in that bottle, so he set it away from him and pulled the fresh one forward. Again, to avoid looking at either the stage or the two men, he sipped some beer. When he finally looked up, both Cranston and Roy were looking at the stage, not at him.

"She's okay, isn't she," Roy said finally.

"Linda does a good job," Cranston agreed. C.B. said nothing.

Roy turned back to them. "She's a good girl." It was not clear

what he meant or even whom he was addressing. "A really nice girl. I think Virgil said he was going to do a story about her. She's had it rough, but she's still a good kid." He started off into the darkness at the back end of the bar.

"Virgil's one of my young reporters," Cranston said. "A kid, but doing a great job. Twenty-five, twenty-six, but a good worker. You'd like him, C.B. A brash kid, but a good boy."

Everyone was good here, he thought. Maybe the word was being re-defined. Loud applause, whistles, and cheers marked the end of the tape, and he looked toward the stage to see the girl named Linda bowing to the audience and picking up the pieces of her costume. As she moved from the stage, Roy lumbered onto the platform.

Roy waved to the people at the tables, as he turned the tape recorder off. He adjusted the machine for a few seconds before facing the barroom.

"Isn't she great? Let's hear it for Linda." His voice had regained the sharpness of before, the voice of a carnival showman. "I just love her. She's great, just great." He smiled at the audience as though they were sharing a secret. "And now Susan's up."

Another girl stepped onto the stage. There was some applause, most of it coming from Roy after he had restarted the tape recorder. The weaker response from the audience was easy to understand. Shorter than the blond Linda, but not much lighter in weight, the new dancer was broader, chunky in fact. Her main attraction seemed to be her large breasts.

"Local talent," Cranston said. "The blond dancer, Linda Lane, is

a real pro. She's traveling a circuit along the Gulf Coast and won't be here much longer. It's a shame; she's a good-looking girl."

"What did Roy mean when he said she's a 'good' girl?" he asked. "He didn't sound as though he just meant a good dancer, and I don't see how else the word could apply here."

Cranston laughed. "Yeah. Well, maybe none of the girls are 'nice' in the old fashioned sense of the word--or even in the most modern sense. But just the same, they're not always bad people. Some are rotten, but some are just dumb or lazy. Or have bad starts. The lazy ones don't want to work in a department store or as waitresses. They didn't or couldn't go to college to get a better job, and what's left? If they don't get married or have a family to support them, they have a chance of winding up working in a bar or a nightclub, earning a few dollars in a place like this. Maybe they start behind the bar, but if they look good enough, they'll eventually try the dancing. It's *easy* in a place like this. No fancy routines required. Just dance and take off your clothes. Later, it's not as easy to get--or take--a job doing anything else. But most of them don't want anything else, at least nothing where they'd have to go to an office or work steady hours." Cranston paused, took a drink.

"Roy looks out for the girls and lets them make a little on the side with the customers if they want to. They don't have to--it's their business. And he won't allow any rough stuff with the girls. They're pretty safe here. Strippers aren't virgins, and reporters aren't poets. It's no great career, but it's a job."

Cranston's last sentence sent him reeling into memories. He hadn't heard that in years, not since . . . he couldn't remember. It had been a favorite saying of his grandfather, his father's father, the grand, white-maned old man who had named him. He could remember what he later learned was a French accent branding the old man's English. The first of his father's family to come to America in 1890, after a period as a ladies man, he had married and settled in Charleston and, later, Atlanta. His influence led to the naming of the first grandson after his favorite French poet. His mother had continued to call him Charles, but his grandfather and father had used the initials that became his identity. The educated immigrant hadn't been the most practical of men, moving from one career to another, from teaching to farming, and again to giving southern society members French lessons for a fee, he had always been philosophical about the changes. When the grandson was born, the grandfather was already past sixty; now C.B. could recall the old man only as a gaunt white-haired giant bending to pass consolation to his eight-year-old grandson. Whenever either had been given a household chore to do, consolation would come from the other. "Well," he would say in his accent, "your mother's got something for us to do. It's not a great career, C.B., but it's a job." It had been his grandfather's favorite saying, so far as he knew of the grand old man who had lived with his nose in whatever books he could find until he died of tuberculosis when C.B. was only nine.

He could remember little of the old man who had named him so strangely--only a few childhood scenes when his grandfather was old

and living with them in Atlanta. He could remember the unruly crown of white hair and the curious intonation of his accent. Funny that Cranston would use the same line under these circumstances. Would his grandfather have been equally philosophical, if a granddaughter had chosen to work as a stripper? Probably, he suddenly decided, he probably would have. The thought slightly embarrassed him, as though someone else would know, but, without knowing why, he was still pleased.

A steady traffic behind the bar, the girls serving drinks, strippers coming out to see Roy or get a glass of something, or Roy himself, back from the stage and moving about checking the operations, kept the bar busy and brought C.B.'s mind back to the present. It was no trouble for him to ignore the girl dancing now; he concentrated on conversation with Cranston and, when he rejoined them, Roy. Cranston's occasional lapses into crude humor annoyed him, however, and rekindled a vague discomfort. It had become apparent that Cranston would not want to leave soon. He himself would rather go, but a feeling of obligation to the local newsman for his earlier help wouldn't let him suggest that they leave. To escape the conversation, he directed his attention to the bottle of beer. Cranston and Roy continued talking as though they had forgotten him.

He found that he could partially escape the noise and movement in the dark bar by focusing upon the taste of the beer, and each time he took the cool liquid into his mouth, it became easier to do, until soon he was taking larger and more frequent swallows. He had almost

finished the second bottle before he again resolved to drink more slowly. He estimated that they had been in the bar for only a little more than half an hour, and he had already consumed two beers. Although Cranston had emptied at least four bottles and was ordering another, C.B. couldn't be certain how much beer he himself could drink safely. Nor could he see how Cranston could drink so fast, despite the man's bulk. The beer proved to be a filling drink, he was discovering, with a definite effect upon the bladder, and if they didn't leave soon, he would have to use the john.

As he took another sip, trying to concentrate on the sharp taste of the beer, he realized that Roy was setting another bottle in front of him.

"I don't know if I should," he said. "I don't know how much--"

"You don't have anything to worry about, C.B.," Roy said. "Even if you got a little high, you'd be okay. Nothing would bother you here."

"I wasn't thinking of getting drunk. I've never been drunk in my life. I don't even drink." He looked at the beer in his hand and set the can down. "But I haven't eaten much tonight."

"Let me send out for something for you to eat," Roy said quickly. "I'd be glad to. I've got some bags of potato chips here, but that's all."

"I don't think we'll be here that long. I should get to bed to rest." He hoped that Cranston would again take the hint.

"At least some potato chips, then." Roy went away and immediately

returned with three bags.

"Well, thanks," C.B. said. Might as well eat one bag, he thought. The salt on the potato chips made him thirsty, and he soon resumed sipping his beer.

Cranston apparently had missed the hint and launched a new and unrelated subject with Roy, who soon was involved with him in the conversation. Still uncertain when they would be leaving, C.B. decided to use the toilet. Before he could ask Roy for directions, however, the barman left for the stage again. The music had stopped, and the girl departed for the dressing room. The audience applauded more for Roy's appearance than they had for the stripper.

"The next girl is a beauty, C.B.," Cranston said. "Toby. She's from South Florida, but she passes herself off as Italian for the customers. But beautiful--"

Cranston was interrupted by Roy's spiel, although it was not nearly so loud or emphatic as his last one. It was almost as if he felt he did not have to sell the audience on the next performance, or even that he did not want to.

"Next we have a prize for you, the beautiful, Toby. Keep your distance, fellows--just look and don't touch. There's a lot to see."

C.B. couldn't wait to see. "Which way is the men's room?" Cranston pointed toward the end of the bar.

"It's a plain wood door to the left at the end of the bar. No markings, but you can't miss it. Hurry back."

He left without comment, stepping carefully past the two or three

customers sitting at that end of the long bar which angled slightly away from the wall to accommodate a second wall emerging at right angles from the side of the bar. This extension, apparently enclosing the men's room, left little space to pass the barstools and their occupants. It was darker in this part of the room--there were no lights behind the bar here and the stage lights didn't shine in this direction--but cracks in the wooden door he was hunting faintly glowed from illumination behind the door and made it easy to locate. The door itself, he discovered, was little more than planks nailed together. The light in the room seemed bright at first, but when his eyes had adjusted, he found only a dull gray cubicle. Its brick walls were not bare--they boasted a worn coat of gray paint, a broken towel rack, and several machines which undoubtedly held prophylactics for the needy. The room was no more sophisticated than the hastily constructed door.

It was small, too. He could have crossed the space in three or four strides. The right wall supported, in a fashion, a dirty wash basin. Its brown stains looked dry; he doubted if anyone had used it recently. On each side of the basin were narrow passageways into dim areas little brighter than the main bar had been. When he glanced into the first--a narrow closet containing two dirty urinals and a toilet bowl--he felt a little sick to his stomach. There was no one in the small room, but he wouldn't go into that filthy looking space. He moved toward the second door, hoping for a cleaner room.

He could see nothing of the second alcove until he stood almost in its doorway. The sight of a figure in the room made him want to

turn away, but the strange, asymmetrical silhouette stopped him. In a moment he could distinguish two forms, only one of them upright--a young man, he could tell now, facing the door and C.B. The youth's eyes were on the second shape, someone hunched awkwardly before the standing figure as though begging for mercy, squatting on his heels, his back to the door. The crouching figure had been lost at first because his gray jacket blended with the dense shadows of the room.

The second man's face emerged slowly as he turned, suddenly aware of a viewer. Prematurely white hair had blended, confusingly, with the white denims of the standing figure. The white pants were open and pulled down a few inches, C.B. finally realized. The young man, his penis erect, smiled insolently, as though the scene were being enacted for this special audience. The crouching man jerked his face away and grew smaller.

C.B.'s stomach knew the truth of the scene before his conscious mind did and grew taut with sudden anger. He wanted to strike out at that insolent grin but instead turned away violently and hit the door with his palm. He rushed into the blinding blackness of the barroom, not remembering to move to his right until he collided with a man seated at the bar. Cranston was watching the stage when C.B. arrived at their stools.

"Let's go, Andrew. I want out of here." He wanted to add that he wanted out of this filth, but didn't.

"You must watch this girl, C.B. She's beautiful."

"No. No," he said without looking at the stage, "I've got to go

now."

"Okay." Cranston was obviously puzzled.

"I don't want to talk about it," he answered as if in response to an unspoken question, and he started toward the door. Cranston caught up with him before he reached the front. Roy was standing by the door, shaking hands with a well-dressed man who stepped farther into the bar's darkness just before C.B. and Cranston reached the door.

"You're not leaving, C.B.?"

"Yes." He wanted to explain, but there were no words. "I'm not feeling well. Andrew said he'd drive me home." Cranston didn't say anything.

"I hate to see you run off, C.B.; but if you're feeling bad, well But promise to come back before you leave."

He started to mumble something and move past the bar owner, but Roy, facing into the blackness of the bar, grabbed his elbow as though to swing him back into the room he was trying to leave.

"Here's a someone I know Andrew will want you to meet, C.B. One of his reporters." He spoke louder, "Virgil, say hello to Mr. C.B. Bodenson, an editor you should know."

He wanted to pull away, to escape from the dark bar, but the tug at his elbow seemed to drain his will. He slowly pivoted under Roy's guidance. The white pants started the churning in his stomach again, and then he saw the same smug smile, again directed at him. He pulled free from the hand cupping his elbow, pushed the wood door open, and rushed out onto the sidewalk and into the refreshing night air. He

almost ran to the car and was waiting impatiently when Cranston caught up.

"Take me home, please," he said, hunting in his pocket for his aspirins.

CHAPTER NINE

He stayed in bed longer next morning, but without getting any more sleep. The change of date brought with it a change of mind--although repelled by what he had seen in the dingy gray bathroom, he was equally disturbed by his reaction. Both Cranston and Roy had been polite and well-meaning, deserving better than his hasty departure. During the drive home, Cranston had managed to ferret out from him the cause of his distress and had indicated he was relieved; he had feared, he explained, not that C.B. had been a witness to such an act, but that someone had made overtures toward him personally.

"It must be shocking, of course, if you've never seen something like that before, C.B.," Cranston had said, "but it was probably more of a shock for the man on his knees. They must not've heard you coming. Uh, no pun intended, this time."

"May be you're right, but it's disgraceful that Roy would allow that in his bar." He realized, immediately, that the statement was irrational. Cranston didn't bother to point out that Roy couldn't stop what he didn't see.

"He allows it, but there's no disgrace involved, C.B. You may disapprove--humans disapprove of the oddest things sometimes. All the people at Roy's are looking for one or more of several things, I think. They either want to escape the usual pressures--a job, a

marriage, bills--or to forget usual sins, only a different kind of pressure. Maybe they want punishment for those same sins, another form of escape. Even those who think they're just looking for excitement probably come because of these pressures. The pressures themselves eliminate any other escape for them--they suffer from boredom, overwork or underwork, too many debts or too few--but it all boils down to guilt for what they've done or what they haven't. Sometimes Roy talks about that part of it, and that's what keeps me going back. Sooner or later, everyone bares his soul there somehow--confession is cheap at the price of a drink. Roy's a man who knows many secrets, and that makes him fascinating and important. He never tells what he hears; that's against the rules--then it wouldn't be a secret. But I see some of the details myself. It's the saddest part of life, but it may be the most real."

He'd underestimated Cranston, he thought, watching the other talk. Maybe Roy, too. He didn't think there was anything to what Cranston was saying, but it was an interesting attempt at justification, an elaborate rationalization. The blond dancer flashed into his mind. No. No mysteries, please. They were only excuses for drinking and watching. . . .

If people suffered from guilt, they didn't work it out in a place like that. There were other ways, he thought. Father Donovan. Marian. No, not that. He forced himself back. Maybe that's what Cranston thought he'd been doing there.

Cranston didn't dominate his thoughts this morning, however.

Rather, his recollections alternated between the bar owner, who had been concerned when C.B. seemed ill, and the repulsive figure in white jeans. On occasion, in editorials, he had been an indignant moralist, yet never before had he been so provoked that he'd let his feelings lash out at individuals. He was a restrained man and proud of it--the problem of immorality in political or community conduct gave way to the standards of civility in personal relationships. He was a polite man. Well, if he saw Roy again, he'd make amends. If not, he'd ask Cranston to apologize for him, since he didn't want to go back to the bar himself.

But the progression of the day wore at his resolve. It might not hurt if he went by to apologize in person. He certainly didn't have to stay or even to have a drink. Through dinner, he continued to waver, only occasionally conscious of the internal debate. After eating he tried to settle for the news programs on television; for once, they failed to hold his interest. Attempts to concentrate on the programs that followed were also fruitless. It was not until he had thought of pouring himself a drink, and had taken his first sip, that he knew he would visit The Buoy again. He was still not certain why, even after calling a taxi. It wasn't until the taxicab was nearing the section of town in which the bar was located that he realized why he was going back. All day, he had been permitted a type of peace. He'd had no headache, and his mind had rested--it had gone no further back in time than last night, or rather no further back than his trip to The Buoy. Fortunately, the dinner at the Bensons' had been forgotten--

at least for today. That was pleasant, but why should he want to escape memories of Marian?

The shock of this revelation rooted him to the car seat, even after the driver had announced their arrival. What was he doing, letting a place like this take his mind off the things that were most important? Marian was so much a part of him that he could never forget her without turning away from himself, too. How could he allow this? Even as he asked the question, he knew its answer--Cranston had been right. He returned to the bar tonight because it had allowed him to escape, for a while, his grief--through not its liquor, but its quality of etrangete.

"This is it," the driver said.

"I'm sorry." He paid the man.

Standing in front of The Buoy, he watched the taxicab pull away from the curb. Again tonight there was no other traffic, motor or pedestrian, and it was as though, as soon as the cab disappeared, the street were dead. He turned to the bar from which he could hear music.

Again confused by the darkness that greeted him when he stepped inside, he remained near the door until his eyes adjusted to the place. It was night outside, but it was even darker within. When at last his eyes grew accustomed to the room, he moved around the left side of the bar.

Roy saw him and hurried forward.

"Hey, C.B. It's good to see you back. Hope you're feeling better."

He returned the greeting, though less exuberantly, and Roy, from

between the two counters, guided him to a stool farther down the bar. The oriental girl Tulip approached.

"Helwo, C.B. Beer?"

He nodded, and she soon set a beer and a glass before him. She smiled the lopsided smile of the night before and moved away, but not before Roy told her that everything was "on the house" again tonight. He protested.

"I should pay. I was your guest last night."

"You'll pay later, maybe, but tonight I want to make everything easy for you. You're the guest of honor." He shrugged and sipped the free beer. Cold in his mouth.

"How do you feel?"

"Better. I'm sorry I left so fast last night."

"No, I meant physically. How's your head? I can recommend a good doctor."

"No. I'm just supposed to change the bandage every other day. I'm okay, just still weak from . . . everything. I had a mild concussion and still get headaches, but my doctor said they'll stop."

"Well you're here to relax. Anything you want, just ask me."

"Okay. Uh, about last night"

"What about it? Forget it. If something upsets you, come see me, and I'll straighten it out. Okay?"

"Okay." He wondered if Cranston had told Roy what had happened, but couldn't decide. He would just forget it, or at least ignore it, and stay out of there. He remembered the small gray room; its image

was unsettling. Dirty.

Roy finally moved away to tend to some mysterious business behind the bar and then in other regions of his kingdom. C.B. watched the short man, dressed in a pullover shirt, pants cut off at the knees, and tennis shoes, until the head of short-cropped hair disappeared into the gloom of the bar. Odd man. Odd, but very . . . comfortable.

He was pleased to find that the beer had a pleasant taste tonight; he actually enjoyed the sips he was taking. That discovery came shortly before the end of the bottle, prompting him to signal Tulip for another. It, too, tasted good and that freed his mind to turn elsewhere. The conversation with Roy and the discovery of the beer's "new" taste temporarily had insulated him from his environment, but now he gradually became more aware of the bar itself. Roy had led him to almost the exact barstool he had occupied last night, and a glance upward at the net revealed the lantern and other objects he had noticed before. There were other people at the bar but none near him, and since it was too dark to see clearly, he soon dismissed them. He glanced over his shoulder once at the wall. He was past the case of models and the pictures decorating the wall; here the wall was bare, and the wood looked strange. It was painted dark gray, and at first he thought it might be stone. A cave, he thought, and remembered pictures of giant lighted caverns which drew flocks of tourists down into them. He had once heard Zeke talk of the darkness that when the lights were extinguished awed the tourists in Carlsbad Caverns. A darkness without relief, so real you felt you could almost touch it. A darkness that

was real by itself, he had said. Like being in a stomach, or perhaps like returning to the womb? he had joked. No, Zeke said seriously, more like the darkness of the mind. Plato had used a cave image once, Zeke had continued. C.B. knew that; he had read that Platonic argument in college, too. Man's ignorance and limited powers of perception made his experience of the true world--or was it just truth? He couldn't remember now--as myopic as the world-view of someone who hadn't left a cave in which he'd been born. Something like that. That was the reason for pursuing knowledge and philosophy. News, even. He had reveled in the profundity of that cave image then. But now he was unsure of both his memory of the stories and of their truth. Plato's cave was ignorance, but was that truly just lack of information? Could the cave be escaped? He was not certain of any validity in the image. A cave that blinded man's eyes to the truth--did it blind him because that was the inescapable nature of the mind itself? He didn't know. There were no certainties anymore.

Except maybe this beer, he thought, taking a drink. He was surprised how much more content he was at the moment. He still felt weak, but for a while he had been able to escape the memories that had been driving him. Marian's face appeared with this thought; for once the vision was peaceful--less unsettling, at least. He thought of her face, the expressive face that had never been a mask shutting him out, of its changes in expression that he had memorized and could always trust. He saw her face now as it floated up out of the depths of his mind; he saw that face in its most solemn expression, the face Marian

had become when she worshipped at church; peaceful, not sad but with a solemnity that made her seem a woman wise beyond her years, perhaps beyond her century, beyond any doubts. She wore that face now, her eyes lowered respectfully, as though she were watching something no one else could see. This time the memory of Marian left him at peace; perhaps he could admit that it was just memory, the past, something he could outlive, no matter how much he missed her.

His empty bottle called him back into the bar. He wanted another taste of beer and signaled to one of the girls. He was drinking too fast, though: Slow down. The girl didn't ask for money before she moved away. She knew his drinks were free.

For sometime he had been aware of the music and of the girl dancing on the stage; finally now her image came into the conscious surface of his mind. He looked once at the stage and saw the tall blonde he had seen last night but turned his eyes away again. He was surprised that his thoughts had remained undisturbed so long because the bar was even more filled tonight and the crowd noisier. For a few minutes he watched the shadowy patrons at the tables on the main floor but without any real interest; the larger number of people made the shadows even less distinct. Only when someone rose to his feet to speak to the dancer did he become separate from the crowd.

He had drunk two beers and part of a third before he became aware of an urge growing within him. He tried to ignore the feeling when he thought of making a second trip to the cold gray walls of the men's room. No, he would lift himself from the stool and sluggishly, he

could see himself now, move from the darkness of the bar outside, and then to a men's room somewhere else. Even as he had this vision, his head turned, almost unwillingly, toward the back of the bar. A thin shadow, bent forward into the blackness, moved slowly in the direction of the toilet. The sluggish movements of the shadow seemed familiar, and when a beam of light, either from the suddenly opened restroom door or from the stage on which the dancer moved, illuminated the man's white hair, C.B. rose from his stool. He left the beer on the bar and walked toward the door to that gray room.

A sudden curiosity that he didn't understand overshadowed even the need to urinate, but still he hesitated when he reached the plank door. He didn't want to hook his fingers inside the wire handle. . . . When he quietly closed the door, the room was empty, and he angled away from the two openings to the urinals. The first was vacant, and he saw the old man standing just inside the second small oblong room, staring absent-mindedly at the dark wall as he urinated into the first of the three urinals. The room's smell unsettled both his stomach and his bladder, and mentally he held his nose as he moved to the last once-white fixture. The man didn't seem to notice him.

C.B. watched him out of the corner of his eye. He was old, and his snow-white hair, long and unkempt, contrasted with his skin, dark in the room's weak lighting. He wore a dirty dress shirt--stained, perhaps washed, and then dirtied again until it was an uneven, off-white color--like the darker skin, it contrasted with the white hair. The shirt sleeves were especially stained in several places, with small,

flower-like blotches deeper in color than the other stains. He saw the darker markings, knew that they would be blossoms of red, flowers of death, and knew why he had followed the man.

"Good evening." When he repeated the address, the white mane turned toward him.

"I didn't mean to startle you." The thin face didn't change. A bony hand shook the penis it held and refolded it into baggy pants.

"I thought for a moment that I had seen you here before."

The old man finally spoke. "I'm here a lot. You might've." He zipped his pants. "I'm here a lot," he repeated.

His voice wasn't strong, and almost as if the talking had strained his throat, he began to cough. He raised his arm to cover his mouth but didn't turn his head. C.B. looked away. He knew what the coughing would be like, that it would come from low in the man's chest, that it could sound as though it came from the earth itself. A wet, tearing sound; the man coughed several times, before spitting into the urinal.

He had heard it all before. The red spot on the dirty porcelain glowed, and he wanted to repair the broken fixture to wash away the blob. The uneven red smear on the shirt sleeve was a brighter version of the darkest stains, perhaps larger than most. He stared at the spots, but the old man paid little attention to the stains on his sleeve or the one in the urinal; he turned to leave.

"Wait, please," but C.B.'s voice didn't stop the old man. Hurriedly finishing, C.B. stepped into the larger room.

"I have a question. Please wait." The old man turned back to him.

"Those stains. Have you seen a doctor?"

The old man looked puzzled, either by the question or by the fact that it had been asked. His white hair covered his head, exploding away from the scalp in every possible direction throwing the man's thin face into shadow. A picture formed in C.B.'s mind, as he watched the old man, and he knew what had drawn him back to this dark room: "It's no great career, but it's a job." He could hear the ancient voice, the whimsey that he had later been told was a foreign accent. Perhaps that old ghost looked like this.

"Doctor? Oh. No. Too much money." The old man started to turn away, as though the exchange ended the conversation.

"I'm not a doctor," C.B. said quickly, "but I know what your trouble is. I'm sure you have tuberculosis--what used to be called consumption. When I was a child, an older member of my family died of it."

He touched the bony shoulder, stopping the old man from turning away again. The lined face slowly swung back.

"So?"

"It can be cured. Rest, proper care. A doctor can take care of you, save your life. New drugs cause miracles every day. There's no excuse for just letting you die."

The old man looked at him stupidly, apparently not comprehending, and leaned toward him. C.B. realized now that he was drunk.

"No excuse," the swaying figure said. He steadied himself and moved toward the door.

"You've got to listen to me." C.B.'s voice sounded shrill against the music pouring through the door. "I can help you get to a doctor if you need. You're killing yourself, sir. It'll almost be suicide if you don't see one."

He pointed at the stains. "That's your blood you're coughing up, and you'll die if you don't get help. Let me help you."

He repeated the request, but the old man seemed to have become deaf. The association of white hair and wisdom never seemed more contradictory; the man stared at him blankly, weaving drunkenly now. C.B. felt an impulse to shout as the old man turned away again, but instead spoke quietly:

"I'm trying to save your life."

"You keep it," the old figure mumbled, apparently misunderstanding; he stumbled through the door into the blackness of the bar. The doorway and the dim light from the gray room framed the dirty white shirt and the white hair until the door slammed shut.

Suddenly C.B. could move. He pushed back into the dark bar, his eyes blinded to everything except the flashing lights on the stripper across the room. Even before his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he searched for the old man. The loud music, the yells from the audience, the very number of people confused him. For a moment he felt lost, then moved to his right along the bar toward the front door. His eyes seemed weak now, and he wondered how the blindness was his fault. He could identify none of the shadows. Only the faces near the stage could be seen clearly, and he was moving away from the ring of colored

lights that circled the dancer.

He found himself back at the stool he had been using, his beer bottle still on the counter. The dim light coming from below the bar turned the blackness into a gray here, and he could recognize the smiling face staring at him.

"I saved your beer, C.B." Virgil said. "One of the girls started to clean it up, but I stopped her." The young reporter was sitting on the next stool. "You were leaving just as I walked up." The reporter's presence angered him; yet . . . he needed help. The bar was crowded and dark, but with two of them hunting the man "Never mind the beer," he said quickly. "Have you seen a gray-haired old man in a dirty white shirt and dark trousers?" As he spoke, he peered past the bar's lights into the darkness.

"No," Virgil answered. "Not tonight anyway. The description is common to the area, though."

The same insolent smile lighted the young man's face. C.B. tried to ignore it.

"I saw him in the men's room a minute or two ago. He's got an obvious case of t.b., and I'd like to help him."

"I thought t.b. was out of fashion. Something of a dead disease."

Virgil's humor irritated him, but he tried to remain calm. "It may not be that common anymore, but it occurs. Maybe that's why I want to find the fellow." He was reluctant to explain the pictures in his mind, the gaunt old figure he had seen in his youth, suspenders stretched over the thin shoulders and coughed-blood spots on the sleeves; thinner

each month, a white-haired old man too weak to work; maybe strong enough only to cough and spit little red blobs into a handkerchief or onto a sleeve; an old stick of a man rocking on the porch until he lay all the time in bed coughing and spitting; then he died and lay stick-thin and white from spitting away his color, lay in the pine box that would carry him someplace his grandson barely understood. "It's not a great career," Cranston had said. He didn't want to talk now, especially not to Virgil, about things he had tried to forget.

"There's no excuse for not helping him. It could even be a good story. See if you can find him. White hair, thin, about this tall." He gestured with his hand. "Wearing a dirty white shirt. The hair and the shirt should show up."

"Sure," Virgil said. "You go that way, and I'll get the other half of the room."

They moved apart. He was surprised that the reporter had been willing to help. For an instant he remembered Virgil in that scene in the toilet and was conscious of his repulsion.

As he moved through the darkness, he had to get close to the figures to be certain about them. Even size and shape were deceptive in the darkness. Once, he saw a figure the proper size, thin and angular, but closer examination revealed only a young woman prowling for game of her own. She turned, smiling, toward him when his interest was misunderstood. He quickly faded into the crowd again. He felt, often, as though his presence would be unwelcome, as though he were awkwardly intruding upon the people he observed. Yet, no one seemed

aware of him. The tall blond girl, Linda, was dancing--the shadows around him were intent upon her.

In fifteen minutes, he hadn't found the old man in the back half of the bar or on the main floor. After circulating among the tables twice, still without drawing attention, he decided to find Virgil, certain that the old man had gone elsewhere. As he walked toward the front of the bar, stepping around a large post, a hand suddenly clutched his shoulder. He had trouble turning and heard Virgil's voice before he saw him.

"I found him outside. We'll have to hurry." Virgil pushed past him to lead the way. The sidewalk in front of the bar was empty when they emerged from the darkness.

"Damn, he was heading that way. Not fast either." Virgil indicated southward, away from the center of town.

"He couldn't go any farther than that--it's a pier jutting into the bay--but he might have walked down to the water."

"Where else could he have gone?"

"If he turned off, anywhere. Probably did. He could be anywhere down on the docks. Who knows where a guy like that goes? Forget him. He could have a room or be sleeping on a boat or just in a hallway. You won't find him out there, but he'll probably be back tomorrow night. Look for him then."

"I want to see if I can catch him now."

"You won't. With that head start, it'll be like chasing a ghost."

At the corner he looked in both directions. Street lamps spread

their yellow arcs off in the distance to the right, and he could see no dark silhouette against them. There was no light off the street to the left. He could see nothing there. He called back to Virgil, who was watching him from the doorway to The Buoy.

"What's down there?" He pointed into the blackness to the left.

"Warehouses, docks. Damn few lights and occasional toughs. He might have gone that way, but"

The street was very dark, and the darkness forbidding. The old man probably hadn't gone that way. Few lights and maybe toughs. No, he would've gone toward the auditorium.

"I'll check the auditorium. He probably went that way." Virgil didn't say anything.

When he had gone another block, he again looked in both directions before crossing the street. There was no street to the right this time. The space between the buildings led to a small inlet. A pier stuck out into the water, and light from a street lamp across the narrow cove showed nothing else. The path to the left again offered only darkness; he ignored it and continued toward the bay. The next block was short, and this time on the left a large parking lot stretched the last block to the auditorium and down to the docks and some boats tied there. The lot was empty. Nothing left to search but the auditorium pier, he quickened his pace to cover the remaining block. When he came to the building, he walked along its right side, staying on the sidewalk next to its wall. He could see the bay now, black despite the brilliant lights here. The pier extended only the width of the street

and sidewalk past the auditorium. The old man had to be there.

But the street and walks were empty. One car occupied by a young couple passed him, turned the far corner, and disappeared. After a step or two he stopped, disappointed, before he crossed the street to look over the rail into the bay that had been black but became dark green as he approached. He saw nothing in the water and wondered why he had looked. He hurried to the far side of the pier and stared toward town. Again no old man. . . .

A Coast Guard cutter was docked there, and a man in uniform was walking on the vessel's top deck.

"Hello," C.B. called as he approached the ship.

"Hi."

C.B. rested his hands on the pier railing, then took them back from the cold metal.

"Did you see an old man walking down here in the past fifteen minutes? An old man in a white shirt?"

"No. You're the only person I've seen for, oh, half an hour. Except the people in the cars, of course. It's getting too cool at night now, and not many people come walking down here. Too close to the water. Always a breeze."

As he heard the words, the night chill struck C.B. for the first time, and he was surprised that he hadn't noticed the temperature before. The day had been very warm, too. He thanked the man and hurried to get back to The Buoy. As he crossed each intersection, he looked to his right at the darkness leading away from the main street.

That must be the direction the old man had taken. He might have caught up with him, if he had gone that way. I should have looked, he thought. But the darkness was a cold barrier that he couldn't penetrate.

He re-entered the bar. How good the warm air seemed after the chill outside. Virgil was waiting for him.

"Look for him here tomorrow night," Virgil said. He was silent until Virgil spoke again.

"Sit down, C.B. Sit down. He may even come back tonight." He sat, wishing he could think of an excuse to move to another stool.

"I hope he does," he finally said. "He needs help badly. Those red cough stains on his sleeve. I'm surprised someone else hasn't done something."

"In this world? Nobody pays any attention to little old men unless they're in the family," Virgil said. "Or are editors." He smiled again, and C.B. didn't like him. "I'll tell you what, though. I'll keep my eyes open, C.B., if you don't find him tonight. Or before you leave town, for that matter. He can get help, I'm sure, if only from the state--and it is a good story."

Distrustful, he looked at the younger man sitting beside him in the darkness. For once Virgil's grin wasn't insulting, and he felt a rush of relief. The old man would get some help.

He remembered his beer, but the bottle had been removed. Virgil waved Tulip over.

"Two of my favorite, Tulip, sweetheart." She nodded.

"What's that, Virgil? I've been drinking beer."

"Beer's not good for you on a night like this, C.B. Aren't you still chilly from that night air?" He nodded, and Virgil called to Tulip. "A glass of water, too."

She set drinks in front of each of them and the extra glass of water beside C.B.'s drink.

"What's this?"

"Just bourbon and water. Extra water for a beginner. You need to get rid of that chilly feeling. It's on me."

"All my drinks are on the house, I understand."

"Even better. It's on Roy."

He decided to add some water to the drink before tasting it. He was careful to sip and was pleased to find that it was less acrid than the beer. He swallowed, and it burned his throat just enough for a small cough. He could still taste the bourbon on his tongue, like the last traces of a smoldering fire.

"Very good," Virgil said. "Small sips until you get used to it. It's the world's best way to warm up."

It was warming, he admitted, taking another sip. He coughed again.

"Never add anything to it besides water," Virgil said. "Anything else and it's not really a drink. All the mixed drinks you hear about are for people who don't really like to drink." Virgil took a swallow from his glass. "They just want to socialize or be seen out."

"A real drinker will stick to bourbon or scotch, with water, maybe, or will have a martini. Martinis, and in the summer a gin and tonic, are the only mixed drinks allowed. Order any of the fancy crap, and

you're not drinking for yourself. You're drinking to have people see you drink--either the people you're with or the ones you carry in your head. Drink up, C.B. We'll make a real drinker out of you."

"Who wants to be?"

Virgil laughed. "Alcohol was sacred in some primitive cultures. Its results were spiritual, not social. I'm always accused of being primitive by people who don't know how right they are."

C.B. sipped more of the bourbon. It might not be spiritual, but the warmth in the mouth spread quickly. The chill was going, leaving behind satisfaction with the comfortable change in the air. The Buoy was fast losing its strangeness for him; the darkness, the lights, the music and crowd--he grew used to the place. Another dancer, one he hadn't seen, was in the lights now, waiting for the tape to begin the tune for her routine. She stood still, holding a veil, a faint smile on her lips and only lustrous panties, pasties, high heels on her body.

He glanced away to Virgil, who was now talking to Tulip. He might have misjudged the young reporter. Tulip left in a minute, and he asked, "Why aren't you at the paper? It's a morning paper; you should be working right now."

"I usually am. But I covered a court case today. Special duty, so I finished early. I don't have anything to do but drink with you, C.B. As a brother newsman, it's my duty to show you a proper time."

"I'm less certain about the propriety, but I'm finding The Buoy more enjoyable now that I've gotten a little used to it."

"It grows on you. I know Andrew Cranston brought you the first time, but how did you get here tonight?"

"Taxi."

"I'll take you home then, so just enjoy yourself."

CHAPTER TEN

His breakfast was more a lunch since he slept until after noon, and despite dreaming at least once of Marian, he had slept well. He felt stronger and even enjoyed cleaning up after breakfast, washing dishes mechanically without thinking about anything. He felt light-headed, apparently from drinking more last night than he had ever before; he hadn't been drunk, however, and had no hangover. It was simply as though there were no need for him to do any thinking yet--his head was just resting. Waiting. Although always before he had disapproved of people who spent an evening, or even any part of one, wasting time in a place like The Buoy, he had spent the entire evening there and had no sense of lost time. He didn't regret the evening. For the moment, he didn't regret anything.

After drying the dishes and returning them to the shelf, he took the morning newspaper to the patio outside the back door. Small, bordered by L-shaped walls of the house and a fence covered with ivy, the patio was warm in the high sun, and he read until the sun made him sleepy, then dozed.

When he awoke, it was past four in the afternoon. He had enjoyed the day and that surprised him. He'd done nothing but rest and--while it was true that he was still weak from his head wound and should be resting to recover his strength, for whatever reason--he could have

been thinking about his immediate plans, about the uncertainty of life without Marian, or about Marian herself, trying to organize his memories to file them away.

But he felt no concern for the wasted hours, couldn't even use the word "wasted." They were just gone. It was as though he were drugged and had no will of his own. Rest; he was content to rest in the sun without thinking of Marian or Cranston or Virgil or even himself.

It was past five, the sun noticeably lower and the air cooler, before he moved from the patio. In the house he heated soup, ate, then showered. He dressed to go out, putting on his suit for the sake of the coat--the air would be cool. He could eat dinner out again, at a restaurant, he thought, but he didn't really know why he had planned to go out until he remembered the old man: he must search for that ghostly old man again.

Even the grayness of twilight was long gone by the time the taxi honked and he left the house, glad he had worn the suit against the cool air. He couldn't afford to catch a cold. That would cause too many complications. He would get home and to bed earlier tonight, also. He would look for the old man but without jeopardizing his health.

He sent the taxi in search of a seafood dinner. Afterwards, in a second cab, he went to the bar. Before the weatherbeaten exterior of the place, he handed a large bill to the driver and examined the building while waiting for his change. The words of the sign announcing

"The Buoy" were so faded as to be almost undecipherable, with only the last three letters of the second word still easy to read. "Uoy," he thought, he was drinking at the "uoy." From the inside it would read "you." You from the inside, he thought.

". . . and twenty," the driver counted.

"This is a strange place," he said as he put the bills away.

"It's the only strip joint intown."

"No, not that. The whole bar is strange--the atmosphere, maybe the people. But what I meant was the sign. You can't read it. It's a public bar, a place of business, with almost no advertising."

"Everyone knows this place, Mac. Most of the adults in this whole area have been here at one time or the other. I'd bet almost all of them get here, even the church goers."

"Think so?"

"He doesn't have to advertise. You'll see when you go in there. It's Friday night and the place'll be packed. The Navy'll be there, college kids, local people. It's early, but there'll be a crowd already."

"I've been inside before. I'm back to look for a man I saw in there the other night."

The driver glanced at him again, and C.B. felt himself blush.

"Nothing like that. Someone who reminds me" He decided not to explain. "Just somebody who needed some help."

"Sure, sure," the driver said, probably without understanding. C.B. got out and closed the door.

The taxi pulled away, and he started toward the bar. At that moment he saw a heavily bearded man about to enter The Buoy. It was the first time he had seen a person, other than Virgil, on the sidewalk outside the bar, and perhaps that made him stare hard at the slim figure opening the door; the man's full red beard seemed familiar, and he had to stop himself from calling, Zeke! Zeke!, as the man disappeared into the gloom inside. The door closed before he could reach it.

He hurried into the bar but couldn't see the man. He felt sick. What was he doing? Zeke was dead, his body buried. . . he couldn't remember where; he hadn't gone to the funeral. Why not? There was no answer ready for him until his hand moved to the bandage on his forehead. Was he wrong? Was everything a mistake? No; Zeke was dead; the man at the door couldn't have been Zeke.

He caught himself looking for the bearded man, however; he moved through the darkness, this time down the right side of the bar, skirting the dark floor that separated the counters from the stage. The darkness was flooded with sound--loud music, a multitude of voices. Crowded already. The cab driver was right, he thought. He could see no one clearly and soon dismissed the man he'd seen as he was forced to step around figures in his path, occasionally bumping into someone or being bumped. He circled the bar's farther end, passed the door of the men's room, and stopped in the area he had before. This time, however, there was no stool free, and he was forced to stand with his back to the wall. He realized that he could see more easily tonight;

the area between the wall and the bar was lighted, and all the people in this section could see each other if they wished. Yet he felt more alone than he had in the darkness. Too many people, he thought. He didn't wish to become part of that crowd, and even though he wanted a drink, it would be too much trouble to move to the bar.

"C.B. Hey, C.B."

He heard Roy's voice above the noise. The bar owner's round face looked cherubic in the new light, hovering patiently above the bar as he motioned with his hand. C.B. moved up to the bar, stepping between two of the old barber chairs.

"Good evening, Roy."

"How are you tonight, C.B.? How are you? It's good to see you back. How do you feel?"

"Fine. As a matter of fact, I had a very peaceful day. Got a great deal of rest. But I'm really here on a special matter."

"Let me get you a drink," Roy said.

He was going to say no, or wait, until he could explain, but Roy went away immediately, returning in a few seconds with a beer and a glass.

"Okay, but I can pay for them tonight. I can't live off you forever."

"Of course you can. Of course you can. You're still a guest of the house, but if you want to pay for your drinks, go ahead."

C.B. reached into his pocket and separated two one dollar bills. He had seen other customers pay and knew the beers cost a dollar and

a half. He handed the bills to Roy.

"Just a dollar," Roy said. "That's all I charge the guys from the paper. Newsmen get a special rate; they deserve it."

"Fine. Here." He took one of the bills back and pushed the other forward, but the barman shook his head again and held up his hands.

"No. It's easier if I just run a tab on you and you pay when you want to. When you leave or the next day. Whenever."

He had lost the argument, so he pocketed the money. Funny man. He thought, then, of the other man he had seen, and the uneasiness that had come with the thought of Zeke settled over him again. He took a sip of beer, hoping to drive the sensation away.

"What I'm really here for tonight," he said when he had swallowed, "is to look for an old man I saw last night. I meant to ask you about him. A white-haired old fellow wearing a white dress shirt--an old one, dirty. I'd really like to find him, if I could." He immediately started to explain as though Roy had asked why. "The man is sick, and he reminded me of my grandfather. I thought, just for old times sake, I could help him get medical attention. He can get most of it free. He looked poor."

"He'll be back," Roy said. "I think I know who you mean. If he's still in town--and where else would he go?--he'll be back. Retired fisherman, if it's the fellow I'm thinking of. I'll let you know if he comes around."

"Good. You can make that your good deed for the day," he joked.

"Maybe," was all Roy said. "Enjoy yourself. I'll be right back."

He moved his lips in a small smile that made his face look strange and then trudged away, rocking from side to side as he walked to the back of the bar and out of the light. C.B. could see Roy working toward the stage, apparently to announce the next dancer; a short thick figure threading through the shadowy crowd. He leaned forward and set the bottle on the bar.

He was still watching Roy when a voice broke into his concentration.

"Move, fellow. Get out of here."

It was the man in the barber chair to his right. He hadn't touched the chair while talking to Roy since he'd been able to step part way to the bar between two of the large seats without touching either. The speaker was a young man, perhaps in his late twenties. His voice had an angry edge to it.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't know I hit your chair."

"You're just in the way, old man. Move it. You're between me and my girl."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize" He stepped back, automatically turning to look at the other chair. He broke off his sentence when he caught sight of the girl's face. If she had had a lighter complexion, he would have thought her a classic beauty stepped from some ancient portrait of a Greek or Roman goddess--a delicate oval face framed by dark, dark hair. But her skin was of a deeper hue than painters had always used for the classical goddesses--the color

of the Mediterranean, he immediately thought without ever having seen its waters--and the result was even more vital. Her clear, fresh skin had an appearance of depth that caught his attention and breath.

"I didn't realize . . . let me get out of your way," he said to the girl as he moved from between the chairs.

"Excuse me, again," he said to the man. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"Just move it." The young man's angry face looked out of place beneath the blond hair. It was dark, too, but from the sun. A beach-boy, he thought. No. Too old to be a boy. He turned to the girl again.

"Excuse me." He moved away as he spoke, stepping back to the wall, and saw that the boyfriend was rising from his chair. The girl's hand on his arm stopped him, and he settled back into his chair, awkward in his anger.

Unsure of himself now, puzzled by the man's behavior, C.B. moved along the wall toward the back of the bar. He had never seen a bar fight, though he had heard stories, and had no desire to be in one. The man's face had seemed unreal, it had been so contorted. No reason for it all.

"C.B." He heard Roy and saw the familiar face above the bar again. "Come here. I've got something to show you. Where's your beer?"

He started to tell Roy about the incident but decided not to. "Oh, I left it on the bar."

"I'll get it," Roy volunteered. When he returned with the beer,

he said, "I've got something for you to see. Come on." He headed for the back of the barroom. At the end of the bar, Roy waited for him. They were out of the lights now, in the darkness that seemed the essence of The Buoy.

"I just set this up today," Roy said. He began to step around tables, making his way toward the stage. "You'll like this. I got it two days ago and kept it in the back until the new paint dried. Painted it gold to use it this way."

Roy led him onto the main floor, among the small wire tables that looked as though they were left over from a World War II era Parisian cafe. Then he saw something new. Right in the middle of the tables, in approximately the center of the floor and only two tables back from the stage, was a bed, or at least a bed frame.

"What do you think?" Roy asked. "Isn't it perfect for this place?"

It was an old-fashioned, gold-painted, metal bed frame. A table had been placed in the middle and benches at either end; two people could sit at the head of the bed and two at the foot, the couples facing each other across the table. Virgil sat at one end now, two men at the other. They looked up as Roy and he approached.

"Look who I found, Virgil," Roy said.

"C.B., C.B. It's good to see you, sir," Virgil said, his perpetual smile beaming. "Back looking for the old man? I'm keeping an eye open for him."

Virgil motioned with his hand, indicating the bed. "How do you like the new table? Appropriate, eh?"

The two men who were with Virgil interrupted to say goodbye.

"Sit down, C.B.," Virgil said when the men had gone. Roy removed the empty bottles. "I'll have another round sent over in a minute," Roy told them. C.B. started to say no, but it was too late, and soon a girl brought two more beers to their table. She took Virgil's empty bottle and waited for him to drain his. He hadn't wanted to, but the girl's presence seemed a command. He handed her the empty bottle.

The bed frame was positioned with one side facing the stage, and he sat at the foot of the bed across from Virgil. Being this close to the stage, even when it was empty, was disturbing. He had been able, if not to ignore the strippers, at least to avoid concentrating on the girls as they bared their bodies, and he had not watched any of the dancers at the climax of their acts. But here it would be almost impossible to ignore any movement on the stage less than twenty feet away. He would have to hide his face or turn his back to the performance. He couldn't bear to attract that kind of attention; he was already certain that the people around him would be observing him now, even if their interest were really the bed-table. He took a drink and tried to ignore the presence of the others pressed so close to him.

Virgil wanted to draw him into conversation, but his comments were terse, if not ill-tempered, until the younger man, his beer empty, left for the bar. After a minute Virgil returned and placed a glass of bourbon in front of C.B.

"No sense in breaking a tradition, right?"

C.B. looked at the glass a moment, uncertain what to do next.

"Should I mix bourbon with beer."

"It'll be good for you," Virgil said. "You need it."

He emptied his beer and set it aside. He put off tasting the drink for a minute, then took a sip. It was stronger than last night's, but he liked the tingle it started in his tongue. It's really good, he thought, and took a bigger swallow. This time he choked, and Virgil laughed a little.

"That can happen at first, C.B. Just take a small sip to get started." He pointed to the stage.

Roy had mounted the stage, and the blond stripper Linda C.B. had seen before was waiting in the shadows. Following Roy's introduction, she moved onto the small platform and began to dance. C.B. allowed himself to watch for a minute, but afraid that he would be doing something wrong to watch too long, he shifted his gaze to the patrons at the other tables. The people--some in uniforms, men sitting in groups of two or three, at one table two couples--were watching the girl dance; the women--he was surprised to discover--were as intent upon the stage as the men, and no one paid any attention to him or the bed in which he sat. That relaxed him some. He wouldn't like to be seen sitting directly in front of the stage, especially when the girl began to take off everything. He thought then, for the first time that evening, of Marian. What would she think to see him here?

"I really shouldn't be sitting out here, Virgil." He had to lean across the table to talk without raising his voice. "It isn't proper. Not now." He was silent then. He had wanted to say: I'm in mourning,

but the line struck him as all wrong. If he were in mourning, why was he here? He couldn't say. It was the first time he has asked the question--he had no answer unless the desire to escape mourning was an answer. But he was in mourning; he was; his grief was real--for Marian, for Zeke and Maddy and their girl, for the abbot he had killed, for himself. Desperately, he raised the glass to his mouth, took a large gulp of bourbon. Mourning in this darkness. In the night inside him, that was him, darker than the bar, he thought. He felt a growing tightness in his chest, and remembering this feeling from before, put his hand inside his coat. His shirt was wet, and his body felt warm, very alive. Mourning

A flash of light and movement turned his eyes. The dancer had come forward on the stage to the edge nearest him and was slowly moving her body from side to side, motioning with her hands as though weaving a fabric in the air, a cloth too magic to see. Her blond hair shone in the light as she swirled her red scarf, pulled it about her body in rhythm to the music, trailed it through the air until it fell behind her, inert. She drew the long scarf about her moving body once again, circling herself in a thin cloud of red silk or rayon as her hips moved forward, toward him, intensifying their rhythm until they seemed gusts of passion from her taut muscles. Then she slipped to the rear of the stage, away from him, her back to the audience now, to him; and in the same motion swung her arms upward, pivoting fiercely yet gracefully to face the blackness of the bar again.

He averted his eyes, suddenly aware that he had been staring with

everyone else in the crowd. He needed a drink to hide his confusion even from himself.

"She's great, isn't she?" He didn't know how to answer Virgil's question, but merely nodded affirmatively and took another drink from the glass.

"Roy should have more like her," Virgil continued. "Not that many on this circuit, though. When they're that good, they go to the bigger cities. More money. She won't be here long. Only the local talent stays, unless they're here for some reason other than the dancing."

Virgil had leaned forward while he talked, and he apparently thought he should clarify his last remark.

"The Navy brings them here. Or the beach. Some of the girls come down from Alabama or Georgia--the whole Southeast--hoping to marry into the Navy. The base is an air training station, so it's built to turn young, college-trained males into pilots. The cadets can't get married until they graduate, but their future's rosy, and the girls are willing to wait until then. It almost never works out though. The girls get stuck here or finally move on."

"You mean they're not all professionals?" he asked. Virgil smiled.

"They get to be, if they're not already." C.B. gazed at the dancer. With the scarf still about her she shed her brief bikini. The top already lay on the floor, and soon, the dancer wore only small tasseled patches that barely covered her nipples and a string that stretched a thin strip of bright red fabric between her thighs.

The lights had been dimmed and the music had slowed in a rhythmic passage that made her movements even more sensual. She danced into the corner and flipped a switch that shut off all the stage lights except one spotlight hanging over the center of the platform. The narrow cone of light cut through the blackness and for a moment seemed to exist alone, marked only by dust particles floating within it.

Abruptly, the dancer moved back into the light, even before C.B.'s eyes adjusted to the change. She seemed almost to explode into the beam that came from above her and ran almost parallel to the length of her body, making her hair shine brilliantly and accenting her body with patches and lines of shadow. It emphasized her height, and the resulting shadows molded even more contours in her figure. Her large breasts caught the light full, standing out like beacons, like the name of the bar itself, The Buoy. C.B. had never seen anything so acutely sensuous. He couldn't take his eyes from the stage, even to sip his drink.

The beam of light, broad enough to encompass the dancer and spread out around her, isolated her completely. In a moment a movement in the blackness behind it became apparent, however, and a second girl became visible when she stepped into the cone, half in the light, half out. She didn't have on a dancer's costume but wore casual street clothes.

The stripper seemed to recognize the girl and, smiling, moved to share the cone of light, turning her body to face both the crowd and the girl. The newcomer danced into the space granted her, and

in the moment light reached her face, C.B. recognized the beautiful features that had impressed him earlier--it was the girl he had seen in the barber's chair. Moon-like, she circled the cone of light, half in the brilliance, half in mysterious darkness, swaying like a flower in a gentle breeze.

The audience greeted the appearance of the second dancer with shouts and applause. When her street attire became apparent, several men shouted for her to take it off. But the slow movements of the two girls, the circle they inscribed with their revolutions had a hypnotic effect, and the crowd quieted. In the lowered volume that seemed almost a sudden calm, as though before a storm, C.B. thought of the girl's angry male companion and jerked his eyes from the stage to look fearfully over his shoulder. But there was only the crowd that he had observed before. There was no indication of the man who had frightened him earlier.

When he turned to the stage again, the second girl had already begun to unbutton her blouse. She was still moving with the music but without changing her position on the stage, now at the center of the light. She had thrown off her jacket, and as she freed the unbuttoned blouse from her skirt, Linda circled about her in a form of rhythmic applause, moving with the slow music and seeming herself to grow excited as the blouse came free and slowly slipped down the girl's arms, one at a time, until it was tossed into the shadow at the rear of the stage.

"She's a customer," he said to Virgil.

"Yeah, but a good one." Virgil hadn't taken his eyes away from the girl when he spoke.

C.B. watched her turn slowly in the direction opposite to Linda's movement. It was as though a spring were being wound tighter until Linda reached for the other girl's skirt. She tugged at the zipper twice, and the skirt fell loose from the rotating hips, slowly, dropping finally to the floor. The girl kicked it to the back of the stage and stood in the light, wearing low-cut panties, bra, and high heels. Finally she raised her arms above her head and began to move again.

The new dancer was not as heavily built as the blond girl, he finally noticed, but she was more perfectly proportioned. Like Virgil, he felt he could not tear his eyes away.

"How can she get up there and dance?" He asked Virgil.

"She just walked up on the stage."

"No, I mean . . . how could a customer . . .?"

"Oh. She's used to it. Ask me later."

C.B. didn't understand, but he wasn't certain he cared as the blond dancer reached for the blackhaired girl again and unfastened the hook on her bra. The loosened bra did not fall away, however; the girl reached behind her and held the ends together while she continued her movements. She breathed deeply and pulled her stomach tight, and he could see it flex. She turned in a circle again, finally facing the tables, and walked straight at him, moving one hand forward with her body, now freeing the bra but keeping it between her and the audience. Linda moved in behind her and ran her hands down the girl's back. The

blackhaired girl tossed her bra into the shadows as she turned from the audience to face her partner. She started her slow rotation again. Linda revolved about her on the edge of the cone of light.

Linda began to strip again, as though the dance were a contest. She removed the tasseled cover from her left nipple, then from the right; her white skin accented the brown circles. Simultaneously, the two girls altered their positions to face each other as they circled about the center of the light. As they moved, the blackhaired girl kicked off her shoes and began to work her panties down her hips. Her dark pubic hair seemed a rare, once hidden blossom. She kicked her panties free, and Linda removed the thin elastic that held the strip of cloth between her own legs. Bare now, the girls continued to dance in a circle apparently for each other as much as for the people at the tables. The music's beat slowed, preparing for a crescendo, and the dancers moved closer to each other. No sounds came from the audience now; there was only the music, which suddenly grew very loud--and then stopped abruptly, leaving a silence that hurt C.B.'s ears. As Linda flipped a switch and darkness flooded the stage, the tables shook with applause and cheers.

"Have you ever seen a better show?" Virgil asked. "If that was impromptu, then it's a once-in-a-lifetime thing, C.B." C.B. could think of nothing to say, and then the stage lights came on to reveal a smiling Roy, awkwardly prancing back and forth on the stage. C.B. was struck by how dry his mouth was and raised his glass, but it was empty. Virgil jumped up.

"I'll get two more. I want to congratulate Roy. He should hire them as a permanent act. Promise them anything--I would." Virgil stepped over the bed frame as he spoke and then walked away through the tables and the still restless audience.

On the stage Roy's face seemed a distillation of both intense pleasure and almost satanic humor, resulting in a beaming, awkward innocence. He rocked back and forth on his heels for a few seconds without saying anything, another curious dance for the figures at the tables.

"Aren't these girls wonderful," he finally said. "Never know what to expect from our show. The Buoy always has surprises for you."

C.B. fancied that Roy was speaking directly to him. He touched his forehead nervously and discovered that he had been sweating heavily. He put his hand under his jacket again and felt the heat of his body. He was fiery as if the bourbon's flames had seeped into his flesh. The sexually arousing dance had stirred him, and that seemed all wrong now. The wrong time and place. He felt desperate for another drink to wet his lips and tongue and was pleased when he saw Virgil appear out of the crowd near the left hand corner of the stage, say something to Roy, and head toward the table. He was carrying two glasses.

He took the drink from Virgil and sipped from his glass while Virgil sat down; he swallowed, took another, longer drink. In front, Roy finished talking, promised another dancer after a short break, and left the stage. Somewhere a jukebox began to play. The glass

was cool, wet in his hand, as though perspiring from the heat of his palm.

"I saw that girl earlier," he said. "The one who danced just now. She was sitting at the bar with a man, some angry young fellow."

"Yeah, I've seen him around before," Virgil replied. "The guy she lives with, I believe. He's a mean bastard. Wasn't she terrific, though? A real pro."

"Then she isn't just a customer."

"That's all now, but she used to dance here. Under the name of Carmelita. Elaborate Mexican costumes and everything. She's really, I think, just from South Texas. Real name's Maggie. The rest is just for the act. When she got involved with this guy, he made her quit. I guess he didn't like her showing her body to other men."

"Why get up there tonight then?"

"Could be he changed his mind, but I doubt it. They may be splitting up." He shrugged. "Or they had a fight, and she did it to get him mad. Who knows why a woman does anything?"

"He got mad at me earlier. I stepped between their chairs by accident. I think he wanted to fight over it, but she stopped him. I just got out of the way." He sipped his drink and then asked, "Are there many fights in here?"

"No. Usually only when a group of Navy guys starts drinking too much. But Roy doesn't mind that, since he loves the Navy. When they fight, he just walks into the middle of it and starts pushing guys apart. He never presses charges for anything like that, even if he

gets hit. That's one reason he's so popular. He takes care of everybody, and he's a helluva friend to downtrodden reporters."

"Why does he like newsmen so much?"

"We're pretty good customers--steady. He likes the idea that newsmen are a community's conscience--or are supposed to be--and need all the support they can get. The ministers might not agree, but I sure do." Virgil raised his drink mockingly. C.B. joined in the toast.

"Speaking of newsmen," C.B. said in a few seconds, "where's Andrew Cranston? He brought me here the first time, but I haven't seen him since."

"He's having a rough time at the paper right now. All of a sudden the powers-that-be seem unhappy with him. We hear rumors that he may be promoted out of the way. Executive editor or something. So right now he's working hard and going home nights, but that won't last long."

"I hope things work out for him. He helped get me out of a spot once."

"Ah, the night of the dinner. He told me. That may be his problem. The Duke, our affectionate Mr. Benson, may have discovered you came down here, and only Andrew could have brought you."

"I hadn't thought of that." He seemed to get everyone in trouble. A vague feeling of guilt settled over him. For a second he could remember the face of the abbot in the gray, stone room, and a chill made the muscles in his back quiver. He shook his shoulders and sipped his drink, but the cold feeling stayed with him.

"Chilled? Here's something to warm you." Virgil rose to greet

Roy. The blond dancer Linda was with him, and as she smiled at Virgil, the blackhaired girl who had danced with her stepped into view. Carmelita--Maggie. He stood up.

"I thought you two might like company," Roy said.

"We'd love it," Virgil said, "Wouldn't we, C.B.?"

"Uh, yes." But he thought: I shouldn't have said that.

"Linda can't stay too long." Roy cautioned. "She's got to circulate. But I thought you guys would like a little conversation. C.B., this is Linda." She was tall--five-ten, perhaps--and now wore a clinging red dress. "And this is Carmelita. Used to dance for me, and I keep trying to get her back. This gentlemen, girls, is C.B., a famous newspaper editor visiting us. Tell him things he can't use in his newspaper."

Virgil, he noticed, had seated Linda on the bench. They seemed to know each other. He was confused and finally thought to say, "I'll get something to drink."

"Tulip's bringing a round," Roy said.

C.B. could see little else to do, so he pushed the table back to let the dark-haired girl step into the bed frame. She thanked him in a voice that showed no sign of an accent. When Roy left them, C.B. could think of nothing to say. Other men were staring at them, jealously perhaps. Finally Virgil spoke to both girls.

"That was a great dance. I was telling C.B. you should use it as an act. Did you plan it?"

"No," Carmelita said. "I just wanted to dance again. It's been

so long since I've been on stage." Her voice did have a slight accent, C.B. realized, but it was a regional distinction, not the mark of someone speaking English as a second language. Her voice was very soft.

"Carmelita and I've never even danced in the same place before," Linda said. "She left before I got here, but I'd heard about her. Roy introduced us earlier at the bar. So when she got up on the stage I knew who it was."

"Where's your boyfriend?" C.B. found it was difficult to keep from looking over his shoulder as he put the question.

"I knew I'd seen you earlier. You were at the bar. I'm sorry Bill got mad--he's always mad. He was already, 'cause he didn't want to come down here tonight. After you left, he said he'd leave and threatened to kill me if I didn't. And he might. He beat me up before. I've been too scared to leave him, but I know Roy will take care of me."

"Call the police," Virgil said. C.B. wondered: Why didn't I think of that, too.

"Oh, no. I couldn't. I'd rather stay away from them. You understand," she said to Linda, who nodded.

"How did you get him to bring you down here tonight?" Virgil asked.

Carmelita smiled at Virgil and then at Linda. "I just told him what he wouldn't get again, if I didn't get to go."

C.B. sipped his drink as he listened to these strange people. Soon the glass was completely empty. He pushed it toward the middle of the

table out of his way, but was soon moving it about slowly with one finger. He folded his hands to keep them still and peered at the girl to his left. She was wearing the clothes he had seen her in earlier--a light jacket and matching skirt--the same clothes that she had removed so enticingly. Even in this dim light, she was beautiful, perhaps more so. What was she doing here? The question seemed to betray an interest that was itself a betrayal; he shouldn't concern himself with any girl, much less one like this. A cheap tramp. No doubt. But beautiful. As he glanced furtively at her, he remembered how she had looked in the spotlight; he saw for a moment her breasts glistening with a slight perspiration. He'd never known anyone like her. Did that give him the right to be interested? he wondered. No. But he listened, while the three talked, until a pause came into the conversation.

"What will your boyfriend do when you go home?" he asked.

"I'm not going home." For some reason, that pleased him. "I want out. He was very nice at first, but that changed. I won't let him beat me again."

"Roy'll get you a place to stay," Linda said, "or you can go home with me."

The conversation drifted and soon Virgil and Linda were lost in their own private matters, and C.B. wondered what he could say to Carmelita. She saved him from his dilemma, for she noticed that his glass was empty.

"I'll get you another drink," she said and started to rise.

"No, I'll get two." He carefully straightened up and picked a path to the bar. He wanted the freedom of distance to think about everything that was happening. He was supposed to be in mourning, not in a bar ordering a drink for a stripper, a girl who was probably also a prostitute. He should leave. Instead, he carefully carried the two glasses back to the odd table. She thanked him with a smile he thought looked shy.

"It's C.B., right?" she asked. At his nod, she continued. "I've been curious. What happened to your poor head?"

He touched the bandage above his temple, now just a patch of gauze taped on.

"I got hit in the head."

"Oh, serious?"

He told her about it, in part, while Virgil conversed with Linda. Carmelita was sympathetic but showed some restraint--he had expected her to take his arm and throw her body into his to show how touched she was. He had seen women display such artificial sympathy in films. But she simply nodded politely once or twice as he told the story of the killings on the farm and of Marian's untimely death.

"I'm sorry, C.B." She seemed sincere, when she finally spoke.

"It's not been easy. I feel lost without Marian. We never had any children and depended heavily on each other." He hadn't spoken with anyone else about Marian or about the grief hidden in him, before this had said only that she died in a car accident.

"I'm not certain what to do now. I shouldn't even be down here--

someone brought me. I came back because I saw a man who looked like my dead grandfather and apparently has the same disease that killed him. I thought I could help him get treatment." He stopped, afraid that it would appear to be just an excuse for his being where he was. The girl would certainly have another explanation. But she didn't respond, remaining still until she leaned over him, half rising, and kissed him lightly on the forehead, almost in the same spot the bandage covered on the other side. Before C.B. had time to think Virgil called out, "Hey, hey C.B. Welcome to The Buoy. I see you're getting along with the natives."

"Virgil, shut up." C.B. was surprised when Carmelita came to his defense, but Virgil merely laughed and, with his arm around Linda's shoulders, pulled the blond stripper closer to him.

"This is the place to forget 'all our trouble, all our woes,' I think the song goes," Virgil said to Linda.

"I can't forget to go back to work," she responded. "I've got to circulate some . . . unless you gentlemen want to buy some high-priced drinks?" She was looking at Virgil.

"Not on my salary," the reporter said, opening his palms to signify his poverty.

"Well, then. . . ."

She was interrupted by the noise of a scuffle from the front of the bar. All four of them turned quickly but could see nothing.

"Maybe I'll stay here," Linda said. But it grew quiet again. In a minute the girl Tulip came over.

"Carmelita, your boyfriend was here," she said in her heavy accent.

"He heet somebody bad when Roy ask heem to leave, but hees gone now."

"Oh, oh. Thanks Tulip. I guess I'd better talk to Roy." She looked at C.B. "It was nice meeting you, C.B. Maybe if I start back here we can have a drink together sometime."

"Maybe," he said, and then added, "I think I'd like that. Uh, is your name really Carmelita?"

"Call me Maggie, if you'd like." Her long curls bounced as a child's might, as she rose from the bench.

"I'd better get moving, too," Linda said to Virgil. She got up and looked down at Virgil. "See you later, Virgil?"

"I hope so," he said.

After they were gone, both he and Virgil returned to their drinks. Virgil stared at C.B. and then suddenly winked.

"Beautiful, isn't she, C.B.? Linda's a doll, and her virtues are obvious even before she uncovers them. But Maggie may be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"She is beautiful," C.B. admitted, reluctantly. "I wonder why she's here at all. She could get work in Hollywood or a bigger city."

"A boyfriend brought her about a year and a half ago, and then he left town. She stayed and got a job here--until Bill started hanging around. He's a good looking guy, and a lot of the girls like him, I hear. Beachboy type. I've never had anything to do with him, but you hear stories."

"Did he really beat her?"

Virgil nodded. "He's fought a lot around town. Supposed to be a karate expert." As he spoke Virgil held his glass up to the light from the stage. "I'm empty. What you say we move to the bar?"

"Okay." But as he stepped from the bed frame, he stumbled into a chair at another table.

"Excuse me, excuse me." He felt dizzy and didn't know why. He straightened, picked up his glass from the table, and followed Virgil around the end of the bar. They found two stools in the darkest area, and Virgil ordered two more drinks. C.B. was ready for his by the time they arrived. He was feeling quite high and liked the feeling.

A few minutes later, Virgil decided to look for Linda to make a date for later and left him at the bar. He had a minute to consider if he wanted to remain alone. Talking to Maggie, to someone who showed some sympathy, had made him feel better; he wanted companionship now, a person to talk to. He said a few words to Tulip, but her heavy accent made communication difficult. He finished his drink and ordered another.

A different stripper was working now, one he had seen before but didn't know, and he tried to watch her. But his mind kept slipping back to Maggie. She was beautiful and had danced well. Beautiful. Another face floated into his vision, Marian. He tried to see how she appeared in his mind, whether she looked happy or sad, but he couldn't determine. He must have another drink. I need it, he thought, lifting the glass. In another minute or two, when he found himself looking at the dancer again, the same progression from the dancer to Maggie, to

Marian repeated itself, and he was grateful when Roy appeared. He wanted especially to talk to this strange man behind the bar. Soon the conversation settled on the subject of Maggie.

"She's beautiful, just beautiful," Roy said, giving the word four syllables. "What a girl, C.B. I hated to see her go with that guy Bill. He's no good for anybody."

"I heard he hit someone earlier."

"Yeah, but I got him out."

He looked at Roy. The bar man was stocky, but he must be at least fifteen years C.B.'s senior. How could he have gotten the younger Bill out without help?

"Oh, these boys. They're not hard to handle." Roy was vague, his voice soft. "They're usually willing to do what I ask them. It's the other customers who have trouble."

"Maggie said he beat her up once or twice."

"I see you're on a real-name basis. Beat her up? Probably. He'd been known to hit a girl or two before she met him; I found out after she left with him." Roy was silent for a few seconds. "Like her?"

"She seemed different." He was embarrassed.

"They're all different, C.B. They all appear much the same, and when you hear their stories, you might think those are the same, too. But when you've heard as many as I have . . . they're all different . . . Bobbie's, Maggie's, Linda's . . . mine, yours . . ."

C.B. lifted the glass to his lips but couldn't taste anything. He took another swallow. It no longer bothered his throat, but he

could feel no warmth in the liquor now. Another sip; he looked at Roy.

"Mine?"

"A figure of speech, C.B. Everybody's got a story. If I were a writer . . . but I'm not. I've heard hundreds of stories, but I couldn't use any of them."

"Do you save them or tell them to anyone, ever?"

"I save 'em all." He was quiet a moment. "It's my only hobby. No, I wouldn't tell anyone. Who ever understands the truth about anyone else? If you tell a story, you're asking for judgment . . . of yourself or somebody else. And who's big enough to judge? I've been in this business a long time, C.B., and I've learned nobody can judge somebody else without living his life for him. Nobody."

"What business are you in?" Suddenly he didn't know. He wasn't certain that he knew the man in front of him.

The ruddy, round face broke the darkness with a smile. "The bar business, of course. Collecting the stories is a hobby, not a business."

In silence, Roy poured him another drink. The blocky figure behind the bar, dark in the shadow of the room, seemed to be waiting for something to happen. C.B. sipped his drink. When he started talking, he couldn't stop. As though he were no longer in control, the story of that night in the rain, in the cold gray room, flooded over his lips, became tears quietly furrowing his cheeks, danced solemnly before him, before the blurred face he was having trouble seeing . . . it was vague, cloudy through his tears. Or was it only

memory. Was the face in his mind Roy's or Marian's? He saw himself standing beside the mound so brown against the green grass, crying, the tears merging across time to wash him; crying; silently, prayerfully, from the deepest part of him, crying.

He had stopped talking before Virgil appeared. Roy had been speaking quietly. Though he was listening, it was difficult to hear the individual words. They seemed to flow together, to be repeated in his mind, and he nodded: Yes, yes. Virgil was quiet, as though he knew what was occurring. He sat on the next stool, not drinking, mute. The three men were silent.

Finally Roy spoke, "Virgil, I think it's time for C.B. to go. Can you take him home? He shouldn't go by himself."

"Sure, Roy. Ready, C.B.?"

He heard Virgil faintly, as though he were almost asleep already and his voice the beginning of a dream. He nodded and heard Virgil say, "I've got a better idea. Maggie needs a place to stay tonight. Why doesn't she take C.B. home in a taxi?"

Faintly, from off in the distance, Roy agreed. He agreed, too, silently; Maggie. He liked the name. It was special; it promised so He nodded. Time to go to bed. He began humming a tune his grandfather had taught him when he was still a baby. "Goonight, mother, goonight father . . . goonight father . . ." He couldn't remember anymore.

Soon he was through the front door and falling into a cab and nodding into sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

An enormous pressure focused behind his forehead in a dull congestion that seemed solid, yet expanding. It forced against the bones of his skull. He felt a pillow beneath his head--at least he was in a bed. But that was all that was certain. His opening eyelids were stiff sheets of sandpaper scraping against the sensitive eyeballs, but he felt relieved when he recognized the wooden nightstand and the reading lamp. His being relieved puzzled him at first. This was where he should be. What had he expected? A dim recollection of The Buoy stirred him, and he began to realize how uncomfortable he truly was. His head was splitting, just as in the jokes: So, this is a hangover. He'd rather not have found out. For years at the newspaper he had been famous for his impatience at that complaint. It was a certain sign of indolence, evidence of misspent time and a state of mind that could become, or already was, habitual. What had happened to him? The night was a blurred memory; he couldn't immediately remember what he had done, but the hangover itself seemed to explain that. He felt wasted, guilty of the crime he had so often condemned.

His tongue was swollen when he moved it and opened his lips: dry, as though coated with sand, or a clinging dust. He thought of water and rolled from his stomach onto his right side, facing the nightstand he had recognized as the Jordans', and then onto his back--

and onto a sharp object that turned his head in an instant recollection confirmed by the form lying beside him. He rolled back onto his side, arching away from . . . Maggie, he remembered . . . from Maggie's elbow. He collapsed onto his stomach and buried his face in the pillow. Oh my God, my God, he thought. He raised his head and watched her stir awake. What have I done: My God. The recent sense of guilt bloomed fully now as the girl raised her head from the pillow, apparently remembered where she was, and turned to face him.

"Morning, C.B."

He could say nothing as she raised her body from the bed to turn toward him. The sheet fell back from her shoulder, revealing a bare breast. She pulled the sheet up as she turned but not before he thought again: Oh my God. He was in bed with a nude woman, nude at least from the waist up. He slowly inspected his own body with his hands--he was naked. He thought of his long pajamas; they must still be hanging in the closet. He was naked in bed with a stripper he had brought home from a bar. It read like a criminal charge. What had happened after they were here? He thought of Marian and stopped thinking.

"How ya feel?" She threw her head back as she asked the question; her long black hair fell over her sheet-covered shoulder. She grinned at him as if he owned him now, as if this secret they shared put her in control. He couldn't answer.

"Ah, hungover. I'll bet it's a first for you, C.B." How did she know? "Let me get you something for it." She threw back the covers and sat up. Bare breasts again; for a second he could see only two

supple cones of flesh, as she stretched her arms toward the ceiling and shook her shoulders in a waking dance; her breasts swayed to mock him, and he had to close his eyes. They opened when she moved in bed, swinging her feet to the floor. She was partially clothed--bright yellow panties. She found his robe in the closet and slipped it over her shoulders, its red contrasting with the yellow panties. She smiled at him and left the room. If only he could remember what had happened. The bar--drinking with Virgil--Virgil--a yellow bed frame. But nothing else. A twisting inside sent him stumbling to the bathroom. His head reeled, but his stomach resettled before he reached the toilet and he only sat down to rest. He washed his face at the sink before returning to bed and remembered to get his pajama bottoms from the closet.

Maggie came back as he was pulling the covers up. "This will help, C.B." She set the tray on his lap when he sat up and then arranged the two pillows behind him. On the tray were a coffeepot and a cup and saucer. She filled the cup and set the pot on the nightstand.

"Drink the coffee, and I'll fix breakfast. Cream or sugar?" He shook his head. "Juice'd be good for you, but I can't find any." She turned, and he watched his robe trail from the room. He tasted the coffee. It was good, strong. God, what would he do now? His hand moved to his forehead and down to his chest before he could stop it. He couldn't mean that. It would be either meaningless or sacrilegious. Meaningless. Marian came into his mind, but he pushed her away.

He had finished his second cup of coffee before Maggie returned.

"Do you want to eat in bed or come to the table?"

"I don't know if I can eat anything." His stomach was quiet for now. No sense in disturbing it.

"Food'll be good for you," she said. He thought a second and then lowered his feet to the floor, conscious that she watched him. The pajamas suddenly embarrassed him, but she said nothing about them. He started to look for his robe, remembered that she was wearing it, and smiled at her awkwardly as though she were reading his mind. She led him through the kitchen to the big table in the glassed-in dining room. "Sit down," she said, "and I'll bring your breakfast." She was back from the kitchen almost before he was seated, set down a large plate of eggs and a smaller one of sausage, went back to the kitchen, and returned with a plate of toast. She took the seat across from him. The girl surprised him. He would never have suspected that he might get this treatment from her type. The good breakfast, the neatly set table, reminded him of something or someone, but his head wasn't clear and he couldn't make any connection. After the first bite he ate hungrily, and the thought was forgotten.

The food was good, and conversation sparse, until Maggie spread jelly on a piece of toast and offered it to him. Without knowing why, he hesitated almost imperceptibly before taking the bread. The toast worked almost as a talisman; he immediately felt free to talk.

"What happened last night?"

"You had a little too much to drink, that's all. Roy asked me to make sure you got home safely. Or do you mean after we got here?"

He felt his face grow hot. "No, no--at the bar."

"That's all. You were very sweet when you spoke to me. Very polite. So when Roy asked, I was delighted to help you. After all, it was a little selfish, too. I needed a place to stay."

"And after we got here . . . ?" He felt his face flare again.

"You were very sweet again. I helped you get undressed and into bed. You started to get romantic but finally went to sleep." He was both embarrassed and relieved. "I was going to sleep in one of the other rooms," she continued, "because of your wife, but when you called me by her name I decided you needed the company."

"By her name?"

"Marian--am I wrong?"

"No. Marian." He grew silent as Marian came again into his mind with her name, as though invoked. A peacefulness enveloped him, a contentment as he looked at Maggie. He no longer felt any guilt about what had happened. It was as though Marian had given approval.

"Later," Maggie said, "you must have dreamed about her. You kept calling her name. And there was something about an abbot." The dream flashed again in his mind: brown robes bent before Marian's whiteness, kneeling . . . that was all he could recall.

"Do you remember the dream?" Maggie asked.

"No."

"I had to stay here or somewhere. I got into a fight with my boyfriend and couldn't go home."

"Why?"

"Why'd we fight, or why couldn't I go home?"

"Both."

"He's very jealous. I was dancing at The Buoy when we met, and he made me quit. A lot of the girls would jump at the chance, but I like the work. I kinda missed the place, so I got him to take me down there last night. He didn't want to, but I threatened to leave him if he didn't let me go. When he started drinking too much, we fought again. He's mean then. Gets jealous. He wanted to beat you up, but I talked him out of starting a fight. He fights a lot and almost killed a man for helping me with a package one time. Even beat me once, too."

"Why stay with him?"

"Easier than trying to leave. He was nice at first, but now I'm afraid of him. Roy could protect me at work, but what happens when I go home by myself?"

"Couldn't you go to the police?"

"Roy offered to get me police protection. But to do that I'd have to prove that Bill threatened me. I'd have to swear in court, and I don't want anything to do with police or courts. I don't trust them. I've been in trouble with the police before."

"Where was Bill when we left?"

"Roy had run him off. He knows Roy has a lot of pull in town, especially with the cops, and he's afraid to cross him in the bar. But I had the cabbie drive around a while to make sure we weren't followed."

He watched the girl's face relax as she talked. An innocence seemed

to shine through, as though for a few moments she were more girl than woman. Perhaps it helped her to tell him her troubles, but how could there be any innocence in a person who lived as she did? She shed her clothes for strangers, perhaps prostituted herself more than symbolically. He looked at her without saying anything. She had brushed her long dark hair, and it curled over her shoulders; one strand fell against her cheek when she leaned forward for a piece of toast. She was no child. A woman sat across from him. But maybe that didn't deny the moment of innocence. He thought of the breakfast she had prepared without having to, of the table she had set neatly. He looked intently at her face, as though hunting for something. For the first time he could remember, he was uncertain of the grounds of judgment. The things she may have done were less real for the moment, distant, less important than the pretty girl across the table. This woman, this beautiful woman.

Maggie asked if he wanted more coffee and brought the pot from the kitchen. She must have plugged it in when it was brought from the bedroom because the coffee was hot. He felt more comfortable after the meal--or after the talk. He helped clear the table, showered when she was washing the dishes, and then relaxed in the sun on the small patio while she bathed and dressed. She joined him, and they sat in the sun and talked. He was curious about her but didn't pry. The talk was casual, not very revealing, but he didn't really care. He was satisfied to sit in the clear bright light of the sun, at rest. It occurred to him that the persistent headache hadn't struck him today.

He was grateful.

"Would you like to go to the beach?" Maggie asked after a while.

"Is it warm enough?"

"Oh yes. It's warm here, and the beach sand's white crystal--not like most sand--and it reflects the sun even more. There'll be people over there now. Not too many maybe, but it's warm enough unless you go in the water. Then when you come out, it's cool--until you dry. You can find deserted stretches of beach and really be alone. Only the surfers and the skiers go swimming much now, but it's nice just to lie on the sand."

"Okay. I'll call a cab. But what about your boyfriend? Will he be looking for you?"

"I forgot," she cried. "My bathing suit's at the apartment. I can't go back there."

He was silent a second. "I guess I could take you by to get it. Or buy you another one."

"No. I'd better not." She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at him. "I won't have time. I'll have to see Roy about going back to work. And Bill might be looking for me. I don't want to get you any more involved." She looked at his wrist. "What time is it?"

He checked his watch. "Just after noon."

"Roy'll be at the bar now. I can go there. He'll advance me money for an apartment."

"What about your boyfriend?"

"I don't know yet, but Roy'll think of something." She started

to get up from the chair. "I'd better call a taxi."

"He thought of the boyfriend lurking near the bar, waiting. It wouldn't be a good idea for her to go alone. But he couldn't go. No.

"I'll call," he said, guilty in his own mind because he wasn't going with her.

After he had called and was heading back out to the patio, he stopped at the back door to watch Maggie. She was relaxed on a lounge chair, obviously enjoying the sun, and had placed her jacket on a nearby chair. Her blouse was loose at the throat. How old was she? Twenty-five? Twenty-six? Barely a woman. She seemed to have been cheated to be caught in this kind of life. What a waste, he thought. Her long legs looked elegant from this distance; stretched out on the reclining chair, she could have been a young woman only two or three years out of college. No life for someone like that. He would like to help her. How? He thought of riding with her to the bar. No, that might be dangerous. Some other way. He couldn't think of anything else.

They talked for about five minutes until the taxi came. She stood and picked up her jacket.

"Thanks for the place to stay."

"That's okay."

"Maybe you'll be down at The Buoy.?"

"Probably. I'll buy you a drink."

"I'd like that." She took a step toward the gate, then turned back. "You're a nice man, C.B." She walked quickly through the gate.

"Wait," he called after a second. "I'll go with you." What am I

saying? he thought. But it would be all right. She looked at him over the shrub-lined fence.

"You don't have to."

"It won't be any problem. Let me lock up." He caught up with her before she got to the taxi.

By the time they reached The Buoy, he was so nervous he couldn't talk. The sunlight had become a glare--spattering off everything he saw--punishing his eyes. In this coastal town the piercing rays were brilliant, as though designed to illuminate secrets hidden from the light elsewhere. There are certainly people at the beach now, he thought. I should have insisted we go. He was crazy getting involved. Roy would help her. And what could he himself do? Nothing.

The thought of Roy turned his mind into another path, and he pondered on what in his drunken state he had told Roy last night. Drunk, he might have said anything. I'd better find out, he thought.

The taxi pulled up to the curb in front of the bar; he paid the driver and followed Maggie from the automobile. Before he had straightened, she cried out, "Oh no, Bill's here." He saw the tall, younger man who had been with Maggie last night coming toward them. He was dressed in the same clothes, and the same belligerence was in his eyes and mouth.

"Where'd you spend the night?" Hoarse with anger, he reached for the girl's wrist, caught her before she could pull away, twisted. She cried out.

"You don't own me. None, oh, none of your business."

"You'll think I own you 'fore I'm through with you and your customer."

The man's bloodshot eyes made him appear mad.

"Customer? Maggie just helped me get home--Roy asked her to." He was ashamed to hear a tone of apology in his voice.

"How much'd you get this time, slut?" Bill twisted her arm again. The words this time rang in C.B.'s ears.

"Stop. Please--you're hurting me," Maggie pleaded for Bill to stop, sounding both angry and about to cry, but it seemed only to anger Bill more. Without releasing her, he swung around to C.B.

"I'll teach you to hang around my girl."

C.B. was going to speak in his own defense, to say something, but a fist came from nowhere to smash his lips against his teeth. He fell back and again tried to speak, but the younger man had moved quickly after him and drove a fist into his stomach before he regained his balance. He doubled over from the pain, his wind rushing from him, and started to fall, but Bill grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up.

"Get out of here before I call the police." It was Roy. He pulled C.B. away from the younger man who had been ready to hit him again. "Stay away from here," Roy said.

"She's my girl, and nobody else touches her." Bill stepped back, glaring.

"She's not yours. She's not anybody's," Roy said. "Go on, or I'll call the police." Bill reluctantly started away, obviously still angry.

Roy and Maggie helped hold C.B. up and guided him inside. She was favoring the arm that had been twisted, and as he listened to their

apologies, he thought that he should apologize if anyone should. He'd been no help. Afraid. Always afraid. He wanted to explain that he had never fought. Never, even as a boy. Afraid. They led him to a chair, and Roy went to the bar for a drink.

"Take this. It'll help." He offered C.B. a glass.

As C.B. took a swallow of the sharp, biting liquor, Virgil came in. He called to them as he got a beer from the cooler.

"What happened here?"

C.B. wiped his face with his handkerchief and dabbed at his mouth. There was a dark stain on the white cloth when he pulled it away. Maggie explained to Virgil.

"That damn Bill was waiting for me here and jumped C.B." She was massaging her wrist and forearm. "Roy, I want to come back to work, but I'm afraid. I've got to get him to let me alone, or I'll have to leave town. Or go back with him, and I'd leave town before I'd do that."

"I'll get the police to give him a warning," Roy said. "You could swear that he hurt you, and they'll put a peace bond on him."

"Couldn't it be handled without me going to the police? I can't do that."

"I think you'd have to testify against him yourself. Otherwise they can't do much. He hurt you--they could pick him up."

"No. I won't go near the cops. Isn't there any other way?"

"C.B. could file an assault and battery charge," Virgil said.

"Maggie doesn't have to do anything."

No, he thought. He started to speak, but Roy broke in.

"I think we should keep C.B. out of this. Don't get him involved with the law. He's had enough problems lately." Silently, C.B. thanked Roy. But the thought stabbed at him that Roy knew.

They discussed the matter for several minutes before Virgil said, "Hey, I've got it. We can fix him so he can't get anywhere near Maggie. He won't even be able to stay in the area." He raised his camera and smiled. "You may have to get hit once or twice, but Bill would never bother you again. Would you be willing?"

"To do what?" Maggie was interested, despite the threat of some discomfort. "As long as there isn't any great danger, I'm game. I've been hit before. Once more wouldn't kill me."

Don't jinx yourself, Maggie, C.B. found himself thinking. This time, this time--he remembered Bill's words.

"It's easy. We just set it up so you're with Bill somewhere I can see him without him seeing me. You get him angry enough to hit you, and I get pictures of him doing it. Roy can get them kept quiet and very safe in the police files, and you wouldn't have to go near the law after I print the film so they can't identify you. Any of a hundred girls could swear that Bill struck them. He'd have to leave the state for good. The pictures would be in the files just waiting for him to come back."

"What's to stop him from beating me to death and taking the camera away from you?"

"With two of us there, he'd stop. We could do it on the beach. You lure him out there to a spot where a couple of us could hide on

one of the dunes. We'd pick a landmark you'd know so you know where to go. After he's hit you once or twice, and I've got the pictures, we simply jump up and start shouting that we've got the shots."

"I don't know," she said. "Bill's crazy." She looked at Virgil and then Roy. "There'd be two of you there? Will you help, Roy?"

"I don't think Roy should," Virgil said.

"Why not?"

"It can't look like an accidental photograph if he files the complaint about one of his girls being beaten up while he just happened to be taking pictures on the beach. Besides, he's no camera bug--I am."

C.B. could feel them all turn to look at him. He didn't raise his eyes from the table.

"Are you willing, C.B.?" Virgil asked.

He looked at Maggie. This time. He didn't want to think about this now. He had to talk to Roy to find out what he'd said last night. He wanted to pull away from this. The darkness of the bar was no help this time. He couldn't hide, even here. It's not really black, he thought. The light that poured in the open front door didn't fall directly on them but seemed to loosen a spreading river of sunlight that gave a peculiar yellow tint to the air. As he watched Maggie's face in the odd twilight, he remembered her handing him toast with jelly spread on it.

He nodded, "I'll help."

Maggie didn't seem happy. She moved her shoulders a bit once and

rose from the table.

"I guess I'd better go find Bill and pretend to make it up to him. Somehow I'll get him to take me to the beach tomorrow morning."

"How?" C.B. asked. She just smiled at him. She didn't seem a child now.

Roy spoke up. "I'll drive you home so Bill won't hurt you."

"That's a good idea," Virgil said. "But if we're going to do this tomorrow, let's get the plan set now. I know the perfect marker to use, one you can't miss."

When Maggie sat down again, they seemed to lean closer together in a conspiracy from which he wanted to be excluded, and deep within his skull he felt the first shooting flicker pain. He would need to ask Roy for some aspirin.

CHAPTER TWELVE

He hadn't been able to talk to Roy. Once he'd tried to ask the round-faced barman what had been said the night before but couldn't. He had stared at that wrinkled face while they formed today's plans, wondering what secrets lay behind the red skin. He was certain Roy knew something and was equally certain that he must discover what, but when the time to ask came as they stood together at the door of The Buoy, apart from the others waiting for them outside, he'd been able to ask . . . nothing. Not aloud; silently he'd begged a reassurance that lined face seemed to give, but he still didn't really know what secrets had been revealed.

He looked at the white sand curling over the toes of his shoes. How had he gotten here? The recessed summit of the dune permitted him to crouch unseen behind the small mounds of white sand that formed the rim of the cavity; their tufts of coarse vegetation effectively hid him. No one would see him unless he stood erect, unless he chose to be seen.

They had driven from town over two bridges, had paid a small toll at the second to cross to the island. He clearly remembered stepping from the car, walking down the road perhaps half a mile, climbing the white dune. The sand had squeaked beneath his leather soles. But why was he here, crouching beside a young stranger, hiding from a man even more a stranger? What business was it of his to help this girl, a woman who perhaps didn't deserve help? Perplexed, irritated, he

shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The fine white sand didn't pack, and his feet had sunk into it when he left the road. It curled around the edges of his shoes now, found its way into one, perhaps into his cuffs. It seemed to work into the crevices of his clothing until it would cover his body. He wouldn't want to be buried in this sand. It would seep into his coffin, trickle into his nostrils, filter through until it filled his skull with its white granules. The image of white grains reminded him of aspirin. He had already discovered that he had none with him and that Virgil had none. He needed some badly, for his headache, which had not ceased since its return yesterday, was worsening.

He looked at the cross. What did he owe them? Why stay? If there were trouble, he would be no help. Still weak from his injury, his grief. He looked at the white stone cross. How long had he been in this town? Atlanta seemed buried years past; he was old, suddenly, now, and would be no help. He looked at the white cross that rose from the peak of the next dune, towering above them hidden there. Why here? The cross was the most obvious landmark he'd seen, but to lay a trap beneath a cross seemed bad luck. The giant white stone could have grown from the sand, an extension of the dune. He had forgotten to ask why it was here, he thought. Couldn't now. Silence. Perhaps the cross commemorated someone buried here. Buried in this sand, this clinging sand. He thought again of the sand seeping through his head, and the fear knotted inside him and was cold in his stomach.

The slender figure beside him looked younger, smaller than he

really was, squatting in the position he'd taken close to the lip of the dune so he could see the road clearly. When they came, Virgil would see them first. They won't come, though. Too much to expect.

Virgil, in his white jeans, perhaps the same pair he'd worn that night in The Buoy, had slung a camera under his right arm with a strap around his neck. The telephoto lens looked awkward, the wrong size and shape. But everything was out of balance now, and again he asked himself: What was he doing here?

"This can't work," he finally whispered to Virgil. "They won't come. She won't be able to talk him into coming; he'll get suspicious. It's a waste of time."

"No," Virgil said. "Maggie's got her ways. She's a smart little hooker. He'll come. She'll talk him into it. She could talk anybody into almost anything. And when he sees the two of us and the camera, he'll run and keep running. He can't afford trouble with the local cops again. Just don't worry."

She didn't talk me into this, he thought. He wasn't doing this for her. Why then? Maybe it was for her. He remembered the sheet falling from her shoulder in bed. Supple, bending body. For the first time he remembered the subtle tones in her skin, her breasts swaying slightly. Was that it? No, he said, no. Why? He whispered again, "I hope you're right. I just feel I'm playing somebody else's game."

"It's our game," Virgil said in a normal tone. "You wanted to help her. Now, I'm just here because I enjoy it. It really is a game, you see. We'll outwit the bastard, and no one'll get hurt --

not seriously. That's the fun part. But we've got to do it right. When she gets him mad enough--and that should be easy--he'll hit her again. Then I'll get the picture. The camera's the insurance. Maggie'll be free, you'll get revenge for that beating, and I'll have fun playing the game. Maybe, someday, I'll get a story out of it, too."

"How can you feel that confident? I've got to admit I'm scared." He wasn't relieved for saying it. Funny, it's supposed to help, he thought. Maybe he was too frightened.

"Forget it." Virgil was going to say more but suddenly raised his hand. A car's engine came closer, slowed, stopped. Virgil motioned for him to come forward. "It's them."

C.B. tried to force his body even lower and inched forward. Soon he could see the very people he didn't want to see. They'd come. Somehow she had lured Bill to the proper spot. Bill looked shorter than he remembered, but that was probably an effect of the elevation, since he was obviously inches taller than Maggie. She wore a bathing suit, a skimpy, white two-piece that would have hidden little of her body from any viewer on the beach--from the height of the dune, the top seemed even less . . . decent. Bill, carrying what looked to be a blanket, wore beach clothes, shorts and a knit shirt. Heavy muscles. The street clothes had hidden those. His skin was dark against the white sand and made his hair seem blonder. A good-looking fellow, C.B. admitted. But dangerous. Even from this distance, he could sense a petulance and arrogance that seemed to determine the man's character.

"Well they're here," he whispered. "Are you sure he'll scare that easily?"

"Sure. I'm just wondering how she'll get him to hit her."

Maggie appeared to be answering that question as it was asked. The pair had stopped walking, and Bill was spreading the blanket on the beach when Maggie suddenly shrugged her shoulder, as though in response to something said, and walked away toward the green water. Bill's words were indistinct, until he raised his voice.

"Come here." Maggie ignored the order. The knot of fear began to flower in C.B., becoming a sickness that quickly spread from some point in his middle, making his body seem heavier, more sluggish. He wanted to shift his weight from one foot to the other but seemed too stiff to move. He was in danger already, he sensed, looking over his shoulder, his head pounding as it moved. There was nothing behind him but the white sand of the dune. Virgil readied the camera and focused the long lens on the scene below. "Perfect," Virgil said, and the man on the beach simultaneously yelled again, "Come here, goddamnit."

Maggie looked back at Bill but continued walking away.

"Bitch," Bill shouted and dropped the blanket.

How brave she is, C.B. thought. She couldn't be certain that he and Virgil were hidden on the dune. Nothing was ever certain. But maybe she never questioned their vow to help; maybe she knew what men would do for her. How could she? How could she have such faith? He could only hope the action would follow the script Virgil and Roy had written. He feared the petulant face below.

When he saw Bill move smoothly after Maggie, covering the yards between them in a few quick strides, an intense sense of déjà vu turned him empty inside and made his body grow cold. An ice-like chill pricked the skin of his back when he felt that he had seen this before, that he knew what would happen next. His chest tightened, and his lungs strained to draw in enough air. It was as though they pulled in not air but the white sand, the crystalline sand that would seep into his nostrils as they buried him. He would become a ghost, as the Indians believed. His ghost would walk the earth if his burial were not proper. He heard himself gasp when Bill grabbed Maggie's shoulder and whirled her around. He thought he could feel those hands, and for a moment his thoughts stopped. A sudden urge to pray blossomed in the emptiness left by the vision.

"Oh boy," Virgil said. "This should be it. I wish we could hear better." He spoke quietly, but his voice was intense. It seemed joyous.

Maggie spun, or was spun, around to face her tormenter; Bill grabbed both her shoulders and seemed to spit his words into her face, but the words were swept away by a sudden swirling of wind from the Gulf. The scene was almost a motion picture without sound. But it was real when Maggie tried to pull away from Bill and he raised a hand to slap her. Don't, C.B. wanted to shout across those white sands, but he was uncertain whether he would be speaking to the threatening Bill or the resisting Maggie. Maybe Maggie. Maybe he wanted her to give in, to play dead. Like Marian? murmured a voice from the shadows in his head. Simultaneously Bill grabbed one of the girl's wrists, the

same one he had twisted at the bar. He bent her arm outward, and the pain was evident in her voice as they heard her cry out and saw her drop to her knees. They could hear her clearly as she begged, "Please. Let go, please," before Bill slapped her.

He felt himself shrinking as Virgil whispered, "Good. One more time." The camera had begun to click at the raised hand and continued to make its faint, quick noises. "If he hits her once more, we've got him," Virgil said louder, advancing the film in the camera.

We should have him already, C.B. thought. Someone should. His knees were weak; he couldn't rise. He knew that he was afraid and wanted to call for help. This was beyond him. God, stop that man, he muttered as Maggie fell to her knees from another blow. He'll kill her. He's got to be stopped. He shot a look at Virgil, but the younger man was fixedly staring at the drama through the lens of his camera. Click, click. He snapped another shot of Bill hitting Maggie in the face as she said something. He slapped her twice more, and they heard the loud clap of his palm against her flesh. She fell to the ground but struggled up immediately.

C.B. was on his feet, unaware that he had risen, shouting to draw attention. "We've got pictures. Photographs. We're going to the police." But Bill swung a closed fist at Maggie again, knocking her to the sand once more, then pulling her up before she could have raised herself. The fist poised above her again, fell again. "Virgil, Virgil." He tried to pull Virgil erect to reveal the camera and the reporter came to his feet but moved away, staring again through the

camera, quickly advancing the film. The beating didn't stop, and no one seemed to hear his cries, to hear him shout again, this time only an inarticulate noise, as he tried to turn Bill's head. The aggressor seemed deaf, and his hand fell again and again. Maggie scarcely struggled as Bill picked her up to shake her, then knock her down again.

The sand squeaked. His feet pushed his body forward. He seemed lost in the white crystals, sinking. Oh, God, he thought once, and the word moved in his chest, becoming a cry of "Please, God" as he almost fell over the lip of the dune, crying again, "Oh God." The hand rose and fell, and his feet moved him faster now, toward the hand that raised again, hung in the air like an ax, falling slowly like an ax, falling onto the girl's face as the other hand held her body for yet another blow. Screaming, he felt his angular body fold and unfold with each step as he cried, "Stop, stop him," his feet forcing against the white sand that would trickle into his nose, would fill his head with its whiteness, its dry shimmer; the figures of Bill and Maggie grew larger, nearer, but the taller, younger, stronger man still seemed unaware that anyone else existed in his world, unaware that someone was running across the white dunes, across the beach that would fill his nostrils and stop his head with its fine powder. One hand held the limp girl's throat; as the other chopped at her face, C.B. raised his frail arm to throw his weakness at the man who was killing this girl, who would kill him. Stop him, God, please he thought as he swung his fist, I promise, and he didn't know that he was

crying, didn't feel his wrist strike the man's shoulder, his fist lightly glance off the dark cheek. In slow motion, a surprised face turned to him

. . . the sky was blue, and the pain in his chest burned viciously. He wondered why he was staring at the sky until he saw a blond giant leap toward him, one foot, covered by a brown loafer, stretching backwards, and he knew he was to be kicked again; he rolled this time, knowing where he was and why, and the foot just grazed him, adding to his roll; he came to his hands and knees; he tried to rise, to make his body work; he turned his head and saw the foot coming again. Only the pain in the shoulder told him that he had been kicked once more. He struggled to his feet. This time he saw the fist before it hit him, and knew, this time, why he was staring at the blue sky, the sand that would fill his nostrils now pillowing his head, in his hair, in one eye, blinding him as he turned his head to protect it; thinking, I'll die, Marian, I'll die; turning his face into the sand without thinking now of protection, but of hiding his blindness. He wanted to cry. He wanted to cry because he couldn't save the girl: Marian, I failed, she'll die--God's will be done: he had tried, God's will be done, God'swillbedone. The sob in his throat was the only prayer that came to his mind finally. He wanted to pray. To God. To Marian. God'swillbedone. He would die with that sob in his throat.

But the kicking had stopped. He hadn't been kicked again; there was a sudden grunt and the sound of something heavy hitting flesh. He tried to cover his face with his arms as he moved his head. He heard

the thud again but couldn't see clearly; at last, the blur became Virgil brandishing a thick piece of wood and standing over a body stretched on the sand. He knew that he would live and wanted to rise to his knees on the white sand to both cry and pray. A bright image rose in his mind, and he heard himself saying in the cavern of his skull, "Holy Mother? Holy Mother?" as he had cried as a child, "Holy Mother?" The bright image became clear and turned her face to him. Marian? he thought. He heard the words of his question again, and he said them twice before he realized what words they were, what the words meant. No. Confused, he grew silent. No.

But the tears had begun to wash the sand from his eyes, and he could see again.

They were inside when he arrived. He told the driver to wait and walked through the open door into the dark cavern. It smelled stale. They were waiting at the bar.

"Here he is," Cranston said cheerfully. "How do you feel now?"

"Better. The puffiness will be gone in a week or so, the doctor said."

"What will you tell them in Atlanta?" Virgil asked. "You don't want to get a reputation as a beach brawler."

"No, I don't want any publicity about this. I'll just make up a story--probably a mugging. Out of town--to save your reputation as a peaceful resort. Don't worry about me. Any word about Maggie?"

"Yeah," Roy said. "She's gone. Left town and me with the doctor

bill. She'll get a job in some other bar somewhere."

"Didn't you tell her she's safe? Bill knows what'll happen if he comes back."

"I told her; so did Andy. But she just wanted to get away, I guess. Scared still."

They were silent for a minute. Roy got him a beer. He took a swallow, set the bottle down, looked at that cryptic, round face. He wanted to ask: What do you know? What did I say? But first there was another question.

"That old man I was looking for--any word?"

Roy shook his head. "Not yet, but he'll be around. I'll get him some help if you still want."

"I do. If there's any cost"

"Probably not. I'll make sure he gets to the public health people."

"Okay. But keep me posted, okay?" Roy nodded. "And if there are any expenses, I'll cover them."

Roy smiled and nodded again. For a minute nothing was said.

"What now?" Cranston asked.

"I told the cab to wait. The plane leaves in about forty-five minutes." He could see Roy watching him.

After another pause, Cranston again broke the silence. "It's been interesting."

He said nothing to that. "If you get to Atlanta, I'm easy to find," he said to them all but looking at Cranston. "If you ever need help, I'm available. You may want to move to another newspaper."

Cranston nodded, and C.B. added. "You too, Virgil."

"Got any special plans when you get home?" It was Roy. Roy knew. I must have told him. What now? Is this secret safe? He stared at the bartender for a clue. Roy looked older in the filtered sunlight that gave the bar a sulphur-yellow tint. He could see nothing in Roy's face. Did he know?

"Anything special?" Roy's face appeared very different for a moment, concerned. He looked at that puzzling face for a second longer, holding his silence as though it were precious. They seemed to be sharing a secret, one that worried Roy.

"I don't know. I've got a lot to think about, so I'll just rest for a week or two before I go back to the paper." He felt that he was almost teasing Roy; that wasn't what the question had asked.

"You feel ready to work?"

"I've got to see some people first. There are some people I've got to talk to before I can do anything." Roy's face may have relaxed. A faint smile seemed to have played across his lips. Why would he smile?

"You're looking better," Cranston said. "You look a lot stronger than you should."

"It's funny, but I feel that way, too. My headache seems to have gone."

"You look more sure of yourself, maybe more certain of things than when you came down."

"More certain of things," C.B. repeated as though he were saying

the phrase to find how it sounded. "Maybe. Yes, maybe. Very peaceful, at least. I do feel peaceful. Perhaps the sun and salt air?" He smiled at his own joke.

"Well, good luck," Cranston said. He shook Cranston's hand, then Roy's, and then Virgil's. "Good luck," Virgil said. He looked at Roy and knew that he was safe.

"Luck may not have anything to do with it," C.B. said without knowing why. He nodded his goodbye. They walked him to the door, remaining just inside as he stepped into the bright sunlight. They waved as he was getting into the waiting taxi, and he waved back and then directed the driver to the airport. When he looked back at the bar, the doorway was empty; he couldn't see into the darkness beyond. His mind turned to the sunlight, the flight ahead, and the red-faced Father Donovan who would be waiting for his plane in Atlanta.