

PAPA SNIGGLY, AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis

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Master of Arts

by
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To

S. N. Karchmer, who taught me
so much, but above all else
patience, I dedicate this
meagre collection.

FOREWORD

Not that it really matters, but what follows is purely fictitious. Any resemblance between actual persons or events and those in the stories is coincidental or the paranoia of the reader. Yet these stories received their impetus from the need to give form to the essence of experiences and observations of a critical stage in my life. I am indebted to Professor S. N. Karchmer, Dr. Terrell Dixon and Dr. Martha Palmer Harper, whose advice proved more than helpful to making the transition from essence to form. Of greater importance, however, is their concern for my future development. This encouragement is indispensable to a young writer.

PREFACE

An author's weltanschauung must necessarily bind any collection of his stories into a semi-cohesive unit. It is only semi-cohesive since the technical aspects of plot, setting, character and time are often so dissimilar that the thematic similarities often remain unclear or just mere threads that hold the stories together. To effect a cohesive collection, one or more of these technical aspects of fiction must be maintained with some consistency throughout the stories. It stands to reason, therefore, that the more of these elements that are adhered to in a collection, the more cohesive the collection becomes. Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio provides a case in point. Set in one locale and developing one group of characters, Anderson weaves a tapestry of his home town that approaches novelistic unity because the collection is focused through the use of setting and character. Yet each story retains its integrity. This focusing of a collection of stories coupled with the retention of their individual integrity is my intention in Papa Sniggly, and Other Stories.

I use the groping of adolescents to break through illusion to effect an authentic human contact as the basic framing device for the six stories in the collection. The focal point of each individual story is that moment of contact or the moment of refusal of contact. To reach this moment of contact, the characters must shed their

illusions, even if this is but momentary. This epiphanic concept is an essential elemental of twentieth century fiction; it is evident in the works of James Joyce, William Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson, as well as in more contemporary writers such as J. D. Salinger, John Knowles, William Goldman and John Fowles.

To focus this theme, I maintain, to varying degrees, certain constants with respect to time, place, plot and character. As concerns time, the fact that the characters of the stories are all teenagers produces a loose unity of time. The action of the stories, in fact, occurs within a time span of roughly six years, though this is never explicitly stated. Moreover, the implied era of the stories is the sixties. Like time in the stories, setting is also implicit. We learn that the central locale is a fictitious community, Red Creek, that lies southeast of Houston, only through the narrative action; we are never told. But these two loose unities result from a more laborious concentration on the aspects of plot and character.

These two technical aspects constitute the major cohesive elements of the collection. In terms of plot, two focusing factors are utilized: 1) a scenic repetition that contrasts different characters in similar situations; and 2) a fragmented or scenic development, as opposed to a constant flowing development, of characters. As noted, the development concerns itself more with character than plot. That is to say, each story acts as an independent unit of action; there is no direct cause and effect relationship between the narrative action of the six stories, though what happens to a character in one

story may reflect in some way on his actions in a later story. Furthermore, the significance of the characters changes from story to story: a character who is the protagonist of one story becomes a minor character in another. The effect is similar to a movie composed of scenes between which there are no direct narrative connections, and which are filmed from varying perspectives.

Clearly then, character is the most cohesive element of the collection. Four characters dominate the action of the six stories, each appearing in at least two stories and one (Sniggy) in five: "Papa Sniggly" examines the special relationship a thirteen year old boy, Sniggy, has with his grandfather; "Lyre" and "Liar" deal with Sniggy's relationship with an habitual liar, Abe; "Hall of Fame" centers around a high school quarterback, Sammy, who sees his chance for fame slip through his fingers because of Sniggy's miscue and Sammy's subsequent understanding of Sniggy; with "You Know, With Eddy What's-His-Name," we see Sammy develop a friendship with a girl he initially finds repulsive; the final story, "Follies," deals with a college freshman, Seymour, who confuses fantasy and reality. Though four characters dominate the above mentioned stories, they may be pigeonholed into three basic categories: 1) the leader-seeker (Sniggy); 2) the dreamer (Sammy and Seymour); and 3) the teacher (Abe and Papa Sniggly). While Sniggy remains the dominant character, a balance exists between the types of characters. The juxtaposition of this dominance of one character and the balance of types is designed to create a greater sense of unity while intensifying the focus of

the theme.

"Follies" becomes the target of this focusing process of the collection. Seymour and Sniggy are on their own; in terms of types, the leader-seeker and the dreamer no longer are under the direct influence of the teacher. Not only is the illusion-epiphany theme more clearly manifested in the protagonist, Seymour, but the dominant character, Sniggy, is seen in a new light, and this reflects back on the first story of the collection, "Papa Sniggly."

Ultimately, the stories must stand by themselves, for it is a collection of stories and not a novel. But a story need not always remain isolated, as seems the common attitude toward this form of fiction today. What follows is an attempt to broaden the scope of the short story: bringing together six individual, yet mutually cohesive, stories by adhering to a loose unity of time, place, plot and character.

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I. PAPA SNIGGLY

Papa Sniggly was not my father; I just called him that. Everyone did. Actually he was my grandfather.

He was tall, six-two, with a barrel body. One of those Clark Gable moustaches lined his upper lip in gray. If you looked hard enough, you could make out his faint limp. But his most characteristic feature was the crooked pipe that always stuck out of his mouth. That's the way I always picture him, with that pipe clenched between his teeth. I don't ever remember him without it, although I'm sure he smoked cigarettes, too. There were always the compressed remains of Camels or Lucky Strikes in his ashtray. And no one else dared to use it.

That ashtray was one of his World War I relics and he guarded it with his life. Papa Sniggly never elaborated on its history other than to say it was "from The War, that's WWI." But it must've had a grand one.

It stood three feet high, was constructed from old airplane parts and the whole thing was silver-plated. Its long shaft once volleyed thirty-five caliber slugs. Next came several unrecognizable engine parts, on top of which two feet of chopped-off propeller was mounted. The hub of the prop functioned as the receptacle and a single hole was drilled in each blade stub. These held the pipes when not in use.

All of this was stuck on a wheel which acted as the base.

Every time I saw it, I thought, it must have cost a fortune to plate that thing.

So, I sat staring at that silver marvel contemplating its price and wondering whether or not it should have been buried with him. Mom would have been horrified by the idea. But maybe it would keep him a little warmer on rainy December days.

This all sounds a bit morbid, but I was feeling a bit morbid. After all, I had just watched Papa Sniggly being planted in a seeping drizzle. I'd lost my best friend.

I'm sure this sounds cornbally. I mean a thirteen year old guy and an eighty-three year old man being best friends. But we were.

"Come here, Sniggy." Papa Sniggly had loved to call me that because he knew that Mom insisted on Zachariah. "How old are you now? Twelve?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's old enough." He threw suspicious glances around to make sure we were alone.

"Old enough for what?"

He took the other pipe from the tray. It was identical to his. But he never smoked it, although he did clean it. Packing the bowl with Prince Albert, Papa Sniggly handed it to me.

"Here you go."

"For me?" I imitated his glances.

Papa Sniggly lit a match and instructed me to draw on the pipe.

I sucked away.

"That's it. Good." Billows of smoke rose before me. "You'll have to stoke it." He tamped it with the burnt match. "And cup your fingers over the bowl. It'll draw better that way."

We both stood there grinning like second graders and puffing away.

Right then I realized we were best friends. That was in November, the day after my birthday. We repeated the ritual every chance we got, smoking and playing coon-can and dominoes.

Around Thanksgiving, a year later, Papa Sniggly went to the hospital for tests. Lung cancer, the doctors said. That was the end of the clandestine pipe smoking, except for that last day. . . .

We had it all planned.

I pocketed the pipes, tobacco and matches in my peacoat. It was all very cloak and dagger. My heart pounded away, sending tremors down my legs and arms. I just knew Mom would catch me. However, she was too distraught to notice and I made it to the hospital without giving myself away.

Aunt Carol was there when we arrived. The three of us gathered around the bed.

"How are you, Papa Sniggly?" Mom asked.

"Fine."

"Do you feel all right?"

"Sure, Martha."

He didn't though. Weak, he looked drained and pale. But when he gazed at me, his eyes sparkled in their weary sockets.

Papa Sniggly knew I had the stuff. I stood there, grinning like crazy, bouncing on my toes. However, we had prearranged signals and we went through the motions. He flicked his finger along his nose. I flicked back.

"Well, how's my coon-can opponent?"

"All ready."

"You deal." I took the cards from a drawer and pulled a chair up to the bed.

"You're not going to play cards?"

"Why not, Mom?"

"Papa Sniggly needs to save his strength."

"Nonsense Martha. Besides, Sniggy's the only one I've got to play with."

"Zachariah. Not Sniggy," Mom countered.

"Now, Martha, you just be grateful I could fix that crazy name you gave him."

"Papa Sn---"

"Martha, you gonna stand there and argue with a sick man?" An orderly brought Papa Sniggly's lunch and left.

"Why don't you and Carol go off to lunch? Bring Sniggy back a hamburger."

Mom was flustered by now, as only Papa Sniggly could get her. After a while Aunt Carol ushered her out and we were alone.

"Let's have it."

"Wait." I crossed to the door, spied down the corridor, and shut

and locked the door behind me.

"Okay, here we go." I pulled out the contraband.

"That's a sight for sore eyes. You pack 'em, Sniggly."

When I handed Papa Sniggly his, he clamped it between his teeth. Then I lit both our pipes and we started laughing.

"Your draw," he said.

We played and shot the breeze for thirty minutes. He told me a war story. Nothing morbid. Papa Sniggly told funny ones. This one was about the time Donal, whose pipe I was smoking, and he snuck over to a nearby RAC Fighter Squadron and painted a half-dozen of their planes yellow.

"They were madder 'n wet hens. And they knew who did it too." He shook his pipe at me and chuckled.

"What'd they do to you?"

"Nothing. Wasn't nothing for 'em to do. They couldn't prove a thing. Yes, indeedy. Those yellow birds sure were a sight."

I sat entranced.

"'Captain Morely and his hens,' we called 'em."

Papa Sniggly drew the last card from the pile.

"They sure were a sight all right." He discarded it. "Looks like a tab."

That was the fourth tie in a row.

"You're still sharp, Papa Sniggly."

"You don't think I'd let down my defenses because I'm a little sick do you? Light me up again."

Just as I did there was a knocking at the door.

"Unlock this door."

"The Sargeant-Major." Papa Sniggly nodded toward the door.

"What do we do?"

"Hide the stuff. I'll take care of her," Papa Sniggly reassured me.

I crammed the tobacco and matches in one pocket of my coat that lay on the second bed, and the smouldering pipes in the other. Then I opened the door.

The short stocky day nurse barged in. "What do you mean locking this door?"

"I--"

"He's very sick. That's a dangerous--" She stopped in mid-sentence. Her nose crinkled up like a blood hound. "What have you two been up to?"

"Now, Miss Kramer, why do you want to scare a young boy like that?"

"Don't you change the subject, Papa Sniggly."

I saw the burnt matches on the nightstand. Miss Kramer did too. If her eyes had been guns we would have both been dead.

"Is that my medicine?" Papa Sniggly reached for the pills.

"Here." Miss Kramer poured a glass of water. Papa Sniggly swallowed the capsules with difficulty, drinking three-quarters of the water.

"I suggest you save some of that for the coat pocket." With that Kramer left.

I hurried to the coat and took the smoldering pipes out.

"Her bark's worse than her bite. Better empty those in the john."

I did, along with the matches.

"Come here, Sniggy."

I rehid the pipes in the coat. "What's up?"

"Open the drawer. There should be some keys in there."

"These?"

"Yeah. Bring 'em here." Papa Sniggly struggled with two short stubby ones.

"I'll do it."

"No, I got it. I got it. There." The two keys lay in his left hand. "Here." Papa Sniggly placed the keys in my hand and closed my fingers around them.

"What are they for?"

"My footlockers."

"Your war stuff?"

"That's right. I want you to have it. And the ashtray."

"The ashtray too!"

I wanted to go home and open those trunks right then. A lump grew in my throat, and I was bouncing again. But the excitement didn't last very long.

"Why?"

"Because we're best friends, and only best friends can share those things."

Mom and Aunt Carol came back and that was the end of our talk.

We stayed for a few more hours. But we never got to finish that conversation. Which was all right by Papa Sniggly. He liked things light. Papa Sniggly and I bantered as we played coon-can. All tabs.

"All right, Zachariah. It's time to leave."

"Do we haf to?"

"Papa Sniggly needs his rest."

I turned back to Papa Sniggly, hoping he'd intervene.

"Come here." He pulled me close and whispered in a tone that didn't match the words. "I don't wanna die in bed."

I buried my head in his neck.

"I gotta get out. This is no way to--"

"Be ready after dark," I whispered to cut him off, my head still nestled in the crook of his neck. I felt him smile.

"Let's go, young man," my mother broke in. "Papa Sniggly? We'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, Martha." Then to me, "See ya later."

I flicked my forefinger along my nose. Papa Sniggly returned the sign and grinned.

The seven miles home passed in silence. I hoped I'd get back to Papa Sniggly in time; I knew there wasn't much left. I resigned myself to having to return to the hospital on foot, running as much as possible. Sure I could steal the car, but they'd hear me start it up and could guess where I was going. Besides, I didn't know how to drive. So run it was. At home, I locked myself in my room, figuring that Mom would finally quit trying to get me to come out by the time

it was dark. So I sat in my room for two hours waiting, only coming out once to grab some of Papa Sniggly's clothes while my parents ate. The sun seemed to hang on the edge of the earth forever. I watched it until I couldn't stand it any longer. Then I threw Papa Sniggly's clothes and myself out the window, paratrooper style, and took off running.

It was colder now that the sun had almost set. The wind, which had kicked up with the dusk, stung my face. But running, I soon warmed up. The clothes that I carried tucked under my arm broke my natural rhythm, and I began to tire before I'd gone one mile. What had started out a sprint was now less than a jog. My legs felt like weights. I wanted to quit. It was stupid to try anyway. Even if I could run the distance, which was no sure thing, I still had to get Papa Sniggly out of the hospital. Just as I was about to pack it in and turn back, I thought of him. Not what he said so much but how he'd said it. That tone. Not crying for help. Quiet and happily insistent, that's what it was. I pushed myself on with all I had. Gasping in the cold air seared my lungs like a hot poker. But I had to make it.

I didn't notice that I'd reached the old farm road highway that passed the hospital until I recognized the crunching of gravel. That meant I had less than four miles to go. A car almost hit me as it screamed down the road 'cause I was staggering now. My feet, too heavy to pick up, shuffled through the gravel. The sun had finally let go. It was dark except for the headlights of the few cars that breezed by. My feet seemed to plow deeper into the gravel. I could

barely tell I was moving forward, so I threw my body forward for momentum. My sneakers jerked away from the gravel, but I couldn't get my legs under me in time. I stumbled, my free hand pushing at the ground like a running back who's lost his balance. The pushing veered me onto the road, flat on my face. I scraped to a stop.

My head rang with a hellacious scream. It pierced my ears from the inside out. But when I heard the metal thud, I realized it wasn't coming from my head at all. A car, its lights blinding me, sat five feet from me.

"What the hell you think you're doing, son? I could've killed you. What's the idea running around out here anyway?" A fat silhouette moved towards me. "You all right, boy?" The man knelt beside me. "Anything broken?"

"Hospital."

"What's wrong?"

"Hospital. Gotta get to--" I drew a breath "--hospital."

"Sure son," he helped me to the car, his head craning right and left, looking for witnesses, hoping there weren't any. "Where's it hurt?"

"Papa Sniggly."

"What?"

"Dying."

"Now, you don't look that bad." His face was pale.

"No. Papa Sniggly. Got to see."

I don't think he ever understood. My face was skinned up and I

was rattling on, and I guess he figured that he might get blamed for my condition. Any way he dropped me off at the side of the hospital where it was dark, so no one could place me with his car. And that suited me fine.

I found the fire exit on the other side and entered. I wandered down the hall until I got my bearings, then I bee-lined it for Papa Sniggly's room. Down the corridor from his room stood the nurse's station. All closed in with windows that started three feet from the floor. I crawled past the station and slipped into his room.

A doctor and two nurses hovered over him. I couldn't see Papa Sniggly. I just heard his hacking cough and I saw the blood that soaked the sheets and the nurses' whites.

"Papa Sniggly!"

The nurses tried to push me back, but I already had grabbed Papa Sniggly's hand. I held on for all I was worth.

"Get out of here, son."

"Nurse, get that boy out of here."

"I'm trying."

I'd never seen so much blood. It erupted from his mouth with each cough. I gripped tighter and I thought I felt Papa Sniggly return the pressure. His eyes fixed on me, staring. Not one of those dumb Hollywood glass-eyed death stares. His eyes smiled at me. A laughing smile.

"Goddammit, Kramer. Get him the hell out of here."

"Yes, doctor."

Papa Sniggly's eyes shut and his hand released mine. I let Kramer lead me outside.

II. A HALL OF FAME

Coach McGraw clasped his fatty arm around Phillips' shoulders. He surveyed the field, then turned his head towards his messenger guard. "Let's have a brokenbone, slot right, eighteen sideline." As if to help him along, McGraw pushed Phillips onto the field. "You get that, Travis?"

"Yeah." Samuel Travis penciled brokenbone, slot right, eighteen sideline on the playsheet in the clipboard he carried.

"Gotta have it, Billy," McGraw exhorted. He tugged at the waistband of his pants where his belly had ridden it down. Crossing his arms, McGraw focused his eyes on the action on the field.

The Red Creek Crimson Knights broke their huddle. Billy Martin sauntered up behind the center. It was not the saunter of a quarterback though; it was more the saunter of a runningback impersonating a quarterback, which Martin was. But since the Knights ran a wishbone offense, he filled the position better than Travis. Travis was what you would call a "classic dropback passer." Martin hunched over the center. Way too much. He looked like he was trying to whisper in the center's ear. After a quick glance down either side of his line, he barked the signals.

"Down." Martin called every play on "Go." No imagination at all. And by now the Mustang defense had figured this out.

"Go." With that command both lines shot out at each other. The collision resulted in a plastic crash of shoulder pads and helmets. Martin rolled right, but the Mustang's defensive end had not been blocked. He rushed recklessly towards Martin, who continued rolling to his right. At the last possible second, Martin cut on his left foot, exposing his left leg to the charging end. The defender lunged for it. But Martin shifted his weight to his right leg, taking away the target. The Mustang had missed. He had been given the old limp leg, a la Gale Sayers. Martin had escaped, but the timing of the play was all off. He continued to his right and looked down-field for a receiver. The split end, Walker, broke clear twenty yards downfield. Martin stopped, cocked his arm--Boom--he was blindsided by the Mustang nose-guard. The ball sputtered from his hand and tumbled out of bounds at the five. The nose-guard sprung to his feet, raising his clinched fist in a sign of triumph. Martin did not move.

The trainers ran onto the field.

"Travis!" McGraw bellowed.

"Yes, sir."

"Limber up your arm."

"Yes, sir."

Patterson flipped him a ball. Finally it was Travis' turn. After seven weeks of carrying clipboards, holding for extra points, and running a few plays when the game was in the bag, he was really going to be in a game situation. Patterson and Travis carelessly played catch. How much time's left, Travis wondered? He looked at the

scoreboard--2:05. Only down by six. Bobby Layne passed the Lions to the NFL title in '53 with that much time left. If Layne could do it, he could do it.

Travis picked up his helmet and crammed it over his ears. Patterson threw him a winged-duck-of-a-pass. He was the number three quarterback. He could carry the clipboard now; it was Travis' turn to play. It's all in the wrist, he reminded himself. Flick it. Snap it down like you were throwing a screwball. It was a loose spiral.

"Come on, Sammy. You're not concentrating," his dad had said. "Keep your eye on the target." Mr. Travis tugged at the rope and pulley contraption he had devised in the backyard. It sent a peach basket along its length at varying speeds.

Travis nodded.

"Concentrate. One-hundred per cent," he admonished. "Not half-assed. Don't ever do anything half-assed."

Bullseye.

"Atta boy," his father's voice carried from out of the mumbling stadium crowd. Travis flicked a tight spiral to Patterson and tried to pick his father out of the mob. He was standing, clapping, cheering his son on.

"You show 'em, Sammy boy."

Travis wished he wouldn't call him that. Sam or Samuel would be fine. Or just Travis. But not Sammy. Not in front of all these people. In front of her. Wimberly. If he could take the Knights in for the score that would change things. Yeah. Every girl in

school would want to wear his letter jacket, even her.

"You were great tonight," Wimberly said.

"Didn't do much." Modesty, what a great touch. But not too modest. They lose interest if you're too modest.

"Didn't do much? The way you moved the team in for the score. It was the most exciting thing I ever saw." She moved out of the shadows. Her arms were crossed under her breasts, accentuating them even more, if that were possible.

"Aren't you cold?"

She looked down at her cheerleader's dress. "A little."

"Here." He gallantly offered his letter jacket.

"But you'll be cold."

"I'll be fine."

"Thanks." She slipped into the jacket. It was way too big in the shoulders. Her fingers barely showed at the cuffs. She flipped her blonde hair over the collar. "How's that?"

"Beautiful."

"Samuel."

"Yeah."

"You can kiss me if you like." She cocked her head back slightly and closed her eyes.

He placed his hands inside the jacket. They found her waist. Should I've put them on her breasts. Don't be too modest. Don't be too aggressive either. Better kiss her before it's too late. He bent his head slowly towards hers--

"Travis!" McGraw's voice snapped his head around. Martin was on the bench now. "Bruised ribs," someone said. Travis loped over to McGraw.

"Okay, Sammy." He had never used his first name before. Travis did a double take. "You all right, kid?" He slung his fatty arm around Travis' shoulders.

"Yeah."

"Okay. Let's have a brokenbone, slot right, twelve cross."

"Right." Travis was propelled onto the field by McGraw's fatty arm. At least he didn't call a rollout. That'd be suicide. I'm probably the slowest guy in school. Including McGraw. Concentrate. One-hundred per cent. Third down and fifteen. Probably have two shots at making the first. It's too late not to go for it on fourth down.

They were huddled in their own end zone. The ball was on the five.

"All right, you guys. Listen up." Show 'em you're in control. They gotta have confidence in you. "Brokenbone, slot right, twelve cross. On--" Mix it up. Vary the count. Don't be stupid like Martin. "On hit. You got that? On hit. Ready, break." Relax and play it cool.

He stopped a yard behind the center, checked to see that the line was set, and casually walked up to the center with his shoulders purposefully slumped forward. That's how a quarterback like Namath does it. He bent his knees and firmly planted the back of his right

hand in the center's crotch. His left hand formed a hinge with the right one, heel to heel. Make sure the snap is handled carefully.

"Down. Go--"

The Mustang defensive tackle fired out, knocking his offensive counterpart, Killane, on his can.

"All right. All right." Travis clapped. This boy wasn't born yesterday. He helped Killane to his feet. "You okay, 'Goldfish'?"

"Uh-huh," Killane mumbled.

Good old 'Goldfish.' A good blocker, but not too quick on the up take. He only got a half-dollar from Sniggy for swallowing that goldfish. Miz Holt nearly killed Sniggy when she discovered he had stolen it from the biology class's aquarium. She got him suspended. Two days.

"Huddle up." The center raised his hand for the team to form around him. Laden, the other messenger guard, came in with another play.

"Brokenbone, slot left," he puffed, "thirteen sideline." Travis nodded in recognition. Just as long as McGraw doesn't make me roll-out. "Okay, listen up. Brokenbone, slot left, thirteen sideline. On down. On down. Ready, break." Relax. Make sure of the snap. Travis crouched behind the center and gave the linebackers a last minute glance to see if they might be blitzing. They were playing pass all the way, four yards off the line. Good. Concentrate. One-hundred per cent.

"Down."

The ball slapped in his hands. Travis dropped back, setting up seven yards deep. He was slow, but he had worked on those seven-yard set-ups till he seemed to cover it with one motion, looking down field the whole time. Cornerback's giving him room. Damn, that guy's loose again. The defender who had racked-up Martin charged Travis. Can't anybody block that ape? Travis stepped forward and snapped off a bullet just as Walker cut for the sideline. He never saw Walker catch it; the defensive end busted him just after he had unloaded the ball.

Travis, pinned under the defender, craned his neck to see if Walker had made the catch. From the reaction of the crowd he knew he had. Atta boy, Sniggy. Travis continued to strain to see Walker. He had gone out of bounds at the twenty. First down. The defender pulled Travis to his feet.

"Thanks," Travis said.

"Yeah," he grunted.

"Way to go, Sniggy." Travis slapped Walker's helmet.

"Good pass."

Good, Travis thought. It was perfect. It had been perfect. The whole play had not taken more than eight seconds; yet to Travis it had unfolded like slow motion. A second seemed like ten. Travis knew that when you were on, really on, everything happened in slow motion.

"Sammy," his father said, "when you got it, you'll know it."

"How?"

"You just will." His father understood Travis would not accept that answer. "It's hard to describe."

Travis waited for an explanation.

"Well," he started, "when you go into a game, you know how your blood's pumpin' through you and you feel like it's gonna shoot out of you?"

"Yeah."

"Your hands are sweatin' and your mind's trying to remember all those things you're supposed to?"

Travis nodded.

"Well, the ball's snapped and you set up. Real quick and all. Quicker even. Quicker than you've ever done it. But it all seems slow. Like a dream or like you were trying to run through jello. Only you don't get panicky. Everything just seems to happen real slow like."

Yeah. Travis did not understand then, but it was clear now.

Phillips brought in the play. Travis repeated the call, then broke the huddle with a crisp clap. They were on their own twenty, but for the first time in the half the Knights showed vague signs of life. Travis could feel it as he looked over the formation. This is it. Connect on this one, Travis ol' boy, and nothing can stop you. He took the snap and set-up. There was no pressure from the defense. They blocked that gorilla-of-a-defensive-end! Walker broke over the middle. The pass had to be pinpointed between two defenders. Travis didn't hesitate; he rifled the ball low to prevent an interception. It zipped between the defenders, and Walker made the reception falling down to get his body in front of the ball. The Knights were on their

thirty-two and rolling.

Walker and Travis combined on a hook and another slant, moving the ball to the Mustang forty-seven yard line, first and ten. A minute-fifteen remained. Travis hit the halfback on a flair for four more yards. The second down pass was incomplete. No one was open, so Travis just heaved the ball over everyone's head. On third and six, Travis hit Walker on another slant for fifteen more yards. The cornerback had played Walker close, almost intercepting.

It's time to go for the deep one, Travis thought. Forty-three seconds left. Fake the slant and cut back out towards the flag. That cornerback will never know what happened. McGraw will never call it though. Screw it. As long as it's not a roll out.

"Good shot," Walker said.

"You ain't seen nothing yet, boys and girls." Travis rubbed his hands together. He was in control and enjoying every minute of it.

"Travis." Phillips had the play. "Brokenbone, slot right, eighteen sideline."

"What?"

"Brokenbone, slot right, eighteen sideline."

"Eighteen? You sure?"

"Yeah," Phillips nodded.

"Terrific." A roll out. That's all I needed. Stupid bastard.

"Okay. Listen up." Travis looked around the huddle. "Brokenbone, slot right, twelve in and out. Got that?"

"But--"

"No buts. Twelve in and out."

"McGraw's not gonna like it."

"Screw McGraw. Look, I don't care what you guys run. I'm running a twelve in and out. All right?" Travis stared them all down but Walker, who just shrugged. "All right. Twelve in and out. On down. On down. Ready, break."

Travis stood behind the center. He checked the line to the right, then the left. He saw the cheerleaders on the sideline and picked out Wimberly. Her arms were crossed and pulled up snugly under her breasts. Concentrate. One-hundred per cent. He set his hands to take the snap.

"Down." Travis set-up quickly, watching Walker all the way. That's right; come on up, dummy. Go for the interception. Walker cut inside. Travis pumped the ball once and the defender took the fake. Gotcha. Damn. The gorilla-of-an-end slipped a block. Travis felt pressure from the other side, too. Both Mustang defenders bulled towards him, but Travis did not budge. Wait till the last second, he commanded. Gotta lay it right on the money. Walker made his cut and sprinted for the flag. The defenders closed in on Travis. He waited. Then, in one motion, he stepped with his left foot, planting it firmly in the grass, and flicked a tight spiral--Boom--the two Mustangs scissored Travis, one high, the other low.

God!

He felt something rip in his knee. The pain scorched his entire body, then left him numb. He collapsed.

The trainers ran out to Travis and administered some smelling salts.

"Oh, God." Travis raised his head.

"Lie down," the tall one said.

They cut the left leg of his pants away and wrapped the knee in ice. The fat trainer removed Travis' helmet.

Travis pressed his hands to his head in an attempt to ease the pain. "Oh, God." Why me? Why now? Why? Can't even enjoy my touchdown pass. Who's gonna hold for the extra point? "Hey. Who's gonna hold for the extra point?" He raised his head.

"What? Lie still."

"Who's gonna hold for the extra point?"

"Nobody."

"What do you mean?"

"Walker dropped the pass."

"Son-of-a-bitch-hell." It was not so much aimed at Walker as it was a general statement of disgust. Yet he did find Walker generally disgusting. Bastard. How could he've dropped it? It was a perfect pass. Right on the money. "God." Travis dug his fingers into the turf. He could feel the blood pump into the knee and pool.

"Get the stretcher," the tall trainer said.

"No stretcher," Travis snapped.

"It's for your own good."

"No stretcher. Give me a hand."

The trainers pulled him up and slung his arms around their

shoulders. Travis hobbled between them, putting little or no weight on his left leg. They headed for the field house.

A stretcher! How would that look? Helped off? Now that's different. That has dignity. But a stretcher? What would his dad think? His friends? Wimberly? Damn. Would've been a cinch, but that bastard had to go and drop the ball.

Wearing only a jockey strap, Travis stood with his injured leg in a barrel of ice that came up to the middle of his thigh. He had already showered, and from the training room he could hear the hollow sound of the metal cleats on the cement floor. He knew they had lost, and he was glad he had his back to the door. Don't want to see anyone. He heard footsteps but did not turn.

"You okay, son?" His father put his hand on Travis' bare shoulder.

"Yeah." He was relieved it was his father.

"How bad is it?"

"Don't know. They say it's hard to tell this soon. Sure is swollen, though."

"Hurt much?"

"It's kinda numb now. But it did hurt like a son-of-a-bitch."

His father nodded. There was an awkward silence. "Samm--"

"Dad, I'm all right. Really."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Can you drive? I mean with the clutch and all."

Not the great American car speech, Travis thought. Not now.

"Yes." It came out harder than intended. "I can manage fine. Really."

"Okay, Sammy."

"See you later."

"Right."

Travis heard his father talk with the tall trainer. He could not make out exactly what they were saying, though he knew his knee was the subject. He kept his back toward them. Staring at the wall, counting the bricks, he imagined the scene.

"How bad is it?" his father would ask.

"Hard to tell. Too soon actually."

"That's what Sammy said. But I thought maybe he was holding something back."

"No, it's just too soon to tell. The knee is swelling, but that doesn't tell us what's wrong."

"I see. Thank you." Finally convinced he would leave.

Travis heard the doorknob turn. The sounds of cleats and pads being taken off grew louder. The door closed.

"Jesus." How could he have dropped it?

"Need something?" the tall trainer asked.

"How much longer do I have to freeze my can?"

"Twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes."

"Hey."

"Yeah?"

"How could he drop it?"

"Sniggy?"

"Yeah. How could he?"

"I don't know. He just did."

"But it was right there on the money. Wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I knew it. I could feel it."

"Well, he still dropped it."

Bastard. Travis continued counting bricks. The door opened and slammed shut.

"What-the-hell got into you?"

McGraw. That's all I need.

"Who do you think you are changing plays like that? Bart Starr?"

His neck blotched when he was mad.

Ignore him. Maybe he'll go away.

"I've been in this game thirty years. And in all that time"

Christ. It's his fault. If he hadn't dropped the ball, I'd be a hero. Jesus Christ.

". . . just who do you think you are?"

Get off my back. I don't feel like it now.

"Don't just sit there. Answer me."

"I--" "You're in no position to get into a fight--" blew it. I'm sorry."

"Blew it! I'll say. Just where did you get that hairbrain play?"

Sniggy, you grease-fingered bastard.

"What made you call it?"

"I don't know." It was the right call.

"You don't know? You disregard the roll out. But you don't know?"

That was brilliant. I'd probably 've had both knees busted up if I'd've run that.

"Dammit, if I didn't think you had more sense."

"I got carried away, I guess." Fat bastard.

"Carried away? Dammit-all. You got carried away, and we lose the game. And you get your knee torn up. It's your own damn fault, you know."

No. No, it's Sniggy's. If he hadn't dropped the ball, everything would've been all right.

Four of the Knights came in the training room to have the tape cut from their ankles.

"Dammit-all, Travis." McGraw spun away from him and slammed out of the room. Travis sighed and returned to his brick counting. Little by little the Knights came in to have the tape cut off. It was quiet but for a few low comments. Travis did not pay any attention to them; he counted bricks. He never got very far with his counting, maybe ten or fifteen cinder bricks before his mind wandered.

Wimberly stepped out of the shadows, her arms crossed snugly under her breasts.

"Hi."

"Travis."

Travis limped forward.

"That was a pretty stupid thing to do," she said.

"What?"

"What! For Chrissakes, that goofy call you made."

"It was a good call. Besides, how did you find out?"

"You couldn't help but find out. Coach McGraw was yelling and screaming like crazy. Anyway, if it was such a good call, why didn't we win?"

"Ask Sniggy. He dropped it. It's his damn fault."

"Bet he's saying the same thing about you."

"What do ya mean?"

"If you hadn't called that play, he wouldn't have dropped the pass."

"That's stupid."

"You think so?"

Billy Martin came out of the field house.

"Hi, Billy." Wimberly kissed him.

"Let's go," he said. "Jeez, that was dumb, Travis. See ya later."

"Yeah." You still don't walk like a quarter--

What had been intermittent grumbling now turned to dead silence.

Walker sat down on the training bench farthest from Travis.

He knew it was Walker without having to turn around. How could that bastard drop it? And after making those other catches. Ask him. Travis started to turn, then changed his mind. What could he say? Go on and ask anyway. He turned, but Walker was already out the door, moving toward the showers.

"How much longer?" Travis asked the tall one.

"Couple minutes."

"You could couple minutes me to death. It's freezing in here."

"Just sit tight."

"That's easy for you to say." Travis returned to his cinder brick count.

Finally, he was helped out of the barrel and down the corridor to the bench in front of his locker. Travis sat on the wood-ribbed bench fingering his knee. It was grapefruit sized, and despite the numbness he could feel it throbbing.

The room was empty and quiet, except for the sound of a lone shower. They sure got-the-hell-out-of-here when they didn't win. It was just as well. It took some wriggling, but he finally managed to take off his jockey strap. You never realize how much you use the stupid thing till it's busted up. Travis pushed himself up, balancing on his right leg and hanging on to a peg with his left hand. It was gonna take a year to dress. He fumbled for his underwear.

His head turned to the sound of wet footsteps. Walker stood at the other end of the twenty foot bench. He buffed a towel across his back. He stopped when he saw Travis. Naked and motionless, they stared at each other. They said nothing, just stared for a long minute. Then Walker shrugged and continued towelling himself off.

Damn. Travis continued the torture of dressing. He could've apologized or something. Bastard. It was right in his hands. He had struggled into his pants and now sat on the bench buttoning his shirt. He refused to look at Walker. Bending over to put on his socks, Travis noticed that his knee had stiffened; it bulged his usually loose jeans. This ought to be a good trick. Travis fought

to put his sneakers on.

"Need some help?" Walker asked.

"What? No. I can put my shoes on by myself."

"I meant can I help you to your car."

"I'm not helpless."

"Could've fooled me."

"Get lost."

"How ya gonna drive? I mean, you gotta TR-4, don't you?"

"Yeah. I'll manage." You and my father.

"Listen, why don't I take you home?"

"Why don't you get the hell out of here? You've already screwed me up enough, dropping that pass."

"Get serious."

"I am serious, God dammit."

"Don't be an ass."

"I'll be an ass if I want to."

"Yeah," Walker chuckled, "I guess you will."

"What's so funny?"

"You." His chuckle grew into a laugh.

"Screw off."

Walker's laughter continued to build.

"Jesus." Trapped with this idiot. Leave for Chrissake.

"Sorry. I don't mean to make fun--" By now, Walker was laughing so hard his sides hurt.

"If you're not gonna leave, you could at least tell me what's

so damn funny."

"You're pissed at me for dropping that pass--"

Damn right I am.

--and I was pissed at you for calling that play." The laughter had near doubled him by now.

"You bastard." In one motion Travis flung himself up and threw a wild punch at Walker. But his knee gave out from under him. Walker caught him, even though he was laughing so hard he was crying.

"Come on, Travis. I'll take you home."

"You're impossible to get through to."

"I know. That's what Miz Holt called me, remember? 'Impossible.'"

"Yeah." Travis shook his head. A hint of a smile came to his face. "At least, let me get my jacket." Travis put his letter jacket on. Walker slung Travis' right arm around his shoulders. They started down the hall.

"Miz Holt was plenty pissed," Travis remembered. "Not as pissed as McGraw, though."

"I'll bet."

"He kept asking why I did it?"

"Why did you?"

"I don't know really. I guess I sorta got carried away."

They looked at each other and broke up. Walker almost dropped Travis.

"Watch it, Sniggy."

"Sorry."

McGraw came out of his office, wearing only his pants. His bare belly protruded over his belt. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Travis said. Straighten up.

"That's not true, Coach," Walker said. "Travis was just getting carried away."

Walker and Travis became hysterical. They weaved down the hall like a couple of drunks out on the town.

"Dammit if you're not impossible," McGraw shouted after them.

III. LYRE

Abraham Lialmann lied. He called it creating other people's truths. But like they say, "a rose by any other name" Anyway I guess that's why I liked him. Abe was a challenge. You see, the thing of it is is that no matter how much you knew about Abe, or thought you knew, you could never be sure that you had him pegged. Not like you could with other people. Take Seymour Wanamaker: one look at him--his fingers weaving silver dollars, up and down, between them smoothly, his gold-rimmed glasses set heavy on his nose 'cause of the size of the lenses, walking in a dazed lanky gait--and you could tell that he was dependable in a quiet sort of way. But with Abe it was different. He lied habitually. Not purposefully, it was like a sixth sense. He just did it. Now I figured that he lied about half the time. But if a Gallup poll came out and proved that he lied one-hundred per cent of the time, I wouldn't be surprised.

You just couldn't tell about Abe.

He seemed to have appeared out of nowhere that last summer of high school. No one remembered ever seeing him around before, in or out of school, but I checked the yearbooks for the past three years. He hadn't changed much. His hair, darker than the pictures showed, was wilder. Not really longer, but the way it fell over his

ears and down his brow from his widow's peak made it seem longer than the every-hair-in-place school pictures. And his nose didn't seem as Jewish--one of those plump George C. Scott jobs. Still big, it resembled Basil Rathbone's more than George C's. Long and broken. But his cheeks still sunk in, making his jaw jut out, and his eyes reflected black and glassy. These were all subject to change, however. One minute you'd swear he was the spittin' image of Bela Lugosi and the next Basil Rathbone. I guess it was the light. Yet the thing that always got me was not that he appeared out of thin air, but that he did it at the club.

I lay on a sun chair by the pool at the Red Creek Country Club and I could hear Seymour laboring away at his fingertip push-ups. They were supposed to build up his hands, but if you asked me, I think he took his magic stuff too seriously. He always worked on it. Now, I could hear the almost imperceptible sound of silver dollars weaving through his fingers.

"Seymour, could you cut it out? You're driving me crazy with those exercises."

"This one doesn't make any noise."

"Maybe not, but it drives me crazy just knowing you're doing it."

He stopped. Then a half-minute later he nudged me. "Hey-ee." But I ignored it. We had just finished caddying for two hackers who tried to cram in eighteen holes on their lunch hour. They took two hours, jawing about insurance, percentages, penalties and other money mumbo-jumbo. It was August hot and I was beat. I just wanted to

lay by the pool and sleep.

"Sniggy."

"Go away."

"You gotta see this, Sniggy." He poked me again.

"Mrs. Warren showing off again?" I kept my eyes closed.

"No. She's there, but this is . . . you gotta see it to believe it."

"Jordan?" I knew it wasn't her. But Seymour, who's normally stable and coherent, had gone ga-ga over her, so I needled him with it.

"Screw off, bastard."

I figured that would silence him.

"You're gonna miss it." An elbow in the ribs again.

I propped myself on my elbows. "It better be good." I didn't need to ask where I was supposed to look. The first thing my eyes focused on was a guy standing by the diving board talking to big-boobed Mrs. Warren. For a moment I thought the heat had gotten to me, but there he stood as clear as sin. All in white--shirt, shoes and slacks--a light breeze tossed his hair back; the sun highlighted his long, broken nose: a young Basil Rathbone. Then a cloud blocked the sun. He smiled broadly and Rathbone transformed into Lugosi.

"See that?"

I nodded. "But I don't believe it."

A voice from the opposite end of the pool complained, "You gonna dive or not, Nora?" It was Judge Warren, big-boobs' husband. Fresh from a round of golf, you could hear the clatter of his golf shoes

on the concrete. Mrs. Warren shrugged to Rathbone-Lugosi, said something at which he laughed and she sprung off the board. Rathbone-Lugosi sat at an umbrella table and lit a cigarette as Mr. Mercer, the club's assistant-manager, walked by.

"That's what I call nerve."

I knew Seymour meant the cigarette 'cause we both could tell that he wasn't any older than us. "That burns me up." I'd tried the same stunt a month ago and almost got kicked out. So why didn't Mercer jump on Rathbone-Lugosi's butt? Possible answers: 1) Mercer didn't notice (highly unlikely 'cause he's got a pair of beady eyes in the back of his head); 2) Mercer didn't realize that he was underage (doubtful since Mercer can spot a guy who's one day short of twenty-one and trying to start boozing early, I think that's one of the requirements for being an assistant-manager); 3) Rathbone-Lugosi is over twenty-one (which I doubt 'cause I can size people up PDQ); 4) his old man is filthy rich (most likely); 5) it's something I could never figure out ('cause Papa Sniggly always said "there's things that just are, and there ain't no explainin' 'em"). But I could sure as hell try.

I shoved myself off the sun chair and wandered toward Rathbone-Lugosi. Seymour followed instinctively.

"Where're we goin'?"

"To check out who's-it's over there."

"Think we ought to?"

The shade from the umbrella softened the ragged line of his nose,

giving him that Lugosi look. He wrote frenziedly in a six by eight black book.

"You don't have to come," I said.

"I'm comin'. I'm comin'." Seymour caught my elbow. "Only, I want it on record: I don't like it."

"I'll make a note of it."

We stopped at his table, on the pool side of it, backs to the sun. He wrote for a minute as if he didn't notice us. If he meant to ignore us away, he had it all wrong 'cause the silence, the waiting, just made us more curious. Finally he looked up, smiled, but didn't speak.

"Know Mrs. Warren well?" I heard Seymour moan, which meant "Jesus H. Christ Sniggy, that's no introduction." But I don't like cornball intro's like, "Hi, my name is Peter Polite and this is my friend Fred Fine." Makes me want to barf. Besides that's all that came to mind and I had to say something.

"I sleep with her," Rathbone-Lugosi said offhandedly.

I'll bet he had a good laugh thinking about how my chin hit the floor, but I knew he lied. Mrs. Warren liked to show off but when it came down to doing something about it she was a regular saint. I know, I tried. He'd said it so coolly, though, that I almost believed him for a second, and Seymour did believe him.

His silver dollars slipped from his magic hands. Chiming as they hit the floor.

"Bull," I said.

He shrugged. "Abraham Lialmann." He extended his hand. "Call me Abe."

"Sniggy Walker. This is Seymour Wanamaker. He works at magic," I added to explain the coins.

Abe nodded his approval.

"Sniggy works at juvenile delinquency," from Seymour.

"He has the looks for it, doesn't he?"

I noticed that the black book was one of those blank write-your-own-novel jobs. It seemed half written.

"What's in the book?"

"It's a poetical essay on Orpheus."

"As in Orpheus and Eurydice?" Seymour knew all that myth stuff.

"That's right, I call it Orpheus, The Jew."

"But he wasn't, was he, Seymour?"

"No. I suppose he means it metaphorically."

Abe just shrugged, the same as he had when I called his hand about Mrs. Warren. His shoulders would bow up slightly, his lips would turn down in a pout, but his eyes were indifferent. A stock gesture, whatever it meant, it put an end to that line of discussion.

Between the two of us, Seymour and I pumped a lot of information out of Abe. Yes, he was only eighteen. He'd told Mercer he was twenty-one and he'd believed it. I don't know how 'cause, like I said, Mercer had a nose for ages. He'd lived down here four years, "Well, this is the fourth," is how he put it. We didn't believe him 'cause Red Creek was a small school and we knew everybody. Well, at

least their faces. And we didn't recognize his. How could you forget it? Seymour and I exchanged glances that said we'd check it out. Abe said he lived in Wood Dell (the poshiest neighborhood in the county) and would we give him a lift home?

"No car?" from Seymour.

"I don't drive. Don't like it."

So we took him home. A white wood and red brick two story. One of those tacky Colonial jobs with the columns and all. For some reason Seymour asked Abe what his father did (I guess it was the size of the house and the thought of how much money it'd cost 'cause we don't bother ourselves with parents normally).

"Garbage," came over Abe's shoulder as he headed up the drive.

"Come again," I said.

"He's a garbage man."

"He owns it, you mean?" Seymour asked.

Abe's shoulders bowed and lips pouted. "Drop by around eight." He turned, disappearing about the back of the house. A door slammed shut. Seymour and I stared at each other, neither talking, but we knew we'd be back at eight.

"Who was that guy?" Seymour broke the silence.

"Beats me."

I stuffed the gear lever of my humpback Volvo in first and dropped the clutch to the sound of squealing rubber.

Seymour and I spent the rest of the afternoon comparing notes on Abe. I found his picture in the yearbook in the class section but

nowhere else, yet we still weren't convinced. Seymour figured that with enough money Abe could have had his picture put in the yearbook without ever setting a foot on the campus. He certainly had access to the money, but the implications of such a lengthy preparation were too much to rack our brains about. We went over and over the details of our meeting. Seymour even tried writing out parts of our conversation, but it all came out the same: Abe was eighteen, rich, had probably lived here for four years, and he didn't drive. The rest we discounted as lies. That's all we had to go on, except that he saved us from the end-of-the-summer-dulls.

"We ought to thank the gods for our deliverance. Whatever the form," Seymour pronounced.

"You're turnin' into a pagan, 'd you know that, Seymour?"

"Look who's talking."

We sat on the floor in my bedroom, Indian style. Papa Sniggly's airplane prop ashtray stood between us as we smoked the pipes Papa Sniggly and his friend had smoked in WWI. We decided that wrapping Abe's house would be a proper initiation for him. It was on for tonight.

Abe was waiting for us at the curb when we rolled up. He hopped in the back and said, "Let's go." I didn't know where, but I popped the clutch and we were off.

"Where to?"

"Galveston."

"Galveston?" from Seymour. "What's in Galveston?"

"Virgil's Bar and Grill."

"Sounds like a sleaze joint," I laughed.

"The sleaziest."

"Galveston, here we come."

Dusk had burnt itself out by the time we made the Causeway connecting Galveston with the mainland. We drove down Broadway for a mile or so and I think we turned at Tremont. But not knowing Galveston I couldn't tell. Abe was guiding us. Anyway we turned at one of the monuments to Galveston's WWII war dead. A couple more jogs and jigs and we found ourselves parked outside the bar. Across the street stood an old opera house, and leaning on a NO PARKING sign were two girls. Women? Too dark to tell. Red neon lights flashed, VIRGIL'S BAR & GRILL. Seymour tried the door. Closed tight. Abe pressed a button, smiled into a mirrored window and shoved the door open when a buzzer went off.

"Enter, my friends." Abe waved us in. The dim light gave him that Lugosi look.

"Hi there, Homer. 'Bout gave you up for dead." It came from a haggard dachshund-faced red head who manned the buzzer that must have been under the Sweda cash register.

"Not me, Lil'. Brought some new blood," from Abe.

"Fine as long as they're legal."

"Wouldn't try to pass anybody on you, would I?"

"Naw. I know I can trust ya."

Abe led us to the back room, past a pool table and some pinball

machines.

"Hey-ee." Seymour pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "What's with the Homer stuff?"

"Wouldn't expect me to use my real name now, would you? Besides people trust Homer's more than Abe's."

"What about 'Honest Abe.'"

"He got shot."

"Good point."

We took a corner table; Abe and I lit up. A huge milk chocolate black man came out of the kitchen with a tray full of drinks that he served to a group of sailors and women. He saw us as he turned and grinned enamel and gold.

"Hate to meet him in a dark alley," Seymour whispered.

"He's probably not so tough."

"I'll tell him you said that, Sniggy."

"Be the last thing you ever tell," I joked.

"Mista Homer. 'S been a long time." His speech came from another world.

"Wes. How's life in that hell-hole of a kitchen?" Abe asked as if they were old friends.

"Hot, but I's cain't complain none."

"This is Sniggy."

"Mista Sniggy." His grip was powerful.

"The near-sighted one is Seymour."

"Mista Seymour. Whut can I's git ya?"

"Three Buds." Abe decided for us.

"Comin' up, Mista Homer."

Countless rounds later, I was well on my way to getting snockered and Seymour was well on his way to getting sick. But Abe sat there as cool as ever.

"How . . . how do you do it . . . lie so well?" I measured the words slowly.

"I don't lie--"

"What about 'Homer'?"

"And Mrs. Warren," Seymour added.

"Oooh yeah. Mustn't for . . . get Mrs. Warren." I cupped my hands under my chest and grunted a laugh.

"I tell people their truth. That's not lying."

"Whatever you ssay, Abe-o." I pulled him over by the neck and whispered. "Anybody ever t-told you . . . that you look like Bela Lugosi? Hmna?"

"Another round?"

"Sure. Hey Seymour." He looked dead to me. "Don't you think Abe-o l-looks like Bela . . . a . . . Lugosi?"

Seymour squinted through his heavy lenses. "Rathbone. Basil Rathbone."

"That t-too."

Abe shrugged, then stood.

"Where you goin'?" I asked.

"To the womb." Abe pointed to the bathroom door.

"Some . . . times you don't make g-good sense." I yelled after him, then turned to Seymour, "Must be a family joke."

"Shh!"

"Hey kiddo. Let's shoot some . . . pool."

"I couldn't."

"S-sure you can. Do you . . . good."

I helped Seymour to his feet and we stumbled to the pool table with fresh cans of Budweiser. I tugged a quarter from my pocket. Slamming it into the coin slot produced the fifteen balls. We could barely hit the cue ball, much less sink the others, so it took us a half-hour to finish one game. By then I began to miss Abe. I asked dog-face behind the Sweda if she'd seen him. No. When I returned to the game, Seymour lay passed out on the pool table.

"Hey, Seymour."

I stooped to look him in the face. Out cold. I blew on his nose. Nothing. Then I jostled him, but he still didn't budge.

"I'll be right back, kiddo. D-don't go any-hic-where."

Armed with a half a can of beer I headed for the john, thinking that I'd die of uremia before I got there. It was warm inside the bathroom from kitchen heat. "Abe-o? You in here?" Silence. "I take it you're not." I sat in the corner stall, too tired to stand, swilling my Bud and feeling unusually carefree as my bladder let go with all the beer I'd downed. In my beer stupor I read the graffitti. There were lots of phone numbers that claimed that they were the best lay in town. Male or female? How'd they get here? By the door

handle, in black magic marker: Nixon, pull out like your father should have. My sentiments exactly. My head spun as I got to my feet. The words blurred. I slid down to the floor. Before I passed out I thought I understood what Abe had meant before, and I laughed 'cause it might not have been funny if I hadn't. Just above the roll of toilet paper someone had written: The Elysian Fields are full of shit.

The next thing I remember the three of us were sitting in my car outside the Jack-in-the-Box that was just down the road from Wood Dell. Abe kept trying to force coffee down us.

"No coffee. Blaah. Beer. I want more beer," I protested.

"You need to sober up so you can drive home," Abe said.

"Hey, hey. Look who's back, Seymour."

"Basil Rathbone."

"No, no. It's Lugosi. Hey where'd you go anyway, Bela baby?"

"Drink your coffee." Abe again.

"Likely story."

"I was talking to Wes in the kitchen."

"That's fishier than the other story, if you ask me." Seymour blubbered in his coffee.

"You carry us-hic-out?"

"No, Wes did. Drink the coffee, it's good for you."

"Yes mother."

After three cups of greasy Jack-coffee, Abe drove to his house. My head still buzzed. We did a Chinese fire drill at Abe's with Abe getting out, me climbing into the driver's seat and Seymour stumbling

out of the back through the driver's door and crawling in the front seat.

"Sure you can drive?" Abe leaned on the door.

"Does a bear shit in the woods? Does the Pope wear a beanie?"

"See you later."

"Right." I found first gear. "Hey, wait a minute. I thought you couldn't drive?"

He gave me that bowed shouldered shrug of his and walked up the drive to the back of his house. I weaved away from the curb but stopped a block later.

"Hey kiddo." I tapped Seymour. "You know what time it is?" Anyone else who'd passed out on six beers would have looked at his watch, but not Seymour. He knew what I meant.

"Time to wrap a house."

"Let's go."

We piled out, each with a sack full of red crepe paper. In front of the house, we pulled out our load of crepe paper. I checked the grass, and when I came up with a dew-soaked hand I giggled.

"Maybe crepe paper's goin' too far."

"Naw. Abe'll love it. Besides it's all we have."

So we got to work. We tied rocks to the ends so that they'd carry over the house with a good heave. Twenty in all. Then we laid them aside in the grass while we covered the trees and lamp post with what we had left. The trees done, we started chunking the rock weighted strips as fast we could, and then cut out for the car,

laughing so hard we almost didn't make it.

It took twenty minutes longer than it should have to make it to my house 'cause of the buzz we still had and the laugh we were having over the wrap job we'd done. As we pulled up, we made out a white clad figure leaning on a fifty-three Buick, smoking. And then my house, strewn with toilet paper.

"Son-of-a-bitch."

We jumped out of the car. It had to be Abe, and it was.

"What took you so long?" He smiled.

"We were wrapping your house!" Seymour was in stitches. I thought about having to clean up the mess.

"I got your house too, Seymour."

There was a moment of dead silence. Then Seymour and I burst into laughter 'cause we'd done him one better with the red crepe. We could see the pink stain it would leave on the white wood.

"We did yours in crepe paper, though," we blurted out together. Then I continued, "It's gonna be a scream, all in pink."

Abe laughed too now. For the first time today a real belly laugh. "It's not my house."

"But you--"

"It's Mrs. Warren's." Abe imitated my big-boob gesture.

"I don't believe it."

"Go and see for yourself."

We would have gone right then, but we were too tired and still too drunk to drive back over. So I sneaked the two of them up to

my room and we fell asleep on the floor around Papa Sniggly's ashtray.

When we woke up the next morning, Seymour and I hazily remembered the night before. Our heads pounding from the beer and all. But Abe reminded us about the house and drove us over. Our minds began to clear as we went. One minute I hoped it was Abe's house so he'd have to clean it up, which was only fair since Seymour and I had to. But then the next minute I knew, somehow, that we'd see Mrs. Warren out in the yard cleaning up as we drove by. Eight-thirty, and the sun already made it hot. As we pulled up in front of the house, sure enough, there stood Mrs. Warren in her bathing suit trying to get all the faded red crepe paper off the house, but trying to look appealing as she labored.

We did a double take from her to Abe: his shoulders began to bow.

IV. YOU KNOW, WITH EDDY WHAT'S-HIS-NAME

She had a horsey face. What was worse was that she was Terry's best friend. And Terry was going steady with Sammy Travis' brother, William. So the dubious honor was all his. Sammy got to take "Mrs. Ed," as she was called, to the Pike beer bust that night. He'd flown up to SMU, armed with game films and a letter of recommendation from his coach, hoping to grab one of the school's remaining scholarships. It'd been a longshot at best: SMU already had the nation's leading passer in Chuck Hixson and a good back up in Mike Livingston. But Sammy had his hopes up anyway. The weekend looked like a total waste. First the football scholarship fell through and now he was set up with a girl that would take last place at a beauty pageant of the winners of the Kentucky Derby. She did have big cans, though.

"She's got big boobs." William pointed out in consolation. William never ate at the school cafeteria, but he made an exception today. Sammy wanted to see what he was getting into.

"The fat lady at the circus has big cans, too," Sammy replied.

"She's not fat." He paused as if stymied for the words that might make her semi-appealing. "In fact, her body's not half bad."

"Are you sure you're looking at the same girl I am?"

"In the green T-shirt, over by the water fountain." He pointed.

"She's bending over to get a drink now."

"That's the one I thought."

"Come on, Sammy. She's not that bad. Just look at her butt."

She really wasn't that bad. Especially her butt. The way she almost waddled made her awkwardly appealing somehow. But Sammy would never admit it. "You seem to think she's such a hot item you go out with her, and I'll go with Terry."

"Nice try, kid. She's all yours," William chuckled.

"I'll do the same for you sometime." Sammy guzzled his Seven-Up.

"What'd you say her name was?"

"Frances."

Sammy doubled up in laughter. Uncontrollable laughter.

"What's so funny?"

Sammy tried to answer but he couldn't get past the first sound.

All that came out was "du du du" They were attracting attention for yards.

"Cut it out." William shoved him playfully. "You're making an ass out of yourself."

"Sor--" But Sammy couldn't stop. His sides ached.

"Goddam idiot. Let's get out of here."

They headed for the Pike house. Sammy was still drawing curious glances. William took long strides, almost running, in an attempt to avoid further embarrassment. Finally, Sammy quit laughing, but not because the humor had worn thin. His stomach hurt so badly he couldn't keep up.

"What was so funny?" William asked.

"Don't you get it?" He stifled a laugh. "Hurts. You call her 'Mrs. Ed,' right?"

William grinned with expectation.

"Didn't you ever hear of Francis the Talking Mule? You know, with Eddy what's-his-name. Mrs. Ed, Francis? 'Cept with an 'i' instead of an 'e.' Get it?"

William half-laughed. "That wasn't that funny."

"Yeah, well. You got no sense of humor."

"We'll see about that at the beer bust," he cackled.

William had gone shopping or something with Terry, so Sammy stayed behind. Mostly because there was a chance, though slight, that Frances might tag along. He already had to spend the evening with her. The thought of spending the afternoon with her, too, was unbearable. He knew he was over-reacting; he hadn't even met her yet! But he'd already had his only hope for a football scholarship pulled out from under him. Some black flash from Lampasas received the last one the university had. He decided to indulge himself.

Sammy sat in the lobby of the Pike house reading Goldman's Boys and Girls Together. But he wasn't having much luck for all the traffic. The sound of pool balls clacking off each other came from the TV room. He stopped reading and got up to investigate.

Two of the brothers were playing eight ball. At least that's what it looked like to Sammy. But then again, he wasn't an expert on the subject. He sat on a bar stool and watched them play. Very badly, even by his standards. He ran his fingers through his curly

brown hair, locked his hands behind his head, and tried not to laugh. The fat one they called "Ace," and he was just that, a real ace. He didn't know the other one: he was tall and skinny with neatly trimmed blonde hair. Ace was the better of the two and he wouldn't let the tall, skinny one forget it.

"I'm gonna have your ass." Ace lined up an eight ball shot. "Eight ball, corner pocket." He indicated the far right corner with the cue. Clack! Down it went. "That makes a grand total of fifty-six dollars you owe me."

"I know, I know. Rack 'em up."

Geez, he was a glutton for punishment.

"You bore me, Davey," Ace decreed in a cool monotone. He turned to Sammy and asked, "Wanna put some new blood in the game?"

"I . . . ahh . . . don't really play that well." Sammy didn't want to interfere.

"Neither does he." Ace pointed towards Davey.

"But--"

"No, that's all right." Davey handed his cue to Sammy.

"Buck a game?"

"Okay." It came out of Sammy's mouth before he knew it. He only had five dollars.

Ace racked the balls. They lagged to see who would break; Ace won. He struck the cue ball hard, putting all his fat behind it. The balls scattered everywhere, but none went in. There were a couple of sitting ducks, right at the edge of the pockets. Sammy wondered

whether he should take them now or try something harder. A stupid Walt Disney cartoon sprung into his mind. He had seen it in geometry class. Ludwig von Drake demonstrated that pool was based on simple geometric patterns. That's it. Sammy studied a bank shot, calculated the angle of deflection, and stroked the cue ball evenly. Clack. Right in the pocket!

He was no master, but Sammy took three quick games from Ace. Davey was delighted; Ace wanted to up the price to five dollars. Sammy agreed. Thirty minutes later, Sammy was fifteen dollars richer.

"Thought you didn't play well?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"Luck! Bull shit."

"It's all a matter of geometry," Sammy tried to explain.

"Rack 'em up." Ace wiped the sweat from his fatty neck.

"Maybe we better quit." He wanted the hell out.

"Bull shit. You've already got eighteen dollars out of me."

Sammy acquiesced and racked up the balls. Davey chuckled to himself. But Travis wasn't gonna let that pig bully him into losing. Fats would have to beat him; he'd have to do it. Sammy chalked his cue, psyching himself up: Fats. Fats. Fatty Fats. I'm gonna get you, Fats, Minnesota Fats.

"Hear you got a date with Mrs. Ed?" Ace probed.

"Humm? Yeah." Travis broke. The five ball went in. "Solids."

"She's a real good looker."

"Don't pay him any mind. He's just trying to distract you,"

from Davey.

"You keep your mouth shut, Davey old boy."

Sammy banked the two ball in the side pocket. "So I hear." His voice had no inflection; it was hollow.

"You know what I call her? My personal nickname?" Ace said. The seven ball slipped neatly into the corner pocket where Ace was standing. "Huh?"

"What?" The three ball dropped in the opposite corner.

"The wandering-Jew." Ace let out a belly laugh. Bass and gut-teral.

"She Jewish?" Sammy sounded a little too surprised. He knocked the four ball in hoping Ace hadn't noticed.

"Oh, you didn't know?"

"Didn't ask." Clack! The cue ball stopped dead after hitting the one ball that made a rectangular pattern banking off three cushions before dropping in the near corner. "Don't even know her last name."

"Fishbein. Can't mistake that, can you?"

"Guess not." Sammy played a finesse shot, clipping the six ball and sending it along the cushion into the corner pocket. He'd never done that before. Tried like hell. But never done it.

"Bring your saddle and you can enter her in the derby."

William, Terry and Frances had just come in. They stood in the entry way. No one noticed them.

"Anyway, you can always get your own TV show," Ace continued.

"They can revive the Mr. Ed series, only it'd be Mrs. Ed. Or maybe

you could simply call it Frances the Talking Horse."

The Talking Mule, Sammy wanted to say. But Ace didn't need any help. No, Fats was carrying on fine without his help. "Eight ball, side pocket." He pointed to it with the cue as if to say, "This is it, Fats. I'm gonna break you, Fats." Clack! "Game. That's five you owe me." Travis turned to Ace and saw the three of them standing there. Frances' face flushed red. Everyone stood staring.

Frances ran out of the house.

"Up yours!" Ace stormed out of the room. Davey eased out and followed him.

"You fat"

"Bastard," William supplied Terry with the appropriate epithet.

"Thank you."

"More than welcome."

They turned to Sammy who was leaning against the pool table, twirling the cue between his palms. They didn't say a thing. Terry almost trembled with rage. But Sammy couldn't figure out whether it was left over from Ace or it was all his. It didn't really matter because what shook him the most was William's look--"My own brother. How could you?"

"I didn't say a thing," Sammy pleaded, his eyes on William's.

"That's just it." Terry stepped towards him.

"What?"

"That's just it. You didn't say a thing."

"I don't understand." He looked to William for an answer.

"That's obvious. That" She pointed out the entryway.

". . . that"

"Bastard."

"Thank you."

"Welcome."

"He was literally tearing Frances apart. Just stepping all over her. And you just shoot pool and hold out your hand for money."

"Jesus. What was I supposed to do? Brain him with my cue. Christ, I haven't even met the girl."

"But common decency--"

"Oh, Christ and his crutch."

"Don't you 'Oh, Christ' me."

"Come on, Terry." William stepped in. "Aren't you being a little hard on Sammy."

"He should've done something." She stared at William; he didn't answer. Then, she turned to Sammy. "You should've done something." This came out as more of a plea than a statement. Terry turned back to William. "I'll see you later." She left.

Sammy searched his brother's face for sympathy. Then, as if they had rehearsed it a million times, they weakly frowned at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

Sammy stood in front of the Pi Phi sorority house, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. The door was open, and he kept to the right of it in the shadows. He didn't want to be there, but he had no choice. William and Terry insisted that he should talk to Frances

and try to get her to come to the party. He had resisted at first

"If she doesn't want to come" Sammy let the words trail off. No matter how hard he tried to speak without inflection, he could see that it didn't sound that way to the two of them.

"Sam-mee." William held the final syllable an extra beat to demonstrate his mild reproof.

"You could at least try," Terry sighed.

Cornered, Sammy half threw up his hands. "All right. I'll go. I'll go." He just wanted to get away from them. Alone. That's what he wanted to be: left alone. Acquiescence was the easiest way out at the time. Or so it seemed.

But now he had to confront Frances and there was no way around it. Not that he hadn't give it any thought. As he walked from the Pike House to the Pi Phi house, he'd thought about just wandering around the campus. In thirty or forty minutes he could go back and tell them she wouldn't come. He'd tried--honest--but she just wouldn't come. It'd work too. More or less. His plane left at seven the next morning; he'd be gone before anyone was the wiser. But that wouldn't work. William would be pissed when he found out. No, he had to go in and face her.

He moved slowly up the walk to the open door, taking half-steps. What should he say? He couldn't think; everything ran together. Ran together into that red face. It was as clear to him now as it had been earlier that afternoon: Red, Scarlet. It was if the outer layers of skin had been stripped away, peeled off, until there was

just a thin, transparent layer left to hold the pulsing blood inside. But it wasn't his fault; he hadn't said anything. It was Fats. Old fatty Fats said it. So what if he'd thought it? He didn't say it. Not then.

But what should he say?

Sammy stopped twelve feet from the door and turned to his right.

"Hi, I'm Sammy." Then as an afterthought, "William's brother?"

Completing an about-face, he answered himself in a voice about half an octave higher. "Yes, I know."

"Yeah." His voice was apologetic but not contrite. Sammy complimented himself on his delivery, nodding as if to say "Good. Not bad at all." And he continued, "I'm sorry about this afternoon. I mean--"

"It wasn't your fault," he cut himself off.

"But I should have done something."

"What? Challenge Ace to a duel with pool cues at twenty paces."

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"Forget it."

"But--"

"Forget it. It's all right."

The quick sequence of lines made Sammy look like a recruit drilling on a parade ground.

"You sure?"

"Um hmm." He nodded. "Really." He held his hands out to prove he was telling the truth.

Sammy turned around, cocking his head to one side. "Okay. Do

you wanta go to the party?"

"This is ridiculous." Sammy broke from his solitary dialogue and moved away from the Pi Phi house. "Jeezus, who do you think you're kidding? She'll probably be as cold as ice." He stopped half-way to the street, remembering he hadn't completed his mission, and reluctantly trudged back towards the house. "Let's see." He rubbed his face. Then he turned once again to his right.

"I'm Sammy. William's brother." He offered his hand but let it drop as if it hadn't been taken.

Then he pivoted about and replied, "Yes. I know." The response was measured and cool.

"I've come to pick you up." Sammy wasn't too pleased with the line: too abrupt, he thought. But he continued with the scene.

"You mean you've been sent." She'd probably be sarcastic.

"No. I mean I've come to pick you up." He had to stand his ground.

"Thanks, but I don't think so."

"Why?"

"Because . . . Well, just because."

"Because why?"

"That's even worse." Throwing his hands up in disgust, he stopped the scene again. "What is this, Abbott and Costello?" He began again, skipping the introductory part and jumping right to the crux of the scene.

"Aren't you gonna come?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He was stumped. He couldn't think of one good reason. Pacing in front of the house, Sammy struggled for one good line. A real killer, something sure-fire. He ran his hands through his hair.

"You! What do you think you're doing?" The squeaking voice snapped his head, with his hands still on top, towards the door. He froze for a moment, taking in the silhouette. It seemed to fill the width of the opening but was a good three feet or more shy of the top. "What are you doing prowling around like that?"

Confused, Sammy searched around for someone else.

"I'm talking to you, dearie." The "dearie" came out in a squeaky Chihuahua growl.

"Oh. I" He removed his hands from his head and shoved them in his pockets.

"Want me to call the police?"

"No, no. Wait. I've come to meet someone."

"Really? Everyone's gone, dearie."

"Oh?" He moved towards the figure. "You sure? I was supposed to take" Three feet from her, Sammy could begin to make out her odd features. Taken by themselves they weren't odd, but put together She had short graying black hair that was curled close to her head. Her eyes, small and inset, were crooked. In fact, she seemed crooked and misproportioned. Her head was too small for the size of her body, and her block of a body sat on two stumpy looking

legs. Sammy realized he had stopped talking. You better say something quick. "Is this the Pi Phi house?"

She motioned with her thumb in a hitch-hikers motion to a plaque above the doorway. "That's what it says, dearie."

"Good." He wished she'd stop with the "dearie." "I'm looking for Frances Fishbein."

"She's asleep."

"I thought you said everyone had gone out."

"I said, 'Everyone's gone.' She's gone to bed, dearie."

"You sure? I--"

"Of course I'm sure. I know where all my girls are."

"Oh. Of course." Sammy screwed his face up in bewilderment.

"Something else, dearie?"

"Hmm? No. No, I suppose not." He didn't move.

"Run along then. I don't wanta hafta call the police. Get."

"Night." Sammy turned and walked away. He figured he'd done all he could. Still, he didn't know if that was good enough. He could hear them both say, "What do you mean you didn't talk to her?" But they could always call and talk to that curly headed fire-plug. At the street he turned back to the house. She was still watching him. He waved, muttering "Stuff it, dragon lady, dearie," and he headed for the Pike house.

But something caught his eye on the second floor.

Sammy couldn't mistake that profile with its squarish, horse-like features. Not wishing to give away his discovery to the fire-plug

lady by staring, he quickly moved on until he was out of her line of vision.

He sprinted across the street and skulked in the shadows of the trees and houses that faced the Pi Phi house. Squatting to make his figure indistinguishable from the shadows, Sammy studied the outline of Frances. Her head was bent down as if she were reading or writing. No doubt about it, she looked horsey. Even from that distance. He wondered why the fire-plug lady had lied. Then he caught himself mentally scaling the house. It was only one flight. A simple climb up the lattice. "Jesus. One minute you don't want to see her, and the next minute you're thinking about doing a second-story job. Forget it. Who do you think you are, James Bond?" He stood up and turned away, but he couldn't force himself to move.

Before he knew it, he was dodging among the shadows, moving in the opposite direction. When he was sure that the fire-plug lady couldn't see him, he dashed across the street, not stopping until he had hidden himself behind an oak tree. He was two houses away. From here on out it became tricky. Carefully now, he darted from the tree to the corner of a house. Then he moved along a hedge for five or six yards and took cover behind another tree. As he got closer to the Pi Phi house, he tried to imagine each step up the lattice work. He wondered how Bond would do it. Did his hands sweat, too? Finally he made it to the corner of the Pi Phi house.

But where was the lattice work?

"You klutz." Sammy leaned against the side of the house. The

brick felt cool. He couldn't figure it. Didn't you use a lattice to grow vines? "Damm!" That ripped it. There was only one other way in, and it didn't seem likely that the fire-plug lady would look favorably on him walking up the stairs. No, if he was going to get upstairs, he'd have to get her out of the way first.

He needed a diversion, a smoke screen. A screen. That was it. It worked in football, he thought. Why not here? Sammy searched the ground for something to throw. Something that would make a little noise and could be thrown about twenty yards. He had to draw the fire-plug lady far enough from the house so he could get in without being seen. He found several rocks. All too small. Then as he ran his hands through the flower bed, they came across the rusted blade of a spade.

Sammy crawled on his hands and knees next to the hedge that ran along the front of the house. He stopped five yards from the door. He could hear her but not see her. On his knees, he cocked his arm and tossed the blade the length of the house where it clipped the corner with a clang. Perfect. He flattened himself on the grass and waited.

He didn't wait long.

"Who's there?" Silence.

Sammy felt his heart pound against the ground.

"Come out." She moved from the doorway along the front of the house opposite to Sammy.

"Just a little bit more," he whispered to himself. Sammy pushed

himself up slowly; carefully he gained his feet.

"Whoever it is better come on out."

Now! He skulked into the house and wasted no time getting up the stairs. He caught his breath while he tried to get his bearings. "It's got to be this way." He started down the hall, reading the names on the doors as he went.

"Appleby. Marino. White. Morris."

"Hey."

Sammy's heart sunk to his feet then shot back up again.

"What are you doing here?"

It wasn't the fire-plug. He turned around. Frances stood there with her arms folded.

"Sammy?"

Sammy smiled weakly. "Hi."

"What are you doing here?"

"Shh!" He pointed downstairs.

"How did--"

They heard someone climbing the stairs.

"Jesus Christ."

"Hurry." She grabbed Sammy by the hand and led him to her room.

Inside, Sammy leaned against the door, weak with relief. "Thanks." He worked to catch his breath. "Dragon Lady woulda killed me."

"Who?"

"Dragon Lady. You know, body beautiful." He drew a square in the air.

She smiled.

He looked away. He felt her staring at him; he moved towards the desk.

"Well?"

"Hmm?"

"For someone who has gone to the trouble of sneaking into a sorority house, you aren't very talkative."

"Suppose not." He sat on the desk top. "I"

"Yes?"

"I've forgotten what I was gonna say." Jesus this was dumb. You're a klutz, Sammy.

"Do you do this often?"

"All the time."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm always forgetting things."

Frances stifled a laugh. "No, I meant do you break into sorority houses very often?"

"Oh." He smiled. "No, this is a first. Probably a last too." He swung his legs in small circles. "To tell you the truth I don't know why I did it."

She smiled.

Her smile only augmented her horsey quality. But it was a nice smile just the same. Better than that red face. He shifted positions so that he was sitting on his left leg. A dogeared copy of Franny and Zooey lay on the corner of the desk. Sammy crooked his neck to read

the jacket.

"Salinger?"

"Yes. He's one of my all time favorites. Have you read Catcher in the Rye?"

"Who hasn't?" Sammy picked up Franny. "It was great. Especially the part about farting in church."

Frances laughed. "Yeah. And what about the time Holden told . . . oh, what's-her-name"

"I forget."

"Anyway, he told her she was a royal pain in the ass."

"Oh, yeah."

There was a beat of silence.

"This one any good?" He motioned with Franny.

"Better."

"Really? I kinda find it hard to believe that anything could top Catcher in the Rye." Silence. "It was my book. I mean, well, sometimes I feel like he wrote it just for me. If you know what I mean."

"Exactly."

They were off. Frances tried to explain something about Salinger and Zen. Something about hands clapping. It made zero sense to Sammy, and he figured it probably did the same for anyone else. But he didn't care. When she finished, he mentioned this new guy he'd been reading. Goldman. They talked for forty-five minutes. Mostly about books, football, college and more books. Frances was explaining

the finer points of Faulkner, Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

"Now if anyone ever asks you to identify a passage of American fiction, here's the thing." This was all very confidential. "If there are big words and long sentences in it, then it's Faulkner. If there are short words and short sentences, that's Hemingway."

"What about Fitzgerald?"

"Well, with Fitzgerald it's"

In the soft light she was almost pretty, Sammy thought. Very striking. But not cute. It had to be soft light though. To round off her features.

". . . So that's the story on him," Frances concluded.

"I see," he replied very seriously, trying to give the impression that he'd been listening.

Frances let out a shriek of laughter before she could check it.

"God, I'll have Ms. Wadman up here, if I don't watch it."

"You mean the ex-Packer with the Harpo Marx hair cut?"

"Um hmm. We call her the three ton terror of the third floor. She doesn't miss a thing."

"She missed me." He grinned. "Hey, what was so funny anyway?"

"You." She straightened herself. With a dour expression and the deepest voice she could muster she mimicked, "'I see.'"

"That's my dad rubbing off on me," he explained. "He's always saying that. Especially when he hasn't been listening. He'll say, 'I see.' It's very noncommittal, you know." He realized what he'd said too late. He hoped she hadn't caught it.

"'I see.'"

They laughed.

"Shh!" Frances pointed down, indicating the three ton terror.

"What were you thinking about?"

Damn. "When?" He slid off the desk and walked over to the window.

"Right before you said 'I see.'"

"Open mouth, insert foot, and bite down." He was lost. What should he tell her? How would she react if he told her? Laugh? Cry? Scream? He felt his face warm from the rush of blood. Why did we do that, he wondered? Do dogs blush? Or cats? He ran a hand across his face.

Frances was right behind Sammy, as he turned around. He was surprised to find her there. They were as close to each other as they could be without actually touching. They stood there mute, frozen like statues. But Sammy could feel her throughout his whole body. Put your arms around her, he urged himself. Quick, before it's too late. But he couldn't move.

An anxious knocking broke the spell. "Frances?"

Too late now; it was the fire-plug.

"What's going on?" She tried the door, but it was locked.

"Nothing, Ms. Wadman."

"Open it, dearie."

"Just a minute." Frances turned back to Sammy, who was opening the window. "Hurry."

He got half way out. "See ya." Whap! He hit his head on the

window.

"You all right?"

"What happened?" Ms. Wadman asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"I just stubbed my toe," Frances said towards the door.

Sammy was out now, hanging on the sill.

"Wait a minute, Sammy." She picked up Franny and gave it to him.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Anytime."

He began to lose his grip. He had a choice: hold onto the book or the sill. He chose the book and fell. "Ohhhh!" His knees buckled as he hit the ground. But he sprang right up and hid in the shadows watching the window. He could see the fire-plug lady looking around the room, then out the window. Finally she left. Frances stuck her head out the window.

"Sammy?"

He moved out into the light.

"You all right?"

"Fine." Sammy rubbed his rump.

"Thanks."

He started to back away. "You're welcome." He motioned with the book. "I'll write you, Franny."

She smiled.

"Bye."

"Bye."

He turned and ran off, clutching the book close to his body like a football. He cut left, then back to his right as if dodging tacklers. He jumped over the last would be tackler and he was home free. Glancing back over his shoulder to survey the helpless defenders, he smiled and softly spoke to himself, "Franny. Franny. Franny."

V. LIAR

His breath came hard, and his legs stung from exhaustion. But Sniggy kept pumping, forcing himself on. He was running away from something as much as running towards something. His lungs began to burn now. He'd been running, faster at first, for how long was it? Maybe ten minutes. It seemed like ten hours. And the fire from his lungs swept to his head. His legs felt twice their weight, and he had to throw them forward to move. So slowly now. Rounding a corner, Sniggy stopped. He bent over with his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath that punctuated the midnight quiet with its frantic rasping. Every few seconds he would look up, try to focus his eyes on a house at the end of a cul-de-sac, then let his head sag back down. The fire began to dissipate, and as it did, his eyes began to function again, slowly at first like an old silent picture, but without the captions. Then the frames began to run together but there was no color; everything had a sepia tint.

Now that he was there, the urgency no longer drove him. He almost seemed repelled. He stood staring at the two story house at the end of the street. No lights. He tried to collect his thoughts. Too much. Too damn much to think about. Abe . . . Mary . . . Abe . . . Mary

Jesus Frigging Christ.

Slowly he moved toward the house. He drew deep breaths trying

to stabilize himself. He avoided the circular pool of the street light as he moved closer to the house. Abe . . . Mary . . . Abe . . . Mary . . . Abe and Mary. Their images flashed in his mind like a neon sign that read, Motel . . . Vacancy . . . Motel . . . Vacancy . . . Motel Vacancy. The images alternated faster and faster until it was just one still picture--Abe and Mary

Sniggy had watched them from three rows back as Mr. Poole gave notes on the rehearsal. They'd lean their heads together, whisper, and then laugh. He couldn't quite tell but he thought they were holding hands. They seemed awfully chummy tonight for being mortal enemies not more than two weeks ago. Well, maybe, Sniggy hoped, maybe it was just that they were playing opposite each other in the play. He'd heard that the leads in shows often become . . . what? Friends? No, more than friends. Lovers. I'm screwed anyway you look at it, he thought. Still, she was as prim and proper as ever. She'd never put out for Abe. She'd never put out period!

"Okay," Mr. Poole said. "Same time tomorrow."

There was a mass exodus for the side doors of the auditorium that led to the parking lot. Sniggy was caught in the current of people and couldn't stop when he'd come to where Abe and Mary stood. The flow carried him out the doors. But as he passed them he heard a fragment of their conversation.

"That sounds fine." She was smiling.

"Then it's set."

"Yes."

"I'll--"

Their voices merged with the shuffling of the crowd as he was pushed farther away. But once outside, Sniggy freed himself from the crowd and waited against the wall of the auditorium. Waited for either one. It didn't matter. He wanted to know what was happening. Abe stepped out the door alone.

"Hey." Sniggy caught him by the arm.

"Sniggy, what cha doing hiding in the shadows?"

"Waiting for you."

"The car's not locked."

"I forgot."

Abe wrapped his arm around Sniggy's shoulders. "You don't lie very well."

"Not enough practice, I guess."

"Hm." Abe dropped his arm. And they walked out to the car in silence, climbed in, and started off.

"Well, we certainly are talkative tonight." Abe broke the silence.

"Kinda tired."

"You're not doing well at all tonight. That's two." Abe smiled at Sniggy. "You want to hear about it."

"Bout what?"

Abe just smiled. It wasn't really a smile, Sniggy thought. No teeth, just one side of his mouth half twisted.

"You mean Mary?" There, I said it dammit. You happy, Sniggy almost tacked that on.

"You would've loved it," Abe began. "Wish you would've come. Could have seen it for yourself."

"Wait a minute." Sniggy revolved to face Abe, pulling his left leg underneath him. "You trying to tell me that she"

"You just spoiled the climax of the 'hole' story." Abe chuckled, then lightly nudged Sniggy with his hand. "Get it."

"Yeah. Funny." He stared at Abe, not long, but long enough to cut Abe's laughter. "Come on, Abe. Not even you can pull this one off."

"I could, but it happens to be the truth."

"Bull. It took me two weeks just to get a goodnight kiss. And you're trying to tell me that you've already gotten her in the sack?"

"Well it wasn't really the sack."

"I didn't think so."

"It was in the grass."

"Christ. You really expect me to believe that? I went with that . . . bitch for almost a semester."

"What can I say? I guess I work faster."

"You're a regular frigging demon, aren't you."

"I don't know about that, but she sure was hot enough."

"Goddammit!" Sniggy slammed his fist into the dashboard. "Shit!" He held his damaged hand by the wrist, gripping it hard as if he were trying to take it off.

"You all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just frigging well fine."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Sniggy's hand began swelling. He half hoped it would stop hurting, but if it did then he'd have to think about Abe and Mary. He couldn't believe what was happening. It seemed so fantastic, now, to have started as something of a lark

They had been standing in the wings watching Mary sing "Knowing When To Leave," her big number in the first act of Promises, Promises.

"She's terrible, isn't she? Too self-conscious, I mean," Abe said.

"I don't know. She'll get better."

"Maybe. You ever get her into bed?"

"What? Who? Mary?"

"Yeah."

"Are you kidding? She's too--uh--too untouchable."

"An iceberg?"

"That's a better way of putting it."

"Maybe I could thaw her out."

Sniggy had studied Abe's face. He had wondered whether this was one of Abe's lie-games. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely."

"No way," he laughed.

"Wanna bet. I could have her eating out of my hand if I want."

"You're talking crazy."

"Come on, Sniggy. Make it interesting."

"How would you do it?" How would you do it? What are you doing? You're practically going steady with her, so what the hell are you doing? Still, it'd be funny to see Mary put the freeze on Abe, and he could make a few bucks in the process.

"You'll have a front row seat."

"Ought to be interesting." Cut it out; this is ridiculous.

"Very. What do you say? Ten dollars?"

"Twenty."

"Fine," Abe said, then turned and studied Mary, grinning like a cat

He couldn't believe he'd done it. The pain helped blot it out of his mind. They pulled up in front of Sniggy's house, and he opened the door.

"Sniggy? I'm sorry. If I'd known that you felt like that I wouldn't have done it."

Sniggy turned back to Abe, searching for the truth in Abe's face. "You really . . .?" He made a circular motion with his hand.

Abe turned away from Sniggy and nodded, "Yes." It was almost inaudible.

They sat for what seemed to be hours like that. Sniggy dumbly staring at Abe, who wouldn't or couldn't look at him.

"I'm sorry, Sniggy. I didn't know."

"Yeah, well. I suppose it's done. Can't undo it, huh?"

"No. Can't undo it."

Sniggy started to get out of the car, but Abe stopped him with his hand. "How's the hand?"

"Hurts like hell."

"Let me see."

Abe offered him his hand. Sniggy turned back, hesitated, then placed his hand in Abe's, palm up. Abe gently turned it over and probed the surface with both hands.

"It's swollen."

"Tell me about it."

"You ought to put some ice on it."

"Yeah."

"Can you move it?"

Sniggy painfully moved his fingers but he couldn't make a fist.

"Some."

"Don't think it's broken. Maybe a massage would loosen it up."

"Careful. Jesus Frigging Christ."

"Relax."

Abe concentrated on the hand. He kneaded it slowly, softly, as if it were dough that would bruise. "Relax. Relax."

"It hurts, dammit."

"I know. But this will help loosen it up."

"Yeah." Sniggy tried to let the tension ease out of his body, but he was all knotted up. He watched Abe as he massaged his hand. Abe didn't look up; he just concentrated on Sniggy's hand. Finally, Sniggy began to unwind. He slipped back in his seat, closing his

eyes. He remembered how Papa Sniggly used to massage him when he hurt himself. He felt warm. It was the kind of warmth you feel from someone doing something for you, something small, but it seemed big.

"How's that." Abe let go of his hand. Sniggy sat up.

"Fine." Too bad it never lasted, he thought. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Put some ice on it."

"Right." He swung himself out of the car.

"Sniggy."

"Hmm?" He stuck his head back in the car.

"I'm sorry."

Sniggy nodded, closing his eyes. He closed the car door and walked towards his house. Abe drove off. Sniggy looked over his shoulder, following the car until it turned the corner and was gone. He fumbled for his key, slid it in the lock, but did not turn it. He had to know. He had to be sure. Looking down the street where Abe's car had been, pictures began flashing in front of him. Abe . . . Mary . . . Abe . . . Mary . . . he began running, sprinting . . . Abe . . . Mary . . . Abe . . . Mary . . . Abe and Mary

He stood at the curb in front of the house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Sniggy wondered how he'd get up to the balcony that spanned the entire face of the miniature Gone-With-The-Wind house. You'd have to have a ladder--a sixteen foot one at that--or a rope. A rope wouldn't do either because he had never been very good at the

rope climb in P.E. But that was entirely academic, like the ladder, because he didn't have a rope. How then? How in the hell was he going to get up to that balcony? He moved through the yard towards the house studying his predicament and stopped under the gaslight. It was out, but he could still read the placard that hung from it--1581--over that in caps--HIGHTOWER.

There was a tree at the corner of the house. A giant oak. It looked sturdy enough and might hold his weight. But even if it did, even if he could crawl out on the limb closest to the balcony, he still had four feet to negotiate. Four feet of air between the tree and the balcony. No, that was no good. Still, it was the only solution that seemed even remotely possible unless he wanted to ring the door bell and wake the whole house up in the middle of the night. That was definitely out.

The more Sniggy thought about it, the more impossible it seemed; however, the more impossible it seemed, the more he wanted to try it. He stood under the tree and mapped out his assault. A car turned the corner. Sniggy slipped behind the tree and crouched in the shadows, as he watched the police car patrolling the subdivision. The car moved slowly towards the house where Sniggy was hiding. He hugged close to the tree. As the car turned in the cul-de-sac and slowly motored away, Sniggy stepped from behind the tree. The patrol car had hyped him up even more. He bent down and retied the laces of his sneakers so that they were good and tight. Standing once more, he found a knot on the trunk three feet up and put his left foot on

it and sprung up, latching onto the crotch of the tree, then pulling himself up into it. Bark broke off in his hands as he shinnied out the limb toward the balcony. He stopped halfway out it. The damn thing wasn't going to hold. He still needed to go out a good three, maybe four feet so that he had a chance of making the jump to the balcony. But what the hell, he was already this far. So he began to inch his way out again. The limb began to creak. He got up on all-fours, readying himself for the jump. Then, he scampered out another foot or so and jumped as the limb cracked!

He barely caught hold of the cast iron railing and hung there. His sweaty fingers were losing their grip. "Come on dammit," he grunted. He swung his left leg up, wedging his foot between the bars of the railing. The rest was a piece of cake. His arms ached. He shook them, like a swimmer before a race, trying to unknot them. It was funny, somehow. Fifteen, twenty minutes ago his hand felt like it was coming off, but he didn't feel anything now. He guessed that it was due partly to the massage and partly to the heat of the action. He couldn't stand there all night, though; that cop might come back. There was no place to hide up there. All he had to do was tap at Mary's window to get her attention, and let things just happen from there. He had a whole speech prepared for her. But there were four windows. Which one was hers? He didn't know where her room was, or even if it was at the front of the house.

Sniggy sat back against the railing. "Jesus Frigging Christ."

There was only one thing to do, start at one end and rap at each

window until someone showed and hope her room was on this side of the house. Of course, he would have to find a place to hide once a light came on. He wasn't that hopeful that the first one he tried would be Mary's. But there wasn't any place to hide. Unless he hung off the balcony. He tiptoed to the far left window and looked in. It was too dark. "Here goes nothing." He started to tap but stopped his hand before it struck the window. "Sheer brilliance," he complimented himself. Sniggy scratched at the screen, hoping it would sound like a cat . . . or something. "Come on, dammit." He scratched harder, louder.

Nothing.

He moved to the next window and scratched at the screen. He crouched, ready to dash for the railing and lower himself over the side. Only his hands would show. Risky? Sure, but it wasn't a matter of choices. Sniggy's scratching became more frantic. "Damn."

Nothing.

Was it possible that all of the bedrooms were at the back? No. That would be a stupid way to build a house. There were two windows left. Maybe he wasn't making enough noise. Sniggy slunk to the third window and smushed his face against the glass. He couldn't see a thing, so he started pawing at the screen. Not a sound came from the room. Desperate, he began meowing. Softly at first, then louder and louder until he was practically howling, "Meow. Mee-ow. Mee--"

Sniggy started at the sound of a window slapping open.

"Zachariah Sniggly Walker!" The voice came from the fourth window.

"Son-of-a-bitch-hell. Scared the hell out of me." Caught. He was on the defensive, and he knew he had to think of something that would give him the upper hand.

"What in the name of God's green earth are you doing?" Mary asked.

He stifled a laugh 'cause he knew he'd never get anywhere if she were mad. Mary's irritated tone and her coy expressions always struck Sniggy as laughable. And she always got mad when Sniggy laughed at her.

"What are you laughin' at?"

"Who me?" A big smile broke across Sniggy's face despite his efforts.

"Is there anyone else out there?"

"Nope."

"Wipe that smile off your face."

Sniggy ran his hand over his face from top to bottom, transforming the smile into a frown.

"Cute. Real cute." A trace of irritation remained in her voice, but Sniggy could tell he was breaking through it. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Let's see." He flicked his left arm out. "Ten 'til one."

No reply.

This wasn't a good sign. Maybe he'd gone too far. On the other hand, he thought he saw the beginning of a smile, but Mary had pulled

away from the window, so he couldn't be sure.

"How about if I call the police?" The strident quality was gone, replaced by a fake irritative tone, like she used on stage.

"How about not calling them and just say you did?" She really was a lousy actress, he thought.

"You better get out of here 'cause I'm calling."

"You wouldn't do that." Sniggy felt a sense of relief that did not last; they were back to their normal bantering relationship: a kind of cat and mouse game. But she never gave him an opportunity to get past this stage; she shielded herself with her coyness.

"Wouldn't I?" She retreated from the window.

"Hey, wait. Wait."

"Give me one good reason." She raised her voice.

"Shh!"

"Don't shh me."

"You'll wake everybody up."

"There's no one here to wake up."

"You mean I climbed that tree, nearly broke my neck, for nothing?"

"I suppose so."

He saw no reason to prolong the game. "Can I come in then?"

"Why?"

"Ah, come on."

"Go A-way."

A car turned the corner. Sniggy flattened himself on the balcony. Mary giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"You act like you were James Bond or something."

"It's no joke. The cops have already been by here once."

"It does look like a police car now that you mention it. I think I'll yell for help." She had him at her mercy and she was milking it for all it was worth.

"Cut it out will ya." He hugged close to the balcony's cool cement.

The car turned in the cul-de-sac and headed away. Sniggy cautiously raised his head.

"That wasn't a police car," he said.

"How careless of me."

Sniggy squatted against the face of the house. Mary cackled, "You'll never know how funny you looked." She covered her mouth with one hand, to stifle her laughter, and with the other she pointed at Sniggy.

He pushed himself up. There's only one way to play it, he thought. Fight coyness with coolness. If it didn't work, there was nothing lost; the game always ended in a stalemate anyway.

"Where you going?"

"Home to get drunk."

"Surely you didn't come over here just to tell me that. You certainly have been acting strange since" Her words trailed off.

". . . Since I've been hanging around with Abe?"

"I didn't say that."

"No." He affected a tired Byronic smile. He liked the pose. It worked with other girls; he wondered why he hadn't tried it with Mary before?

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like someone who's . . . who's . . . I don't know. Just stop looking at me like that."

"Can't help it. I'm tired. I'm so ever loving tired." He hoped he hadn't overdone it.

"What's the matter? No jokes left?" She attempted to lighten the atmosphere.

"They're tired too." Sniggy swung one leg over the railing. "See you around. I'm off to rob the old man's liquor cabinet."

"Hey. Why don't you have a drink here?"

"You serious?" It worked.

"Sure. As long as you promise not to try anything fancy."

"You mean . . . ahh?" He made a tiny circular motion with his hand.

"Exactly."

"It beats walking home." Bingo.

Mary unlatched the screen; Sniggy struggled to get through the window. It wasn't as big as he had thought it was.

"Hurry up. It's freezing."

"I'm hurryin' as fast as I can."

"Now remember, no funny stuff."

"Sure." He wasn't sure but he thought he detected a quiver in her voice. The room was dark; he scanned it slowly.

"Come on." Mary stood in the hall.

"Right behind you."

He followed her down the stairs, studying her tentative steps. It must 've been the darkness. Then again, she should know the house better than that. No, she minced down the stairs like a novice actress, suddenly self-conscious of her slightest movement. She led Sniggy into the living room and motioned for him to sit in the reclining chair.

"Your father's?"

"Yes. I'll get the glasses and ice." Mary started out.

"You having one too?"

"Father says it's not proper to drink alone."

"Father knows best."

The living room was almost pitch black with the drapes closed. Sniggy lay back in the recliner, the leather cool on his neck. He knew he could get her into bed if he played it right. But for some reason he wouldn't let himself concentrate on how to go about it. Yet at the same time he knew he had to do it. He had realized that as he had watched Abe drive off, thirty, maybe forty minutes earlier. He had to know the truth. It bothered him, though, that he couldn't concentrate, think things out; he liked to be in control. The crash of glass shattering came from the kitchen.

"You all right?"

"Fine. It's just that it's so dark in here," from the kitchen

in a stage whisper.

"Turn the lights on, why don't you?"

"You crazy? What would the neighbors think?"

"I don't know. What would the neighbors think?"

"You know, lights on at this hour. My parents away."

"They might think you're just getting a glass of water."

"They might. But people always think the worst." Mary entered with two glasses filled with ice.

"They're probably all asleep anyway," Sniggy said.

"What do you want?"

"I don't know. I was thinking along the lines of a beer."

"We don't have any. Besides I've already got the glass. How about Scotch?"

"Fine, I guess."

She measured out a jigger and poured it in the glass.

"You do this often?" he asked. "You look professional."

"Daddy lets me make him drinks. Soda or water?"

"Hmm?"

"With your scotch. Soda or water?"

"Oh." Sniggy studied the choices. "Nothing."

"Straight?"

"Yeah."

She brought him the drink and sat on the arm of the recliner.

"Here's lookin' at you, kid." Sniggy raised his glass and swallowed a huge slug. "Jesus! That stuff's rotten." He gagged, holding out

the glass.

Mary took the glass from him and crossed to the bar. She rushed back to him and slapped him sharply on the back. The coughing began to subside.

"You all right."

He shook his head, yes. She looked helpless leaning over him, her robe half open. Gagging had been a bit of luck. All he had to do was play it on out.

"Lie back." She pushed him back in the recliner. "I'll get you a cold washcloth."

This is no good, he thought. It won't really solve anything. It will, but it won't. Not really. Besides she's too untouchable. Or was she? He had to get out. What was he doing? Sniggy started to sit up as Mary came back with the damp washcloth.

"Lie back."

"I better be going."

"Don't be silly. Now, lie back." She placed the washcloth over his eyes.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." She bent over Sniggy and kissed him.

"What did I do to deserve that?"

"Just felt like it."

"You think you might feel like it again?"

"Might." She leaned back over him. As she kissed him, Sniggy pulled her into the chair. She resisted for a minute

"Sniggy, you promised."

"Hm?"

. . . then gave in.

He couldn't remember how they made it back to her bedroom, or what happened exactly. It was all fragmented; he recalled disconnected parts but not the whole picture. She'd been half-hysterical, crying one minute, calmly figuring how to hide her de-flowering from her parents the next. Sniggy lay in bed alone now, the clean sheets cool against his skin. Can you get blood out just by throwing the sheets in the washer, he wondered? He didn't expect that much blood. Did he expect blood at all? He wasn't sure. It was funny in a way. He'd won the bet, but he was gonna have to pay Abe anyway. He couldn't tell him he'd screwed her and she had been a virgin. Abe would just laugh and shrug his shoulders. The twenty bucks wasn't worth having to hear Abe's maniacal laughter that pronounced his verdict, "I just create other people's truths."

Returning, Mary brought Sniggy back from his thoughts.

"They're soaking," she said, straightening her hair in the bureau mirror, her back to Sniggy.

"Sorry."

"I think they'll come clean."

Sniggy studied her as she worked on her hair. She brushed her tangled hair with self-absorbed strokes. Nothing self-conscious there, he told himself. He couldn't help thinking that there was something he liked about her hair all in a mess. However, he couldn't

place it. Once again the surge of helplessness hit him. Why couldn't he think, analyze? Dammit, he didn't have control.

"Sniggy?"

"Hm."

"Do I look different."

He glanced at her quickly, realizing he couldn't look her in the eye. "Yeah, your hair's fixed."

"No, no. I mean different. Because . . ."

"I don't think I follow." He looked past her, over her shoulder.

"Well Jordon told me--and she got it from her sister who's at Texas--that you look different after . . . that people could tell that you'd . . ."

"You look the same to me." Doesn't she, Abe? Sniggy put his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling.

"Good. I was worried for a minute that . . . You all right?"

"Fine."

"Sniggy?"

"Yeah."

"Can I ask you something?"

"I suppose."

"You know while we were . . . ahh . . ."

"Yeah. I think I get the picture."

"Good. I don't like those words. Anyway, while we were, you know. I thought I heard you say something."

"What?" I hope it's nothing stupid, like "Marry me," he thought.

"Well I could only make out one word, kinda."

"Oh, what?"

"It sounded like a girl's name. Abby? Yeah, Abby. You just kept saying something about Abby, over and over. Right while we were . . . well, you know."

"Yeah? I don't know any Abbys."

"Sure? Maybe one of your elementary school crushes?"

"I'm sure."

"Don't get defensive. I was just curious. I probably shouldn't have brought it up. It's not really important. Not now. I mean, I'm not even sure if that's what it was or not. I was just curious, that's all."

"To tell the truth, I don't remember saying anything."

"Oh," she said, as if disappointed that she'd never know who it was, but not really upset. "I love you, Sniggy."

You did it again, Abe, Sniggy thought. He pictured him dying laughing about it. But I'll get you this time. I know. But I'm not gonna let you know that I know 'cause now I'll have the edge. Mary's voice registered. "Hmm?"

"I said, I love you."

"Oh." Sniggy wished he had a cigarette. A beer would be better.

"Me too."

VI. FOLLIES

The fluorescent lights glinted off Seymour's glasses, blinding him. But he didn't move. He sat on the hall steps just outside the stage door. His elbows resting on his thighs. His hands hanging limp. They were graceful and long. Manipulators. "Magic hands," someone had called them. Who was it? Couldn't remember. Who cares? The corner of his mouth turned up into a smile that was somewhere between irony and scorn. Irony for the appellation. Scorn for his muddled mind that couldn't remember.

Two figures in stage-hand black rushed through the stage door and hopped up the steps (two at a time) past him. Someone said, "Thirty minutes to curtain." Still he didn't budge. He wondered why he couldn't tell where the voice came from. The two on the steps? From the stage? Seymour tried to block out the murmuring stage noise (or was it the hum of the heater fans?) to clear his mind. . . . There.

Silence.

No.

The door opened again and another black clad figure flashed into the hall and hurried back through the door. But the glared image remained before Seymour, like an afterthought. White head and hands, the rest was black. Slowly the glaring white background faded to a

sepia tint, then to black, leaving only a pair of hands and a head visible, floating in a void. They were blurs at first. Grainy spots of white on black: one larger than the other two. The smaller ones moved in an awkward harmony while the larger one remained fixed. But somehow it seemed a part of the odd movement of the two. The spots began to gain form now. Long bony hands circled, opened and closed in a sort of pantomime controlled by the bespectacled face that strained consciously not to watch them.

His pallid hands tore the paper into bits. Beaded with sweat, Seymour's face looked like the second day of the three-day flu. Clammy and white. He stepped toward a little brown-haired girl who sat front and center of a cluster of ten year olds. The "birthday girl." She had the upper hand in their struggle; she had ruined, to some degree, everything but a couple of card tricks. He was good with cards. He needed to assert himself or he'd end up the laughing stock of the class, a failure at fourteen. He needed to counter-attack.

"I'm gonna break one of the cardinal rules of a magician." Seymour's voice cracked; he cleared his throat. "I'm gonna show you how this trick works." He'd seen Marc Wilson do it before: a double paper trick. It was a dynamite pocket illusion. Just what he needed to regain control. "Of course you don't really restore the torn paper."

He paused to let it sink in. Surveying the room, he could see the disillusionment in the kids' faces. Except the one, Sally

Hightower. She gloated, triumphing in the fact that she had reduced Seymour to showing how the illusions were done. But he'd show her, all right. He'd pull this off, 'cause he had to, and then she'd be the one with egg on her face, not him. He glanced quickly at the trio in the corner who were monitoring the affair. Mary (Sally's older sister), her mother, and Sniggy Walker (He'd gotten him into this mess. "Seymour'd love to do a little magic for your sister's party. Wouldn't kiddo? Sure he would. He's just dying to," he told Mary.) Seymour smiled to himself as he watched them shuffle and mumble. Son-of-a-bitch if he wouldn't show them too. "The idea is to swap a whole sheet that you have palmed in your right hand for the torn pieces. Like so." He did it cleanly. His fingers moved with a speed and accuracy he'd never known before. If he hadn't tipped them off, they never would have seen it. He knew he could pull it off now. Before he'd only thought he could, but now he knew. Because all he had to do was the basic paper trick and that was a snap. Besides, he had everyone off guard by now. "A few magic words. Abra Kadabra Presto Change-O. Viola." He produced the first sheet. "The only problem with this trick is you're stuck with the torn pieces in your hand. Which isn't a problem if you can do one-handed magic tricks. But since I can't, I'll just have to make it whole again." His hands moved quickly and efficiently. Another solid sheet. Seymour showed them that his hands were empty and they shrieked with laughter.

He glanced at Sally, expecting to see her slumped in defeat. But she was laughing and clapping with the rest. He didn't understand.

But that didn't matter 'cause he'd done it; he'd shown them what real magic was. No one could've done that trick better. Wilson. Blackstone. Houdini. Even Merlin. He was one of them now. Name in lights: Wannamaker the Wonderful. Their laughter turned to chants, "See-moore, See-moore." Sally was the loudest one of all; she held out her arms for him. Seymour picked her up (she really was kinda pretty) and whirled her around the room. She whispered something. He could barely make out snatches of it: "See-moore . . . magic hands . . . See-moore."

No, that wasn't it.

Seymour tore the doubled paper in half, then one half into little bits. It looked as if he had torn the whole thing up, but he still had one single piece the size of the double one. His ghost-white hands shook from the tremor that radiated from his stomach.

"Notice that the end is never out of sight." Seymour held the torn bits and the 'whole' one in his left hand. "Say a few magic words." He held the fist out to Sally.

"Aah. You got another piece in your other hand."

Laughter. Everyone thought she was cute.

Seymour opened his right hand; it was empty. "Nothin' there." Her mistake bolstered Seymour's flagging confidence. Out of the side of his mouth he whispered Bogart-style, "Not this time, shweetheart." Then louder so everyone could hear, "Say a couple magic words. You do know some, don't you?" He used the last as a goad; he just couldn't pass up the chance.

"Who needs it. It's all just hocus-pocus anyway."

"Well, well. She does know some. Not the best ones you could

use, but they'll have to do in a pinch." Seymour licked his forefinger and thumb, then pulled at the edge of the paper that stuck out of his fist. "Just as I suspected. Those weren't strong enough. Used too many times."

He licked his fingers again. Better not pocket the torn pieces, he thought. Too obvious. He tugged at the edge, exposing more of it, then he went back to his mouth with his fingers. He'd have to use the mouth "getaway." Get the torn pieces to stick to his wet fingers and leave them in his mouth the next time he licked them. It was more difficult, but he'd done it before. In practice. He'd have to take the chance 'cause he figured she would want to search him and he'd have to let her: after all she was the "birthday girl." Seymour could almost hear Mary and her mother say it. As he pulled at the solid piece this time, he could feel the smaller bits adhere to his fingers. Once more to his mouth and he left them there. He'd surprised himself at how easily and cleanly he'd done it. "Viola!" He produced a single sheet of paper and quickly pulled a ruler from his pocket to demonstrate that it was the same length and to red-herring a pocket "getaway."

"I know where the torn one is. I know where the torn one is." Sally skipped in front of the others chanting.

"Where?" Seymour called her bluff knowing that she'd say the pocket because of the ruler bit.

"Your mouth."

He couldn't breathe. Other people's hearts sunk, but not

Seymour's. His breath became shallow and his stomach knotted. He looked to Sniggy for help. All he got was a shrug that seemed to say, "It was pretty obvious, Seymour."

"Let me see. Let me see." The rest of the kids picked up the chant. Then Mary broke in, "Go on, Seymour. After all she is the birthday girl."

"Kneel down," she commanded.

Why didn't anyone believe in magic anymore, Seymour asked himself as he knelt before Sally. The vanquished. Then with what seemed a super-human effort, because he couldn't let them see him do it, he swallowed. Sally inspected his mouth, pulling and poking like a maniacal dentist.

She found nothing.

An exhausted smile worked across Seymour's face as he rose. Sniggy ambled across to him.

"Hey, kiddo. I thought for sure you'd put them in your mouth. The bits of paper I mean."

A pause.

"Magic. I made it whole again. With these." He thrust out his hands.

"Come on, kiddo. Where'd you put 'em? In your pocket?"

Seymour formed an O with his mouth.

"But--"

"I swallowed them." Sniggy was howling but Seymour still had to ask. "How come you can't believe I made it whole again?"

"You keep on trying, Seymour. You got a pair of magic hands."
He let out a cackle. "Yes sir, Kiddo. You got A-number-one magic hands."

But Seymour wasn't listening. He studied Sally. Her brown hair casually out of place, falling over her shoulders in loose waves, gave her pouty face a kind of sophisticated-innocence only little girls can have. There was something triumphant in her defeat. But she couldn't recognize it; no one could. Except Seymour. Her sad brown puppy-dog eyes cut short what little exuberance he was feeling. She would have crucified him. She almost did. Why didn't he feel like a winner?

"Mr. Wannamaker." The voice resonated firmly in Seymour's mind, chasing the images and thoughts away. Seymour tried to recall them but couldn't. Nothing but the black void remained and that gradually transposed back into the glare of the fluorescent lights. "Mr. Wannamaker." Again the same resonating voice. A tall silhouette hovered over Seymour. Green trousers and sports coat, gaudy brown plastic looking shoes--Boothe. It had to be; no one else would wear clothes like that; no one else could have made the first six months of college as miserable for Seymour. He always seemed to be hovering over him.

Seymour stumbled to his feet. He was taller than he, but Boothe had a way of looking over his half-moon glasses and down his thin nose that made him seem to tower over everyone. His salt and pepper moustache gave his mouth a stern look, even when he smiled. Boothe

was not smiling now.

"Mr. Wannamaker." He paused for dramatic effect. That always irritated Seymour. "We do have a show to do, don't we?"

Seymour cringed at the royal 'we': he hated that worse than the pregnant pauses. But it was appropriate for Boothe, so condescending. He slid his hands into his pockets and slouched his shoulders forward. "Yeah."

"Well?"

"Right."

Seymour moved past Boothe to the prop table. It depressed him. That's all he'd done for the past six months: work crew. The black sweat shirt and pants (the badge of his humiliation--he was a comedian and a damn good one too) depressed him even more. He began checking the prop list against the props on the table.

"Let's do it right, hmm?"

Like it was his fault the show was a turkey. Henry, Sweet Henry. It bombed on Broadway. How in the name of God did he expect it to play in Houston? Seymour spun to confront him, but Boothe's black eyes glaring over his glasses stopped him. Stupid bastard. Seymour froze.

"The guns will work tonight, won't they?"

No, I sabotage the things every night and I'm gonna do it again tonight. "I'll do what I can."

"See that they work. Won't you, hmm?" He left.

Seymour picked up a blank gun, turned, and aimed it at the back

of Boothe's head.

"Hey-ee?" Seymour liked to say it as if it had two syllables, pitching the second one a half-step higher than the first. He'd seen Paul Newman do it in Harper.

"Wannamaker, what are you doing?"

He'd never seen Boothe panic-stricken before. He liked it. "It's all over Boothe ol' boy."

"Is . . . is that loaded."

You better believe it. And I'd just love an excuse to splatter you all over the wall. Sweat rolled down Seymour's brow; he brushed it away from his eyes with his sleeve. Boothe began to regain the composure that the shock of being cornered by Seymour had destroyed.

"Listen, Wannamaker . . . Seymour. You shoot that thing and it'll be heard from here to Dallas."

"Fine."

"You'll go to jail. Maybe even the chair."

"Possible, but I doubt it. You killed Johnson; Parker found out about it so you killed him too. But you didn't count on me, did you? The Company sent three of us." He stepped toward Boothe.

"Now I've got you."

"You've got nothing."

"Don't I?" He wiped at his brow again. "I've got the cancelled checks. Very sloppy. Tttt."

"They don't prove a thing."

"We'll see."

Boothe started to walk away, calling Seymour's bluff.

"Boothe. I'm warning you." His hand shook. He gripped the gun two-handed. "Don't ma--" Seymour squeezed off three rounds. The hall reverberated with the blasts. The bullets lifted Boothe off his feet and slammed him into the wall like a discarded doll. He lumped to the floor with a dull thud. A headline flashed through his head: FRUSTRATED COMEDIAN SLAYS DIRECTOR, UNCOVERS HOUSTON SPY RING.

"Hey Seymour. Guns fixed?"

"Jerry." He flicked open the carriage of the blank gun. Six rounds, none fired. "Nope. Frankly, my dear," he slipped into his Clark Gable routine, "I don't give a damn."

"Boothe--"

"That bastard can kiss off--"

"Hey--"

"You know what that sorry son-of-a-bitch did? He had the nerve to imply that I was the reason this show stinks. Because the guns don't work. If the department wasn't so cheap, they'd buy new ones. But that's not the real problem. You know what Boothe said?"

"I can imagine."

"He strolls up to me, cocks his head back ever so slightly (you know the way he does)," Seymour mimicked Boothe, "and he says to me, the bastard, 'Let's do it right tonight, hmm?' and then, 'The guns will work tonight, won't they?' Can you believe . . . that sorry--"

"Take it easy. Take it easy." Jerry put his hands on Seymour's shoulders and began to massage them. Trying to relieve the tension.

"Can you--"

"Hey. It's not gonna do any good, right?"

"Guess not. You sound just like my mother. It just gets to me.

Six months I've done nothing but flunky crew work."

"Everybody does."

"Yeah, yeah. Sure. But not everybody gets the shaft like I do. Everytime I turn around." Seymour was leaning back against the prop table, almost sitting on the edge. The strident tone disappearing, his voice verged on tears he fought to control. "It's just not fair." He stopped. Now he had control of himself. "They just don't give you a chance. But they'll put an idiot like Brett in the lead of this Turkey musical."

"Would you want to die every night trying to get the audience to laugh at this abortion?"

"That's not the point. The point is is that if you don't get on stage, you're nowhere in this department. You're something everybody wipes his feet on."

"Not everybody." Jerry smiled.

"Yeah, well . . . present company excepted, of course"
Something was wrong; he tried to remember what he was saying.

"Thanks." His fingers continued to work on Seymour's shoulders.

"Take her, for example." He motioned towards a girl who would probably pass for a maid before she would a college coed. She was what Sniggy would call a two-alarm woofer. Seymour smiled at the thought. "Even she treats me like crap, and God knows she ain't

got nothin' to be proud of. Look at that face. My dog would get a date before she would."

"Don't tell me."—Jerry had a queer sort of grin on his face—"you're secretly in love with Ruth but you just--"

"God." He guffawed. "That's revolting."

"Yes, I thought you'd think that."

There it was again. Not something he'd said but how he'd said it. He couldn't place it; he lost his train of thought; he tried to push it out of his mind. A gigantic silence. Seymour tensed. His shoulders weren't being massaged. The fingers glided lightly over his sweat shirt, but he could feel them more now. It doubled his stomach: he wanted to vomit. No, he had to be wrong, he just had to be, 'cause of everybody he'd met at college and especially the drama department, Jerry was the only one that treated Seymour semi-human, so he just couldn't be--

"Would you like a kiss?"

Oh, my God, no. It can't . . . What do I . . . Christ, it just can't be. But he had to say something. Stall him. ANYTHING. "That depends." He hoped against hope.

"On what?"

"Wh-who does the kissing."

"Me."

"No."

Seymour gagged as he bolted out of Jerry's grasp and somehow stumbled outside through the two side doors marked with a lighted

red and white exit sign. He retched all over the sidewalk until his gut was just one big knot and he couldn't retch any more because there was nothing left. Still doubled up, Seymour pushed himself away from the doors. He didn't know where; he just knew he had to move. He sucked in shallow gulps of misty-cold March air. He felt worked over.

Before he realized it he was in the University Center trying to warm himself. He remembered he'd left his jacket: he didn't care. His breathing came easier now. The knot was now only a lump. He drifted through the lobby, taking guarded looks over his shoulder.

"Caun A hulp yo?"

He stood in front of the cigarette counter, blankly staring at the Arabian attendant.

"Caun A hulp yo?"

"Hm? . . . ah . . . yeah. Cigarettes." From the way the Arab angled his head and sneered, he figured he had a funny look on his face. And the Arab could tell he didn't smoke. But he had to say something. You just don't walk up to a counter for nothing, do you? Faced with a wall of cigarettes, that did it. The Arab didn't move. "Cigargettes. I want some ci-gar-ettes." He didn't understand. Why did people hire these camel jockeys when they can't speak English for Christ's sakes. "You know, puff-puff." Seymour mimed smoking.

"Undirstaund. Undirstaund."

"Good." But he didn't move. "Well?"

"Watt kind puff-puffs yo waunt?" His cold, black eyes were

accusing.

"Oh." Smart-ass A-rab. He surveyed the different brands. What kind? Non-filtered ones were too strong. He'd tried some Pall Malls in high school, part of his attempt to toughen up his image. On top of that you got all that tobacco in your mouth. Menthols? Not strong enough, too queer looking. "Winstons?"

"Dat queschun or watt?"

"Or watt. Winstons."

"Feeftée-fif."

Seymour drug some change out of his pocket, tossed the money on the counter, took the pack and walked away. He turned back. "Matches."

"Tu."

"Here." He flipped the Arab a nickel. "Keep the change."

"Tanks."

"No sweat. We're all filthy rich."

He needed to think. The lobby was empty except for the Arab and a kid with long curly brown hair. He flopped on a sofa with his back to the Arab. Why did these things always happen to him? He didn't go looking for it. Jesus H. Christ and his damn crutch. What did the H. stand for? He fumbled with the package and finally got a cigarette out and lit it. The guy with all the hair was staring at him. They shouldn't let high school kids on campus, he thought. Seymour scrunched down in the sofa and closed his eyes. That's just what he needed. He prayed the kid wasn't queer. He let the hand with the cigarette hang off the edge of the sofa. His mind went black again

as it had on the steps.

But there were no "magic hands." Just endless darkness. It must have been from fatigue. Whatever the cause, Seymour intended to savor it. A black vacuum. Something moved. It wasn't anything he could "see" (too dark for that); it was more a sense. Cautious movements, stalking movements. For a moment Seymour thought he could make out two hands. Black hands reaching out . . . for him?

He had gotten up with the rest and had begun to file out of the TV room that was in the basement of the dorms. Seymour hadn't noticed him before; he'd been too wrapped up in the Olympics. The awkwardness caught his eye first. This slight black guy lay across three chairs. What made it really awkward was that the chairs, though connected, all had arm rests. Like theatre seats but without the padding. Their eyes met for an instant as Seymour wondered how anyone could be comfortable like that. But he filed on out and his mind flipped back to the Olympics.

Russi had been terrific flying down the mountain, his skis chattering in the ruts made by the previous downhillers. A couple times he seemed out of control but he was just on the edge, shooting down the mountain as if he were being chased, fleeing for his life, knowing it was hopeless but busting a gut trying anyway because he just had to win. And he did! Stopped at the bottom, he slipped his goggles down round his neck and looked for his time. A nonchalant smile came to his face when he saw that he'd won. There were more

skiers to come down on their runs, but he knew he had won.

Seymour crowded into the elevator. There were at least fifteen or twenty people crammed into it. Seymour was stuffed into a corner at the back. "Twelve. Somebody push twelve," and he drifted back to the mountain.

They'd done some trick camera work. They shot a whole sequence of a downhill run from the racers' perspective. A give-you-the-sense-of-it sort of thing. He felt his stomach sag (like it does when a plane takes off or a roller coaster suddenly slashes down a sharp grade) as he got airborne coming off a bump. On the ground, back in the tuck position, he had to gain more speed if he was going to do it. His legs ached from the strain of trying to keep the skis from chattering. But it was working because the boundaries of the course hurtled by now, indistinguishable except as a blur. And he felt he could do it if he could only hang in there. He was ragged in the turns, sometimes only on one ski, sometimes airborne, 'cause he was really moving now. And being ragged didn't matter 'cause he was screaming down the hill faster than anyone had ever gone before. Faster than Russi even. And all he had to do was stay on his skis and finish and the gold medal was his. A sharp left-hander and he was airborne again, but, oh God, he'd lost control; he was going too fast. His left ski dipped and if he caught the tip in the snow it was all over. He'd be a human bobsled crashing into the hay bales--helpless. He shifted his weight back. He might fall if he got too far back, but he didn't have a choice. The skis hit flat; his rump

touched the snow for a second, then he was up again. He made it: OLYMPIC CHAMPION SEYMOUR WANNAMAKER, AMERICAN NIPS RUSSI IN DOWNHILL, the headlines read.

Sometime later the elevator doors had opened.

"Who wanted twelve?" Five sets of eyes settled on Seymour.

Seymour shuffled out, smiling. He thought he noticed the black guy from downstairs give him the same strange look as before. But he couldn't tell for sure: "they all looked the same." He chuckled at his joke and wandered down the hall to his room. His roommate was out. Seymour left the door open; he didn't know why.

The room was dark but for the light from the hall and the study light over his desk. Seymour hunched over The Iliad and tried to make some sense out of it. It all seemed a mess. All these heroes died (they had to); it just didn't make sense. Why? It was fated that's all, his instructor had explained. The will of the gods. But it didn't make sense.

A shadow blocked the hall light. Seymour looked up. He didn't recognize him. All he could see was that he was small, slight and black. The guy from downstairs.

Silence.

"Want something?" Seymour asked.

"Have any aspirin?"

"No." The guy didn't move. Seymour wanted him out. He gave him the willies. "I think my roommate does." He rifled through one of his roommate's drawers and produced a giant bottle of St.

Joseph's and gave him two.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it." He replaced the bottle and returned to his chair. The black guy stood silently.

"There's a fountain down the hall."

"I know." He sat on the edge of Seymour's bed.

Seymour felt a chill come over his body.

"Where ya live?" the black guy asked. "I mean where's your home?"

What-the-hell-is-going-on. "Red Creek. Twenty miles south."

His mind raced. Probably some psycho-killer. Don't panic.

"Humm. Live there long?"

"Ten years or so."

The black guy's head bobbed slowly, assimilating the information.

Seymour wondered what his "game" was.

"What's your father do?"

"He's a mortgage banker." Seymour understood the blank simian look. "You know, he loans money." What is this, twenty questions? Why are you answering, dummy?

He flashed yellowed teeth.

A kidnapper. He's gonna kidnap me. But he can't be alone; he's not big enough. Probably two coal black gorillas outside the door. He finds out if the parents got money; they're the muscle. Maybe, just maybe, he could bolt past them. But he'd have to cross the entire room just to get to the door, and one quick signal would bring those two goons down on him. There'd be too much racket though. He

could wake the whole floor if he had to. The black guy had said something.

"What?"

"Do you like gay boys?"

Seymour's skin felt alive with spiders, roaches, all kinds of creepy crawlies.

"No."

"Oh." The black guy stood. "Thanks for the aspirin." He left as quietly as he had come.

Seymour grabbed a towel and a bar of soap and headed for the showers.

"You're gonna burn yourself."

Seymour felt a hand on his leg. His eyes flashed open. It was long-hair. He shrunk back into the sofa.

"Take it easy." The voice was strange. Not really weird, but not what he would have expected. He scanned long-hair quickly. "You better put it out. The cigarette."

"You're a girl."

"Brilliant deduction. Give the man a cigar." She took the cigarette stub out of Seymour's hand and crushed it out in an ashtray.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, I think." He'd been right about the age. She was young. Too young for college. Or maybe she was just flat-breasted.

"What kind of a trip are you on?"

"Trip? No trip. I guess I sorta had a bad dream."

"Had something, that's for sure." She smiled, a little apprehensively. There was a slight gap between her front teeth. "You look terrible, buddy. I'll be back in a sec."

He watched her go down the hall to the bathroom. Definitely too young for college. He sat back in the sofa and smiled. But the smile was soured by the garbage taste in his mouth. He wiped his mouth. Dried vomit crumbled onto his fingers. He cleaned them on the sofa, then sat back again and thought about her big brown eyes.

"Here we go." She dabbed at his face with a damp paper towel. "There. That's better."

"Thanks. I guess I did look pretty bad."

"That's one way of putting it."

"Yeah."

"Can I bum a smoke?"

Seymour started to hand her the pack but stopped.

"It's the least you could do. After all, I did save your fingers."

"True. Here."

"Match?"

Seymour struck a match. "How old are you?"

She stopped cold.

"Eighteen."

"Guess again," he said.

"Sixteen."

He stared. "Better light it before it lights my fingers." She

inhaled deeply and blew it out.

"I'm fifteen. But I'll be sixteen in three months."

"Been smoking long?"

"Longer than you."

They both smiled.

"My mouth tastes like"

"Shit?" she asked.

It surprised him. Not the word so much, he used it all the time. She intrigued him. Young but grown up; innocent but experienced. Tonight was full of surprises.

"You want something to drink?"

She shrugged, then nodded. "Let's go downstairs to the pool room, okay?"

"Sure." He was game.

They started off down the stairs. She was pulling great drags off her Winston; he was trying to figure her out.

"What's your name?"

"Joey."

He smiled. It figured, what with the jeans, the football jersey and the jacket.

"Yours?"

"Seymour." He noticed her suppress a giggle. He went red.

"I'll have a Tab."

Seymour pushed the "Tab" button for her, the "Coke" for himself. Joey asked if he shot pool. He hadn't in awhile but if she wanted

to . . . ? So he rented a table and she racked up the balls.

"You break," he said. "How come you to be hanging around the university?"

"My parents." She was intent on the game. Crack. The balls scattered. Seymour could tell she was good. Real good.

"Explain."

"Well . . . solids . . . They wanted to see this crumball show."

"Here?"

"Uh-huh." She was running the table; Seymour didn't care.

"Continue."

"So . . . anyway . . . they wanted to see this show. I didn't--"

"Very wise."

"But I didn't want to sit around the house either, so"

"You decided to bum around the university."

"Correct. It had to be more interesting than sittin' at home, didn't it?"

"Suppose so. Out of curiosity, why the aversion to the 'crumball' show?"

"Queers. They're all queers. Skippin' around and all. No one who's got any sense does that."

There was a long silence.

For the first time since she started playing, she looked up.

"You aren't queer, are you?" She had a big joking smile.

"Not funny." He didn't mean for it to come out so hard, but it did, so what-the-hell. It wasn't funny.

"Sorry. Eight ball in the corner." Clack. It dropped in. "Anyway, you're too goofy looking to be queer." She laughed.

"Thanks a lot." He grinned, looked down at the table, then back at her. "You're pretty good, kid." He slipped into his Bogart routine.

"You break this time."

They played for two hours. Or rather she played and Seymour just watched and clowning around. He did his Cagney impression. E. G. Robinson. Peter Lorre. John Wayne. He knew all the oldies. But his favorites were Bogart and Groucho Marx. He often wondered whether that meant anything. If it did, he couldn't figure it.

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard." His Groucho was impeccable. Paint a moustache on him and you couldn't tell him from the real one. "Ah, I could dance with you until the cows come home." He got a hold of her as she was about to shoot and dipped her as if they were tango-ing.

"Seymour, I'm trying to shoot."

He let her go. "On second thought, I'll dance with the cows until you come home."

"How 'bout a cigarette?"

"I don't know. How 'bout one?"

"Seymour."

He straightened up from the Groucho slouch. "Sure, sweetheart." He tapped two Winstons out, let them dangle from his mouth and lit them. He put one between Joey's parted lips. "Here's lookin' at you, kid."

"You're cute, Seymour. Did you know that?"

"Thought you said I was goofy."

"You can be cute and goofy."

"That's nice to know. You're not so bad yourself."

A half-beat pause.

"What time is it?" Joey asked.

"Ten-thirty."

"Better be going. Show'll be over soon."

"Probably. I'll go with you."

"Better not."

"Parents?"

"Yeah."

A full beat.

"I look older with my hair up."

"I kinda like you the way you are."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"Bye Seymour."

"Bye." She was almost out the door. "Hey-ee?" She turned.

"Will I see you again?"

"What's your number?"

"Seven-four-nine, fifty-six, eighty-eight."

She smiled and was gone.

The Arab shook him from his sleep. "Yo go now."

"Go away, Manolo. Let me sleep."

"We close. Yo go."

Seymour stared at the Arab, then quickly searched the lobby with his eyes. "What time is it?"

"Twelve."

"Where's Joey?" He rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Where's the girl?"

He shrugged. "Yo go now. Go home."

Seymour stood up and walked towards the doors. He cocked his head back over his shoulder. "Damn camel jockey," he mumbled. He cut across the wooded green between the University Center and the dorms. It was colder; the wind had picked up. But Seymour took his time. Casually walking through the trees, he lit a cigarette. His hands were stuffed in his pockets. The cigarette dangled from his mouth. He mumbled a few lines from As Time Goes By.

"You must remember this,
A kiss is just a kiss,
A sigh is just a sigh."

A little soft shoe.

"The fundamental things apply
As time goes by."

He walked four or five paces.

"Play it again, Sam."

As he stepped out of the elevator, Harold, the "Boomer," stopped him. "There's a guy waitin' for ya."

"Who?"

"Don't know. Said he was a friend, so Fowler let him in with the pass key."

"Manolo not there?"

"Went home for the weekend, remember?"

"Right." Damm spick was never around when you needed him.

"Tell me all the details tomorrow."

Seymour thought about going back downstairs. He could sleep in the lobby. He didn't like unannounced "visitors." Especially after the last one. But his curiosity got the best of him, so he headed down to his room. He looked at the bottom of the door. No lights. It didn't look good. He fumbled for a cigarette. Thought it would make him look tougher if this "visitor" tried anything funny. He slid the key in the lock and opened the door. A figure sat slumped at his desk. Elbow on the desk top and his head cradled in his palm. He turned toward Seymour, swiveling the chair.

"Hey, kiddo."

"Sniggy? Is that you?"

"No one but."

"Hey, hey. Long time no see."

They moved toward each other. Seymour detected something different in Sniggy's walk. Something awkward. But he let it slip, as they shook hands and clasped each other by the shoulders. They stared at one another in disbelief. Then they broke into uncontrollable laughter.

"You smoke now?" Sniggy sat down in the chair.

"Yeah. Sort of. Just started tonight as a matter of fact." He pulled up the other chair.

"Let me bum one."

"Sure thing."

"Ashtray?" Sniggy held the burnt match.

"Just put it there." Seymour slid a tablet over to him. "So, what cha doing here? I thought you were in Nam?"

"Gotta a Discharge."

"After six months?"

"Medical."

"Your leg?"

"It's really not too bad, actually."

"Just bad enough, huh?"

Sniggy nodded. "Been keeping busy?" He held up a Greek anthology.

"Not doing any more than I have to." There was an awkward silence.

"How 'bout some light?"

"Rather not. If you don't mind."

"Fine." Seymour sensed that something was wrong. Something worse than his leg. "How long you been out?"

"Week."

"Your mom's probably glad."

"Haven't been home."

"Mary?"

Sniggy shook his head.

"What cha been doing for a week?" He wished he hadn't asked.

"Tell you the truth, I don't remember. I figured I needed to go somewhere. So I came here."

"Great. It's gonna be like old times." He knew it came out phoney, but he couldn't help it. Any second the roof could cave in. Sniggy wasn't the same; Seymour sensed that he didn't look the same either. He'd lost his cavalier air, his no blindfold-firing squad attitude. It was as if it had been dry cleaned right out of him. He seemed to look the same, except for the leg, though it was hard to tell in the dark.

"Hey-ee?"

"Yeah, kiddo."

"Let's get out of here." He had to snap him out of whatever he was in.

"Where to?"

"Wherever."

Sniggy smiled and Seymour knew that it was because he'd always said that before. "Okay."

Seymour grabbed a coat and Sniggy by the arm and led the way out. "Just like old times, huh Snig?" Halfway down the hall a door slammed. The percussion banged off the walls.

"Hit it."

Sniggy slammed Seymour down and against the wall. He lay on top of him, covering him, holding him, protecting him. Seymour couldn't breathe. He had to get air. But Sniggy wouldn't let him up.

"Get off for Christ'sakes." Seymour felt Sniggy's fingers clutch him, then release him, then clutch again. At first he thought he was shaking, but then . . . he had to get away. Too many hands reaching

for him. Grabbing. Just like all the rest. No. He pushed for all he was worth. Sniggy slipped. Somewhere Seymour found more strength 'cause he had to get away. He had to get free. He had to make it back to his room where he'd be safe. And then he did break free. He stumbled for his door. The key wouldn't go in the lock. Come on. Come on. The door sprung open, but Sniggy was right behind him. Seymour closed the door. It didn't close. Sniggy had his foot jamming it open. The door burst back on Seymour, sending him sprawling to the floor. He scrambled to his feet, but Sniggy was on him, pawing him, pushing him back against his desk. He heard him call his name. Soft and pleading. Seymour wrenched an arm free and tried to push Sniggy away. But he was too strong now. Seymour reached behind himself for something to club him with. His hand ran over books on the shelf. Then it found a bookend. An alabaster bookend. He swung it down, hitting Sniggy on the head. His grip loosened with the blow, then gripped tighter. He brought the bookend down again and again and again and again until Sniggy fell to the floor. But he kept on hitting him, pounding away at his head until he couldn't lift the bookend anymore.

"Hey you guys. What cha doing?" It was Boomer.

"Come on, Sniggy. It was just a door. Boomer's always slamming doors."

Sniggy let go. Seymour rolled him over and got to his knees.

"Hey, what's going on?" Boomer asked?

"Get the-hell-out-of-here." Sniggy was curled up, crying.

"It's all right, Snig." Seymour got Sniggy to his feet and back in the room where it was cool and dark. He put Sniggy on his bed and sat in his chair. He watched him for a half-hour. He hoped he was asleep.

"Seymour?"

"Go to sleep."

"I'm sorry 'bout this."

"It's all right."

"But if you can't crack-up on your friends--"

"Go to sleep."

"Thanks, kiddo."

Seymour put his feet on the desk. It was overcast outside. No stars. No light. Looked like rain. He lit a cigarette and stared out into the black. He wondered if Joey would call him tomorrow.