

THE HIGH PRICE OF OIL

Jim Barclay

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

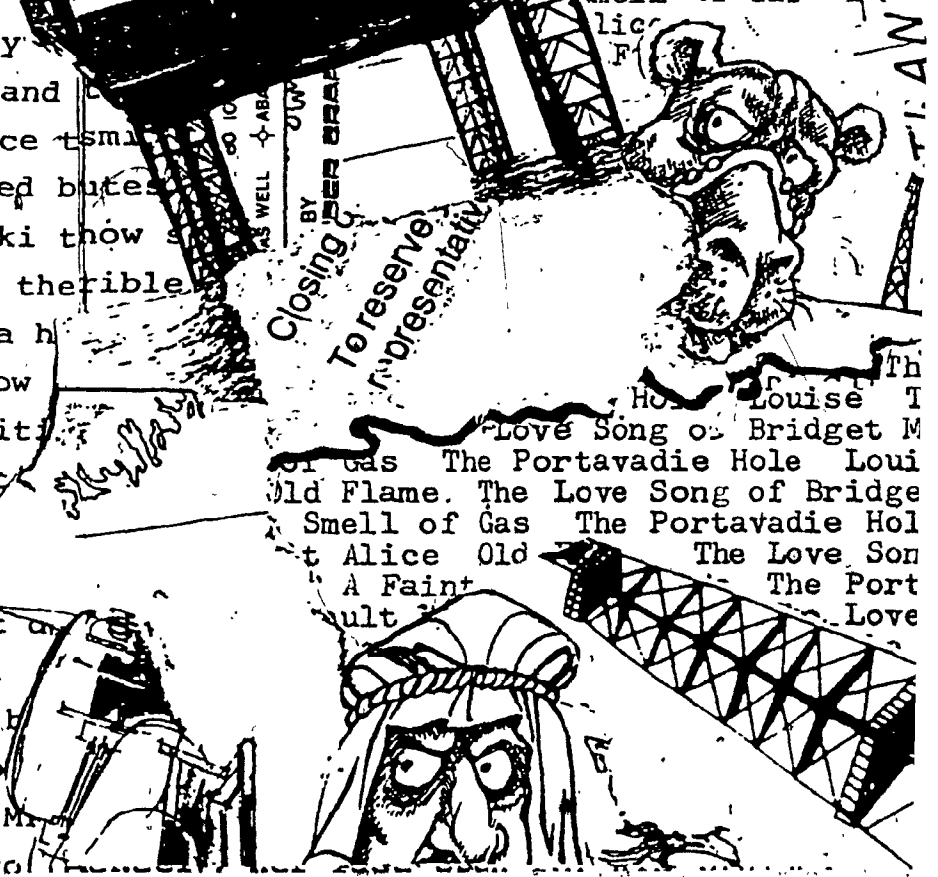
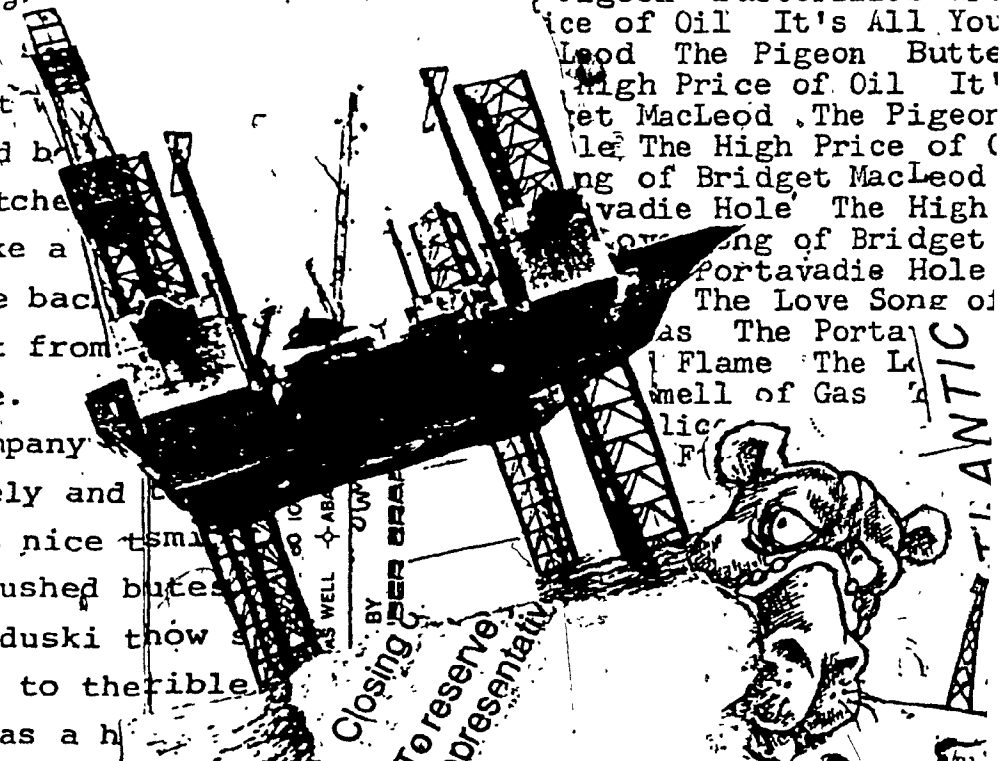
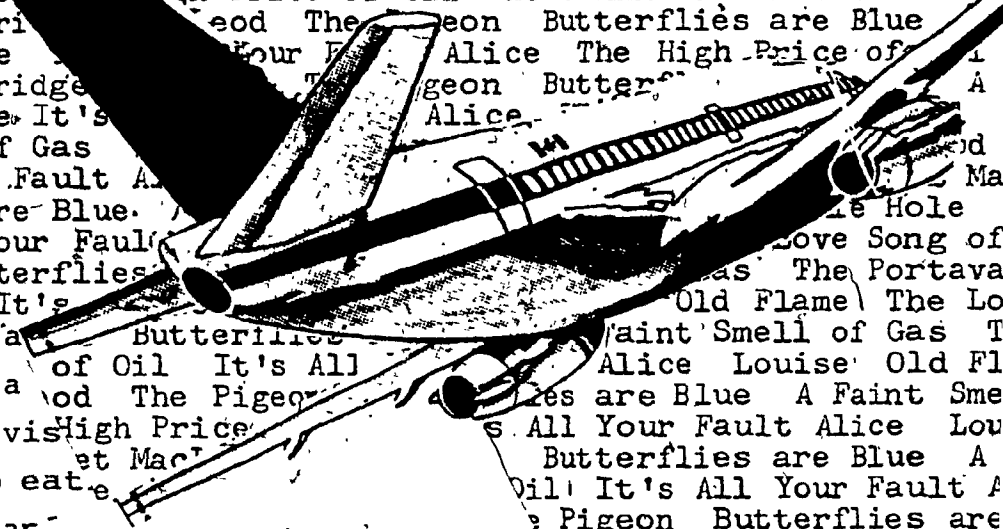
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ABSTRACT

THE HIGH PRICE OF OIL

Jim Barclay

Five of the nine stories in this collection, The High Price of Oil, The Love Song of Bridget MacLeod, The Portavadie Hole, Old Flame and A Faint Smell of Gas, deal with people and events having to do with the oil and gas industry. The High Price of Oil tells of the price which one family pays for the exploration for oil off the coast of Newfoundland - the loss of a son. In a lighter vein, The Love Song of Bridget MacLeod takes us to the oilfields of Southern Iran, in 1951, and The Portavadie Hole to the west coast of Scotland, where a multi-million dollar project has turned into a large white elephant.

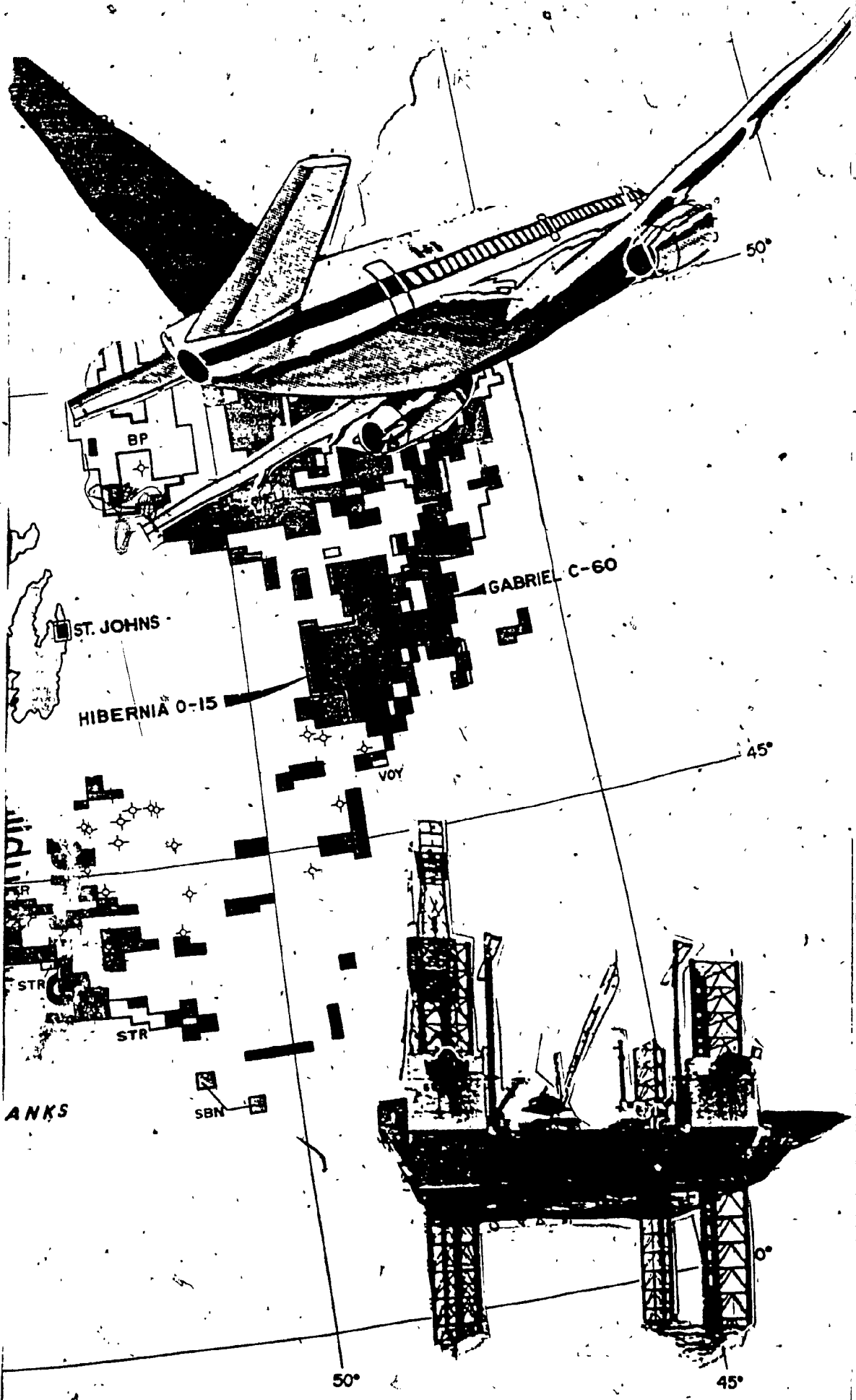
Old Flame is a satire on promotional advertising; A Faint Smell of Gas, on the way business relies on the computer.

The heartlessness of big business is also touched on in the next two stories. The Pigeon is a study of the roots of corruption, of the men who sell armaments to fuel wars in the Third World. In It's all your Fault, Alice we meet an old maid fighting to preserve her beloved village green.

The theme of Butterflies are Blue is faith in the healing powers of the mind and body. Faith also kept alive the body and mind of the narrator of Louise, the last of the nine stories. In Louise, it is war and separation that cause the mental and physical injury.

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THE HIGH PRICE OF OIL

The driver put the truck into reverse and backed it up to the side of the plane, stopping it close to the open cargo compartment. He got out, unlocked the rear door of the truck, and said "OK" to the four men waiting to unload the casket.

Finlay had climbed down from the truck as soon as it stopped. His coat-collar up, he now stood against the side of the truck, using it as a shield against the cold night wind that whipped up a fine dust of snow from the runways of the airport. As he watched the men pull out the casket, he moved from one foot to the other, now and then pulling his hands from his pockets to cup them over his mouth.

The men lowered the casket so that it lay on the ground astride the two rope slings. One of the men said "Right," whereupon they all stooped to grip a handle of the sling. "Up," said the man, and they straightened, lifting the casket from the ground. They walked the few steps to the long, ribbed, aluminum crate where the same man said "Down," and they slowly lowered the casket into the crate. A fifth man came over, pulled down the lid of the crate and strung wire through the clamps which held the lid closed, twisting the ends of the wire with a custom's seal. The four men each

took a grip on the top rib of the crate, and when the same man said "Right," they lifted the crate and carried it to the plane. "For Christ's sake, keep in step," the man said, as they went up the ramp to disappear into the black hole in the side of the plane.

The driver, who had returned to the warmth of the cabin, spoke to Finlay from the open window of the truck. "You want to take these papers now?"

"I'll be right with you," said Finlay, but only when the men came back down the ramp to load the other baggage did he climb back into the cabin.

"These are for the customs in Scotland," the driver said. "And the other lot - here, the white papers clipped together at the back - you give these to the guy who picks up the body at the airport." This was more than the man had spoken in one sentence during their overnight drive to Halifax, and there was a new note in the man's voice, a sudden cheerfulness which annoyed Finlay. He knew what it implied: the driver's job was finished, the driver could get back to the Company's depot, and he, Finlay, was now wholly responsible for the body.

"There's also a package for the next of kin," said the driver, lifting a thick manilla envelope from the shelf behind the seat.

"What do I do with this?" Finlay asked, although he knew as he spoke that the driver would be of no help.

"If the Company didn't tell you, I guess you give it to the guy that collects the body."

The Company had said nothing about a package for the next of kin. "When you get to Scotland a hearse will meet you at the airport," the Company had said to Finlay. "All you have to do is clear it through customs and hand it over to the driver of the hearse who will take it to the funeral parlour." Finlay reminded them there were no funeral parlours in Scotland, only undertakers. "OK, then, the driver will take it to the undertakers." No, there was no mention of any package for the next of kin. But then the Company had said nothing about the plane being a regular passenger plane, and it had never occurred to Finlay that the plane would be anything but a charter 707, the type the Company used when flying urgent drilling equipment or pieces of machinery. Finlay had been disturbed to find that he and Sutherland's body were going to Scotland on a regular scheduled flight. He was now glad they had arrived early enough that the casket could be loaded in the dark and before the other passengers assembled.

"You gonna have some breakfast?" the driver wanted to know when Finlay had put the papers and the package in his hand luggage.

"No, I'm not hungry." Which was a lie, but he suddenly felt an urgent need to get rid of the man and the truck and everything to do with the body.

The driver said: "Can I give you a lift?" and he said: "No, I'll walk," and the driver said: "OK, good luck," and when Finlay had taken his hand luggage and suitcase from the shelf of the truck, he drove away, leaving Finlay to walk back

to the main building of the airport.

The building was further away than he had thought, and the surface of the runway was so glazed by wind and snow that he had to walk slowly, testing each step before trusting it with the weight of his body and suitcase. He stopped twice to wipe the moisture from his eyes, pull up his coat collar and change the suitcase to the other hand. It had been a mistake, he told himself, to bring so much luggage. Why bring the Christmas presents for his parents? He should have posted them as he usually did. And what possessed him to bring the present for Peggy? She'd only have to carry it back to Canada next week. My God, yes, next week. He'd given precious little thought to where she'd stay. Until they were married it would have to be in that hotel in Cumber, the nearest town to the Company's depot. And what would she do in a strange town during his ten-day spells on the rig? The thought stirred a sudden needle of apprehension in Finlay until he remembered the sound of Peggy's voice. There had been no hesitation in that voice, only the sound of joy running along the telephone line. Much better to be married now, she agreed, than to wait for that shore job the Company had promised him next year.

Near the airport building the snow had melted and the tarmac was steaming, reminding Finlay of the mist that used to rise from the low ground near his grandfather's farm, and that frightened him as a child made to rise early for the morning cattle. He and Peggy would call at the farm, he decided. It would be a nice gesture before leaving for

Canada.

In the washroom of the deserted passenger lounge he took off his coat and washed his hands and face, and washed them again, splashing the cold water over his face, rubbing his cold wet hands on the back of his neck and running them through his hair. Although he had only dozed during the overnight drive to Halifax and had lost sleep the previous night - the night of the accident - he did not feel at all tired but was strangely refreshed. Sutherland's body was now well away from him. Sitting in the front of the truck he had not been able to rid himself of the vision of a body, cold and dead, within reach of his neck. Twice when the driver braked sharply on the narrow twisting coastal road to Halifax, Finlay was sure the body had moved in the casket, for there was a muffled thump and instinctively he leaned forward in his seat to keep the body at its proper distance. He saw the body as naked, and having Sutherland's face. Or what he thought was Sutherland's face. He hadn't been well acquainted with the man, was on different shifts on the rig, and couldn't recall speaking to Sutherland but once. "I'm from Perthshire," Sutherland had said. "The coast?" Finlay asked, for most of the Scots on the rig had some connection with the sea. "No, man; Strathyre, on Loch Lubnaig." After which Finlay said he'd heard of Strathyre, had never been there, that he himself was from further north. "Kincord, near Aberdeen." Sutherland nodded, they stood facing each other in silence, eyes not meeting, embarrassed to discover that even as fellow countrymen and three thousand miles from

home they could find nothing more to talk about.

A cleaner came into the washroom. Finlay had been standing looking at his reflection in the mirror. The cleaner put down his mop and bucket. Finlay turned on the cold tap, cupped his hands under it, and doused his face again.

He had a window seat on the plane; the middle seat was empty and a tall thin man in a leisure suit sat in the aisle seat. A tongue of gray hair was combed down over the man's upper brow, hiding a bald patch, Finlay imagined, but giving the man a severe, napoleonic look. Across the aisle sat a stout lady in green slacks and a yellow sweater. She chewed as she talked to the thin man and threw her hands out like she was feeding pigeons. The thin man sat with his head back, his eyes closed, his face twitching as if talking to itself or rehearsing some part in a secret play. Man and wife, Finlay guessed. But why not sitting together?

"More room to stretch the legs," the thin man said, opening one eye and turning to Finlay without any warning. "Name is Ross. This is the wife. You going to Gander or all the way?"

Finlay gave his name, said he was going all the way to Scotland, and they spoke no more till the plane had taken off and levelled out.

"New shoes," said Ross, resting one foot on his knee.

"Wife insisted." Then, leaning towards Finlay: "You

Scotch?" and when Finlay nodded, Ross lowered himself confidentially into the seat beside him. "M' father was born there. In Auchterlonie;" and he raised his eyebrows in question. Finlay said he'd never been to Auchterlonie. "You live in Nova Scotia?" Ross wanted to know, and Finlay explained he had been working for three years on drilling-rigs just off the coast. On hearing this Ross moved over to the aisle seat and spoke to his wife. From the way she kept looking over Ross' shoulder, Finlay knew they were talking about him.

"We had you down as working on the boats," said Ross when he came back to sit beside Finlay, and he went on to explain that he had never been on the boats himself but had been thirty years in a fishpacking plant." Just retired," said Ross. "You never been on the boats?" he asked again. Finlay admitted he had worked on the North Sea trawlers for two years before quitting to join the oil drilling company. "Ah!" said Ross and went back to speak to his wife. Finlay wondered what made them think he had been at sea and concluded it was the deep tan of his skin.

"We're going to Scotland on vacation. Edinburgh, Inverness, the Highlands, you know," said Ross, when he came back.

"The Old Country," said his wife, leaning across and holding in suspension whatever she was chewing in her mouth.

"Yes, the Old Country," said Ross. "You going on vacation to the Old Country?"

Finlay hesitated. One word, he felt, would commit him

to too many others. How could he explain he was going over for five days only, to bring back Peggy, and that they didn't have time to get married in Scotland? So he told Ross he was going to Scotland to get married.

"Married, did you say?" said Ross, and to Finlay's embarrassment the man spoke loudly to his wife: "Going to Scotland to pick up a bride." Mrs. Ross leaned forward in her seat and smiled at Finlay, and two passengers in front turned their heads inquisitively.

"Good luck to you, m' boy," Ross said, and put his hand on the other man's knee.

Finlay turned his head to the window. Perhaps he'd need that luck in the coming week. He had explained to Peggy on the telephone that this was the only way if they wanted to get married now and not wait another year. The Company would only give him a week - five days to be exact - he had explained. "On business," he had said, but hadn't told her the business was to accompany a dead body. No need to worry her. She'd said yes, if that's the way it had to be, but how could she explain all this to her father? He had reminded her he had a father, and a mother too, who would not understand.

At the thought of all he'd have to go through in the next five days he suddenly felt tired. He shut his eyes and dozed fitfully. He was aware of the plane landing at Gander, heard the announcement of a half-hour's delay because of problems in stowing the baggage, and the noise of more people coming on board. But all the time he kept his head tilted to the window, his eyes closed for fear that Ross would start

another conversation. The engines of the plane had stopped and Finlay could hear men shouting to each other outside the plane, was aware of the gentle rocking of the plane as doors were slammed. More and more he became aware of a chatter of voices inside the plane, heard but not understood, like voices in the next room, the voice of Mrs. Ross amongst them.

He opened his eyes to find that a small, middle-aged, fussy-looking woman and a young boy had taken the two seats beyond Mrs. Ross. She and Mrs. Ross were taking turns at looking out the window, gesticulating and exclaiming to each other, their voices rising and falling in a confusion of loud whispers and excited exclamations. Ross turned to Finlay as if sensing that Finlay was awake. "It's a casket," he said, and when Finlay sat dumb, the blood gone from his face, Ross repeated: "It's a casket. They're putting a casket on the plane."

The voices of Mrs. Ross and the middle-aged woman had attracted other passengers who turned in their seats to look out the window. Passengers on Finlay's side of the aisle got up and looked over the heads of the others. A stewardess came down the aisle. The middle-aged woman rose in her seat and leaned over the boy and Mrs. Ross and touched the stewardess on the arm. "I tell you I'm not flying with a deceased," she said. The stewardess said: "Now, now, nothing to get upset about." She persuaded the middle-aged woman to take her seat and spoke to her and Mrs. Ross in a low voice.

"They're taking it out," said the man in the seat in front of Mrs. Ross. "Yeah, but they're putting it back in

again," said another man. A third man said: "Why the hell all this fuss about a coffin?"

The middle-aged woman got out of her seat, pushed her way past Mrs. Ross, and she and the stewardess went down the aisle to the front of the plane, the woman's hands waving, her voice raised in protest. The woman was back in a minute saying loudly, triumphantly, to Mrs. Ross: "She's going to speak to the Captain about it. I told her flat, we refuse to fly with a deceased." But when the stewardess did come back it was to help the woman and the small boy off the plane, the boy crying, the woman protesting vigorously.

"Bloody disgrace," said Ross, and looked at Finlay for support, but Finlay could only stare dumbly, his mouth dry, his limbs without strength.

"What do you think, Charlie?" said Mrs. Ross to her husband. "We can't get off, don't live here," said Ross. "Write to the airline," said the man in front. "That's it," said Ross in a voice full of social responsibility, "write to the airline, that's what we'll do." But the noise of the engines starting sent them all back to their seats.

When the plane had taken off, and levelled, Finlay felt the muscles in his body relax, the pain go from somewhere inside him, his breathing return to normal. "God damn Sutherland." "No, no, he should not say such things. Yet the words soothed him, made him feel better, as though by uttering them the weight of Sutherland's body had somehow been removed from his shoulders. "God damn Sutherland, God damn and blast Sutherland." He shut his eyes, forced his mind to think of

Peggy. That's what this is all about, he told himself. I'm going to Scotland to bring back my bride.

"Mr. Finlay?" The stewardess bent over Ross, touched Finlay's shoulder. He nodded, sat up. She spoke in a low voice.

"Mr. Finlay, if you let me have the papers we can radio ahead, have the hearse meet you beside the plane."

Ross looked at Finlay, his mouth open, silent. When the stewardess had taken the papers, Ross said to his wife in a voice quick with injury: "He told me he was going home to get married;" and again, to the man in front: "He told me he was going home to get married."

When the plane landed at Glasgow, Finlay waited till the other passengers had left before turning from the window. A steady drizzle blanketed the airport but he spotted a hearse parked at the side of the airport building, and when he went down the aircraft steps he found it drawn up beside the luggage compartment. He signalled to the driver who got out and met him under the shelter of the wing.

"We'll have to wait for the customs to sign these," said the driver, having examined the papers Finlay had given him.

"I can't wait," Finlay said. "I have another plane to catch." Which was true, although he had two hours to make the connection. "And I've got a package for you," he went on, before the driver could protest. "This is for the next of kin."

The driver shook his head and made no effort to take the envelope. "The brother is here, give it to him."

Finlay explained he did not know the brother, had not known the dead man, they "just happened" to work for the same company. But the driver waved him away. He would look after the documents needed to deal with the body but the rest was Finlay's responsibility. "You'll find the brother in the terminal. I told him to wait in room 62 - that's a special lounge they use for things like this."

Finlay collected his luggage and checked it at a cloak-room. Carrying only the package for Sutherland's family he made his way to room 62. At first glance he thought the room empty and was hesitating at its door when a soft voice said: "Mr. Finlay?"

She was about his mother's age. Sunk into the deep arm-chair, the black shawl matching the material of the covers, she did not look big enough to come up to his shoulders.

"Mr. Finlay?" she said again.

"Yes," said Finlay, and let the door swing shut and walked over to where she sat.

"We saw you speak to the driver. Ewan has gone to look for you."

Finlay was unable to take his eyes off her face. "I wasn't told you would be here," he tried to say, but the words went dry in his throat and he had to cross to the table and pour himself a glass of water. "Excuse me," he said.

"There was cattle to be fetched in. Father could not come," said the woman. Finlay said "Yes," and took the seat

facing her.

After a silence she said: "Were you there?"

"What?" said Finlay, and the woman had to ask again:

"Were you there?"

"I was sleeping," he said. And when he saw her uncomprehending look he went on: "We - your son and I - were on different shifts. It happened at night when I was sleeping."

"Why was he working at night?"

Finlay had to think before answering: "We work all night - every night; when we start a hole we drill for months - we don't stop for night."

"It happened on the Sabbath," said the woman and looked at him as though hoping he would deny it.

"Look, it's like...." And Finlay stopped. He had been about to say it's like fetching in the cattle; the cattle have to be fetched in and milked, even on the Sabbath. But he knew how the woman would answer. The cattle cannot wait, the woman would say, the cattle have to be milked, Sabbath or no, but that's no reason to keep on with your drilling. So he made no reply, but looked down at his hands.

The woman took a yellow envelope from her purse and handed it to Finlay. He unfolded the telegram, read it, and handed it back.

"It says you will have Jamie's things for me," said the woman. Jamie? The name hit Finlay in the chest. The name, somehow, made Sutherland quite different from the Sutherland in his mind. He had never imagined Sutherland as having a

mother and a Christian name.

"You have something?" the woman was asking.

"What? Yes, I'm sorry. I've this package for you."

"Please open it," said the woman.

There was Sutherland's wallet, a ring, his watch, a key-chain, some photographs, coins in a plastic sandwich bag, a pen, and a bundle of letters held together by an elastic band. There was also a long white envelope, unsealed, bearing the Company logo, and Finlay held this up for her to see. "This looks like a letter from the Company," he said.

"Read it to me," she said and sat forward in her chair and was so pale that Finlay wondered if he should offer to get her a drink.

"No, I'm all right," she said as if reading his thoughts.

"Please read it for me."

She can't read! The truth came so suddenly he had to get out of the chair and go fill two glasses with water so that the woman would not know what was in his mind.

"Thank you," she said, took a sip of water, and looked at the papers expectantly.

"There are two letters. The first is from Kretchner - Mr. Kretchner - the head floorman. He was in charge of your son's shift." Kretchner's letter was handwritten and short, and the woman made no comment when he read it to her.

"The other is the medic's report."

"The doctor?" she asked.

"Yes, the doctor," he lied. "I think this report is meant for your own doctor - or for the....". He hesitated,

trying to recall if there were coroners in Scotland.

"Please read it," she said.

Finlay read the first few lines to himself, then said:
"It's a long report, written by Bromley the medic. Bromley explains he was called out...."

"Please read it to me," said the woman.

Finlay made as though to say something to her, thought the better of it, and drew his chair closer to her and read to her what Bromley had written:

I got a call at about 4:15 a.m. to go to the drill deck and found the injured man lying on the floor beside the drillpipe. He was in shock with the pupils dilated, but was breathing OK. I asked what had happened but no one seemed to know because the floorman working with him had gone for a blanket. His head looked OK but when I opened his shirt I found he was heavily bruised on his chest and above his right ribs. There was no external bleeding. I told them to get a stretcher and we got him down to the hospital. The other medic helped me strip him and put him on a blood drip. His breathing was not so good now so we made an airway to improve his breathing. We also gave him 50 mg. emcotomine I.V.

I spoke to the other floorman who said he had been hit on the chest and maybe the head when the spring snapped on the drillpipe centraliser. The injured man's arms were up at the time. One end of the spring swivelled out and hit him and he was knocked to the ground. We checked his head again but we could not find any injury.

The injured man was not responding. His breathing stopped and we had to use the M-M resuscitator and give him another 50 mg. emcotomine. After using the resuscitator we found his heart stopped and started cardiac massage. This time we were not able to get a response although we tried cardiac massage for over five minutes.

We think this man died from a blow on the chest and side which caused severe shock and internal bleeding.

When he had finished, the woman did not say a word, but sat looking at the wall to the side of his head - or so it

seemed to Finlay. On the night - was it really only sixty hours ago? - he had been wakened by the silence. The drill had stopped. Had they struck oil? No, no, impossible, they had at least two thousand feet to go. Broken down? Would drilling be delayed a week as it had been last winter? Then came sounds - a hurrying of feet - Bromley's voice in the corridor - more feet - a shout from the bunk next door: "What's wrong?" Then silence again, and he lay, lost in imagination, till sleep came, finally. All this time Sutherland had been fighting for his life, not fifty yards away.

The mother's eyes were staring, unblinking. What was she thinking? What vision did she see? Was it all beyond her understanding? Could she imagine the deck of a drilling rig, and what was a centraliser, and what an M-M resuscitator? Or was she seeing her son as she had last seen him, or as a child.

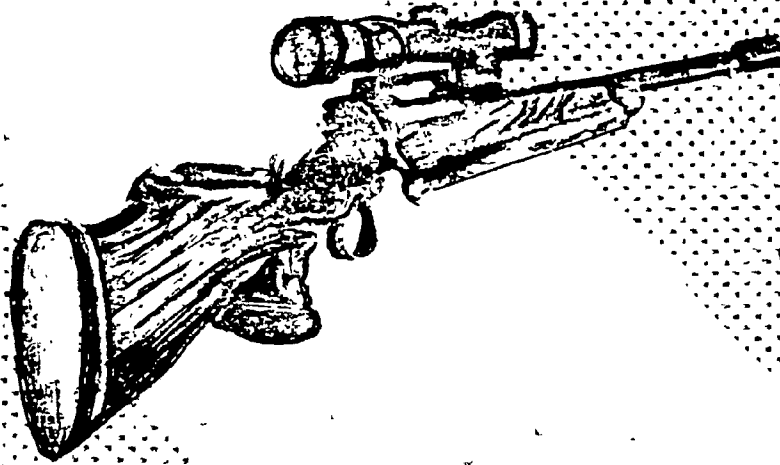
The woman spoke. "I thank God it was not his face," she said, tightening the shawl around her shoulders and pushing herself to her feet. Finlay got out of his chair to stand facing her, the medic's report in his hand. The woman came over to Finlay, put her arms up and around his neck, pulled his face down so that she could put her cheek against his. "God rest him," she said.

"God rest him," Finlay said, and held the woman to him. For a moment he felt he had known her all his life.

"You will come home with us?" the woman said, releasing him and looking up into his face.

"Yes, of course," said Finlay. "I will telephone my family."

"We will go now and find my son," said the woman.



THE PIGEON

THE PIGEON

In the morning Karlson, sober and smelling of the kind of deodorant and lotion you expect of the Ritz, and looking more alive than any of us, said this trip all he wanted to buy was one cargo of three thousand automatic rifles, fifty or so bazookas and "any cannon that will shoot a shell five and one-half miles."

The outside air was clear, not yet dusted by the traffic, and I could see the pigeon on the top stone ledge of the hotel across the street. Miss Marco, my secretary, took notes. McGee took a second long drink of water and ran a wet tongue over his lips. "Why five and one-half miles?"

"We have to protect ourselves. That's the distance across the straits between us and our friendly neighbours"; and Karlson smiled all round and pierced his cigar into the ashtray. He had been buying arms for his adopted country for ten years and although blonde with fair skin - except where mottled by the sun - he always referred to the Tanzanians as "us."

A woman looked down from one of the hotel windows, a maid shook out a yellow duster, the lights blinked on the

sign that said Ritz and I wondered how long it would take them to find out that the top light wasn't working.

"Well," said Karlson, "what have you to sell?"

McGee said we could supply the rifles and bazookas but had nothing larger in stock than a reconditioned French anti-tank gun, and that wouldn't shoot a shell more than a mile. "Except in a strong following wind," he added, and looked round the table, and we all tried to laugh except Karlson.

"You don't have any cannon?" Karlson wanted to know.

"Haven't bought a cannon in years," said McGee.

"Except Big Bertha," I said in a low voice meant only for McGee, but Karlson overheard and leaned forward.

"Big Berta? Who is Big Berta?"; and his grey eyes turned to Miss Marco who caught the look, flushed, and studied her notebook.

"Just a joke," I said.

He persisted. "The name is familiar. Do I know her?"

"The name for a long-range field gun. A special, made by the Germans in World War I to shell Paris from a great distance."

Karlson looked at Miss Marco, sucking hard on his new cigar as if to draw her closer to him, and she put her hands on the table as if to resist. How in God's name could his mind be on women so soon after last night? But he was speaking. "What distance?" he wanted to know.

I waved the question to McGee. "Seventy miles," said

McGee. "Or is it seventy kilometres? But it's a museum piece and hasn't been fired in years." And to change the subject he went on: "We have a new automatic pistol you'll like," and he produced from its red leather pouch ("not holster," McGee insisted) a sample of the new Schiller IV. Karlson blew smoke into the flowers Miss Marco had arranged on the conference table, took the Schiller and fondled it, and McGee and the others broke into a chatter of excitement about trigger release, reflex timing and sensitive recoil.

Yesterday on the ledge the pigeon had strutted in front of its mate, -turning round and round with lowered head, allowing the play of light to bring out the iridescence of its neck feathers. Now those feathers, no longer puffed out by skin muscles, were dull and flat as slate. The wind that blew along the ledge caught the underside of the pigeon's wing, lifting the wing from the ledge so that the pigeon looked alive and as if waving to people in the street.

"How much are we asking for the Schiller?" said McGee to me.

"In bulk?"

"Quote by the hundred."

"Twenty-six thousand." Which was twenty percent more than I'd thought of asking yesterday morning, before Karlson arrived.

"And delivery?"

I shrugged. "Two weeks for the first hundred, a month

for each hundred after that."

McGee looked at Karlson who rolled his cigar between his wet lips, pulled it out with a slight pop, contemplated the lighted end and then nodded. "And the bazookas and automatic rifles?" he asked.

"We have these in stock, you can take them with you."

His eyebrows lifted. "But they are so heavy," he said in mock alarm and spread his arms and appealed to us without a smile. McGee and the others laughed and I smiled and looked beyond Karlson to where the pigeon lay on the ledge above the top row of windows. Unless someone looked down from the roof of the hotel and noticed the pigeon it could lie there for days in full view of my office. The thought made me sick.

Miss Marco left the conference room to warn them we'd soon need the bar, and Karlson's eyes followed her, making her fumble the door knob. When she came back her own eyes darted momentarily to his face and away, and she put her hand to her chin in her confusion, like a small girl at a party coming back to a roomful of boys having been to the toilet.

Karlson had thrown an arm over his chair and moved his body so that the pigeon now appeared to be sitting on his left shoulder.

"Delivery must be completed before the rains," he said to McGee.

"Which is March?"

"April at the latest."

"No trouble," McGee said, "no trouble," and he looked

around, inviting questions. When there were none he said: "I guess that's it," and the deal was settled with a handshake, both sides knowing the bargain would be kept.

McGee suggested we all go back to the penthouse for a drink. "The hair of the dog," he said, looking at his empty water glass.

"I'll join you in five minutes," I told them, and on the way out drew Miss Marco aside and put an arm reassuringly on her shoulder.

"Have no fear, you're not his type"; and I smiled at the vision of Miss Marco dancing with Karlson, she wearing only silver slippers and black silk tights, before the two of them disappeared somewhere in the night. I took her by the arm to the window.

"Look, see that pigeon?"

She squinted her eyes at the ledge across the street.

"I want you to phone the Ritz and tell them about that pigeon."

"Perhaps it's sleeping."

"It's dead. It's been dead since 8 o'clock last night."

She looked again at the pigeon, looked at me, put her hand to her mouth, said nothing.

"Phone the desk. Tell them the pigeon could fall on the head of a guest. Tell them they can reach it from the roof."

The instant I saw McGee in the penthouse bar I knew something was wrong. When he is intense he has a habit of pulling at his eyebrows, giving short, quick glances around him as though expecting others to recognize this as a secret call for help.

"Karlson wants to buy Big Bertha."

"Ah!" I did not know what else to say, so tossed back my whiskey.

"He says money is no object," said McGee, waving his hand and giving a despairing look, as if dismissing all hope of keeping his own wife if Karlson were to say that money was no object.

"That is correct," said Karlson who had approached my shoulder. "No object."

"Is that so?" I said, aware that McGee's eyes were not forgiving me for having first brought up the matter of the gun. "You have explained why we bought Big Bertha?" I asked McGee, but when he didn't answer I turned to Karlson. "We bought Big Bertha as a museum piece. We're going to mount it at the entrance to our factory."

"Factory?" said Karlson raising his brows in question.

The factory, I explained, was where we stocked and refurbished the arms we bought around the world, rebored, replated, polished, mounted, oiled, greased and packaged them for clients such as he. "But Big Bertha hasn't been fired in fifty years. We bought it from a bankrupt war museum in Hamburg. Its barrel is badly corroded, no spiral left. Try and fire a shell from it, and woof!" I said, and

threw my hands in the air to show how the gun would disintegrate, and my whiskey showered over McGee's grey flannel suit giving him the appearance of having made an unsuccessful dash to get out of a thunderstorm.

"Ach yes," said Karlson, "that's what McGee has been telling me, the gun will explode if you fire it." He rolled his cigar in his mouth and looked up at the ceiling light, his eyes glinting and sparkling as if alive with fragments of metal flying from the gun.

"That's right," I said, as I helped McGee dry his suit with my handkerchief. "Blow up in your face."

When I came back with a fresh drink McGee was making ominous signs with his eyes and pulling again at the hair above them. "Karlson doesn't want to fire the gun himself. He wants to give it away. As a present. To the ruler of a neighbouring country. As a token of goodwill."

"As a gift," said Karlson without any expression. He could have been talking about a bunch of flowers. "You will quote me a price, yes?"

McGee shrugged his shoulders, dismissing himself from the answer.

"I'd like to think about it," I said.

Karlson was persistent. "I leave tomorrow morning."

"I'll see what can be done. I'd like to talk it over with McGee." I did not ask why he needed a quote if money was no object.

"I leave early," Karlson reminded, and McGee gave me a last dark look and led him off to the bar.

From the balcony I could see the pigeon still there on the ledge. Miss Marco did not answer her phone so I called the hotel desk and explained I was from Consolidated Imports across the street.

"Did my secretary phone you?"

"About a room, sir?"

"No, about a pigeon."

"A what?"

"A pigeon. You know, a bird."

"Hold on, sir."

Voices spoke in the background.

"Can you spell the guest's name, sir?"

"No, no, I'm not talking about a guest. I'm talking about a bird. A pigeon. Didn't you get a message there's a dead pigeon on the top ledge of the hotel? It could fall on a guest."

"Did you say a pigeon, sir?"

"Hold on a minute," I said. McGee had me by the arm and was asking was I phoning for an escort for Karlson, for tonight.

"A woman? No, but I will." And to the clerk: "Yes, a pigeon, on your ledge"; but he had hung up or we had become disconnected.

"What's this about a pigeon?" asked McGee.

"The pigeon is still on the ledge."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he said, and pulled away at his eyebrows and looked round at Karlson laughing in a group in the corner.

"You've forgotten because you were as drunk as the rest of us. And that was at eight o'clock," I said to McGee, not accusingly, just to remind him.

"What was at eight o'clock?"

"Karlson shot a pigeon on the ledge of the Ritz. He also blew out the top light of the hotel sign. Don't you remember him trying out my pneumatic?"

McGee's face showed his disbelief. "You're crazy. You say this happened before we went out?" He half-closed his eyes as if trying to focus his mind on the events of last night. "You say Karlson killed a pigeon with your air rifle? The bloody thing is only a toy."

"It fires a point two-o-two bullet," I reminded McGee.

"Where is it?"

"I hid it in my office. At two o'clock this morning you were all talking of shooting out the traffic lights at the corner of Mountain. If he asks for a gun tonight tell him they've all been sent back to the factory."

McGee must have been worried by my tone, for he put his arm on my shoulder. "Remember, Karlson pays cash."

"There's a limit to what cash will buy."

"Remind yourself of that next time you look at your overdraft," said McGee taking his arm back, and looking at the spots not yet dried on his grey flannel suit. "Let's have a drink and forget it."

Around noon I was called to the phone. Miss Marco

said the lady from the newspaper was here, early for her appointment.

"I'll be right down. Put her in the conference room. Give me fifteen minutes with her and come in and remind me of some engagement. And did you phone the hotel about the pigeon?"

"Yes, I told the desk. They said not to worry, they'd take care of it, and they have. The pigeon has gone."

McGee and Karlson were still at the bar. "I've got to go," I said to McGee. "A press interview about our buying Big Bertha." It was agreed that McGee would take Karlson to lunch at the factory and that we'd meet for drinks at 7 o'clock. "And don't forget a woman," were McGee's last words before I left.

The liquor had slowly eased the pain behind my eyes, and removed that nervous, uncertain feeling of insecurity that gripped me for the first few hours of each day. One drink - perhaps two - later in the afternoon would keep me going till evening, and over the years I had found a way to live through evenings so that even the thought of Karlson would no longer concern me.

The conference room was two floors down. The door was open and she was standing with her back to it looking at the painting on the far wall, but I knew the back of her head so well that the blood ran cold from my face. "My God!"

She turned. "Hello, Mike."

Stella had changed little in the five years. A bit thinner perhaps, her cheekbones more prominent, her hair

darker. But then we'd last been together in Southern California where her face had been tanned, her hair bleached from long days of sea and sun.

"My God!" I said again and went to her. After the faintest hesitation we put our arms around each other, and without hearing her answers I said how are you? why are you here? what are you doing in this part of the world? and you look so well. "You look just great. But don't tell me the Santa Monica Conservationist is interested in a story on Big Bertha?"

"I'm now with Newsweek," she said.

"Ah! So you too have sold your soul." Now I knew what was different about her face. The scar she'd got in Spain had been removed.

"May I?" she said, and nodded to the tray of coffee Miss Marco had put out for us on the table.

"Of course - I'm sorry - please sit down - I was expecting a girl from our local paper."

"So I gathered from your secretary. Don't blame her - I let her think - well, I wasn't sure you'd want to see me."

I shrugged. "I guess we both said things five years ago we don't feel today. You're looking great, Stella." She made as though to speak, perhaps to return the compliment, but stopped and turned her eyes again to the table.

"Look," I said, "forget about coffee, this calls for a drink. We've got visitors upstairs so I can't ask you there. Let's go across the road to the Ritz."

I told Miss Marco to cancel my appointments till three.

The Maritime Bar was quiet and we found a corner table. "You look great," I said again. "Five years have made you younger."

"Thank you - it's six - six in September."

"Ah, you remember."

"I remember."

We looked at each other and smiled, and I knew without saying that suddenly we were friends, that there would be no going back to what we had, too much had been said and done that could never be forgotten, but it was something to be friends.

"Oh Mike, not champagne!"

"Why not? Here's to the next six years. Now tell me what you've been doing with yourself."

We finished the bottle, she had lunch, and the day looked much brighter, Karlson and the pigeon forgotten.

"And you're now in New York?"

"Washington."

"And Newsweek is interested in Big Bertha?"

"That and other things - mainly other things."

"Like what other things?", I asked, signalling to the waiter for another bottle.

She made as though to reply but stopped herself, finished her drink, leaned forward and said softly: "I went back last year, Mike."

Ah, so that was it. She'd been to Spain. She'd been

back to the Spanish Pyrenees where we'd first met, Stella and I, both on scholarships, she writing a history of the Basques, me with my sketchpad and camera looking for the eyries of the Aquila Chrysaetos, the Spanish golden eagle. We'd lived in tents - me, Stella, Spencer and three others - way high up above the line of firs on the harsh hills, where the air was thin and in the mornings wet with mist, but where the noon sun showed, below, a world of lush stream valleys groomed with hay and alfalfa fields.

"You went back to Catalonia?"

"To the village itself. We were doing a special on the drug trade in Barcelona - you may have read it - and I took a weekend off and drove up to Viella."

"How is it?"

"Unchanged. Ten times ten years wouldn't change Viella. No, that's not quite true, there have been some changes. The old church has gone, destroyed in a fire, and the road to the foothills is paved, and - oh, there's a new hotel - I stayed the night - run by Huesca's son. Yes, Huesca is still alive. And Lugo and Cypriana, and..." She spoke names I could put no face to. "And they all remembered me - they remember us all. 'The sanitary Americans,' they call us."

"Spencer was the only American," I reminded her, and wondered if my voice betrayed me. If so, she gave no hint of it.

"American, Canadian, we're all the same to them."

I persevered. "Did they speak of Spencer?"

She nodded.

"What did they say?"

She shrugged. "Huesca - he was there that day, remember - told me three others have since been killed on the same peak."

"Trying to reach the eyries?"

"Yes." She looked round the room as if seeking a way out of this lane of conversation.

"Do you think knowing three others have died makes me feel any better, Stella? For chrissakes look at me, will you!"

I shouldn't have said that, and when she turned to me and I could see her eyes I hated myself for it. Do you really think I'm trying to hurt you, her eyes were saying.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Tell me more about the village."

For half an hour we spoke of old friends and old places, but she must have known as I did that the joy that comes from remembering had gone and would not come back.

"What other things, Stella? You said you'd come to see me about other things and I guess you didn't mean Spain and Spencer."

"No, but I thought you'd like to hear about the village."

"I'm glad you told me. I can talk about it now. What other things, Stella?"

"Oh, let's start with selling arms to Africa."

I sighed and looked at her, and it came to me that it had always been this way with Stella, like walking off a

beach into the sea, warm at first, till suddenly the cold undercurrent hits you, often when you're not ready for it.

"I'm not up to it today."

"You look tired, Mike. A bad conscience or a late night?"

"Let's not go into conscience again. Let's blame late nights, and my getting old."

"I know Karlson is in town," she said. "I'd like to meet him. Can you fix it?"

So that was it. I should have guessed.

"He's not news any longer," I reminded her. "Besides, he's not here." Which was true; McGee would have taken him away by now, to go see the factory.

"Is he coming back?"

I shrugged.

"OK," she said, "let's talk about the pigeon."

I was saved by the waiter calling me to the phone; Miss Marco to remind me of afternoon appointments. I told her to rearrange them, that I'd be away for another hour.

Back at the table Stella said: "I was at the desk in the Ritz when your secretary phoned. I was still at the desk when you phoned. The desk clerk said 'What gives with these people across the street, all this fuss over a dead pigeon?' 'What dead pigeon?' I said, and he told me. I also asked myself what gives with these people across the street over a dead pigeon?"

I pointed to the painting above the bar, a jacamar bird beside a pool of green water. "You know how I feel

about birds."

"I know how you used to feel about birds. Are you telling me you haven't changed? Am I supposed to believe you can sell arms to Africa and still grieve over a dead pigeon? When were you last in Africa, in Tanzania?"

"Six months ago."

"And what did you think?"

I shrugged. "Better than it was a year before, and better still than a year before that."

"But still criminal for the twentieth century!"

"Criminal?" I turned away, called the waiter. The pain was coming back behind the eyes.

"Look," I said to Stella, "is this off the record?"

"You know it is."

"Then let me tell you, I don't like the people who run that country, or people like Karlson, any more than you do. And you know that, Stella. If I thought I could stop these innocents slaughtering each other by giving up this job, I'd quit tomorrow and go live in the hills of Spain." I rubbed my eyeballs with thumb and forefinger.

"So why don't you?"

"It's my job. If I didn't do it someone else would. And if Karlson didn't deal with us he'd go to one of our competitors, and if he couldn't buy second-hand guns from them he'd buy new ones from the government. Your government, Stella, the government you help elect."

"I live in the States and I'm a Republican," she said.

"And these are still the same old lame excuses, Mike."

I waved this aside and finished the drink. The waiter had diluted it with tonic instead of water and the taste was bitter to the tongue. I ordered a fresh drink while Stella talked.

"Look, I know Karlson is here to see you, and I want to meet him."

"I tell you he's no longer news. 'Time' ran a story on him two years ago."

"Did you read it? Have you read the files on Karlson? There is nothing about the man, everything about what the man does. I want a story on Karlson as a man. Does he kick stray dogs, send flowers to his mother?"

"He does," I said. "Send flowers to his mother, I mean. Let me tell you."

And I told her of how I'd once met Karlson, by chance, in the lobby of a New York hotel. He was on his way out with a large bouquet of flowers and something - the size of a jewel case - gift wrapped in the rich blue paper of Berthier, the jeweller. He said, with no blush of self-consciousness, he was off to see his mother who was in her eighties. I had expected him to laugh and give me the conspiratorial wink that often passes between men, but no, he spoke earnestly.

"But don't be fooled, Stella. He's as cold and evil as the devil. And lecherous as hell," I added with faint visions of last night.

"That's the Karlson I want to write about. I have to meet him, Mike."

"Not a chance. He leaves first thing in the morning."

"How about today, tonight?"

"For chrissakes, Stella, he's here on business and you know he doesn't give personal interviews."

"He needn't know who I am. You could introduce me as your friend."

"I'm sorry, but no."

She looked at the jacamar bird and said without turning: "I've got the pigeon, Mike. It's lying in a shoebox in my room. The pigeon has one bullet hole in the head, another in the chest. The blood has seeped out and clotted on the wings. If I get to meet Karlson tonight, introduced as your friend, that's the last you'll ever hear about the pigeon. If I don't, there'll be a colour photograph of that pigeon in the next issue of Newsweek, and a colour photograph of an African child dying from a bullet in the stomach, and a photograph of the balcony of the Consolidated Export penthouse, and a photograph, taken at night, of the illuminated sign of the Ritz, with the light of the R not working."

McGee phoned from the factory late in the afternoon.

"Karlson is still talking about Big Bertha. Have you thought about a price?"

"A hundred thousand."

"Oh, for chrissakes!"

"The man said money was no object, McGee."

"Oh, for chrissakes!"

"All right, you fix the price."

"How about fifty?"

"Make it seventy-five and a new suit. I ruined your nice new grey flannel suit with my scotch, remember."

"Have you been at it already?"

"I've been intoxicated by a beautiful woman with eyes like grapes, if that's what you mean."

There was the sound of a voice speaking behind McGee, and then he was back. "How about tonight - for Karlson - a woman."

"All fixed, all fixed, and one for you."

"A lulu?"

"Aha! you'll have to wait and see. And ask Karlson if he'll settle for an Aquila Chrystaeto?"

"What the hell's that?"

"A species of the Spanish golden eagle."

"Have you been at it already?"

"You're repeating yourself, McGee, you're repeating yourself. I've already told you - I'm suffering from a pair of glistening green grapes."

"Oh, for chrissakes! Remember, we meet at seven, in the lobby of the Ritz."

I slept on the couch in my office for the rest of the afternoon.

It is night. I am refreshed, warm and glowing.

"Let's try the Embassy Club next, three in this car, three in the other." These words come from a face the shape of McGee's.

"Yes sir, yes sir," from a blue chauffeur, and the body of a tall thin girl with bones crushes my knees, fills my face with its breasts and its attar of perfumed sweat.

The wind blows cool as on a hilltop and a voice - is it Karlson's? - says: "For chrissakes shut the window," and the transparent folds of the thin girl's dress stop flapping on my brow like the wings of some flimsy eagle. Or like the clouds on the mountain above Viella that used to beat against the peak, to end defeated and fall into the valley in tatters of small white plumes.

"You all right?" says the voice of the bones on my knees.

"You all right?" I said to Stella the day I chased her and she stumbled on the rock-strewn path and cut her cheek. And Stella said: "Do not worry. When you're famous you will pay to have the scar removed," and her red hair shone and her eyes sparkled like green grapes fresh from the hillspring flowing.

"We settled on sixty thousand," whispers the voice of McGee, and I guess he is sitting in the smell of whiskey somewhere in the limbo beyond my left ear.

"Send me the bill for the scar, Stella," I say.

"She's in the other car," says McGee.

"You feeling better?" giggles the voice of the bones on my knee.

"We've been here before," I hear myself say to the shape of McGee, and it must be later for we are now erect and engulfed by a new wave of light, thin blades of fire, redgold, greengold, piercing to the eye.

"You dance disco?" says the voice of the tall thin bones.

A wave of noise flows from the instruments and spills all over the floor, and I am skinless, unprotected.

"Did you hear me? Sixty thousand!" shouts McGee in my ear, as if speaking to a deaf conspirator.

"What about your suit?" But when the voice of McGee answers it is to say: "Stella sure has fallen for Karlson."

"Stella fell," I hear my voice tell McGee. "Stella fell and cut her cheek on the hills above Viella."

My eyes shut, I see the blood of Stella's cheek, but as I move to wipe it clean the face changes to become the face of Spencer, as all faces become sooner or later in every dream. "Spencer fell, not Stella," I say to McGee, but he does not hear. "Poor Spencer, poor bloody Spencer," I shout at McGee but McGee lifts his glass and says: "Cheers."

"The eagle killed Spencer," I say to the tall thin bones, but she smiles and puts her arms around my neck.

We dance in a collision of limbs, buffetting, probing, through the wreckage of bunches of bodies, the overpourings of fleshslack frames, with all mouths opening, shutting, spitting out a vast silence of words or singing to some secret music.

"Cherry jubilee," cries the tall thin bones and tongues

of flame shoot from the table.

"Too much brandy," says the voice of Karlson, and in the light of the blue lambent flame I see the figure of Stella, her arm around a neck, dancing. Stella is dancing with Spencer.

I make my way to Spencer to tell him I wasn't to blame. That day they put the gun in my hands and said: "Shoot, shoot the eagle, the eagle is attacking Spencer." But I couldn't shoot the eagle - Spencer will understand why - and the eagle attacked Spencer and his body came down, bouncing off the Spanish rocks, and the eagle stood high on the ledge triumphant. "I have shot the eagle, it cannot kill you again," I shout to Spencer and hope that he'll believe me. But when Spencer turns, the face dancing with Stella is the face of Karlson.

I swing at Karlson but he is no longer there. Arms loosely attached to my body now hold Stella; the music is soft, we dance as though up to our ankles in sand.

"Stella, Stella, the man is the devil, how can you do it?"

"It's my job. If I don't do it someone else will."

"It's not too late."

"Too late for what?"

"To forget about Spencer."

"I thought you meant for us," she says. "You know it's too late for us, and that has nothing to do with Spencer."

Oh Stella, Stella, don't you understand that there comes with love an overwhelming need to possess the mind?

And that the guilt of Spencer's death came to possess what mind I had? So what are we doing here, you and me, engulfed in this sea of sodden and withered faces, all trying vainly to outmagic youth?

"You never did send me the bill for the scar," I say to Stella, but I am now dancing with the tall thin bones.

"What bill?" she says.

"There are long snatches of incoherence, disremembered words, fleeting scenes of indecipherable shadows. Torrents of noise pour over me, under me, all from a flood of half-human faces, ginfired and sensuous, as if in some strange rite of exultation and party to some private and faraway excitement. And there are also mirrors of light and moments of sad reflection.

"I will cleanse myself of Spencer," I say to Stella.

"It is not too late."

But Stella has gone, gone with the devil.

"Drink up," says McGee.

And with time comes a long and crushing silence.

The phone rang in my office.

"How are you this morning?" McGee's own voice was coarse as a rasp and I knew he'd spent the night competing with the noise.

"I'm fine, fine."

"You know we got sixty thousand for Big Bertha?"

"You told me last night."

"I didn't think you'd remember. You kept talking of mountains and grapes and golden bloody eagles. But you sure can pick 'em."

"How do you mean?"

"Stella. Did you...."

"Shut up, McGee; shut up."

"Take it easy, take it easy."

"Has he left?"

"Karlson? Yes, flew out first thing this morning."

"Did he pay you?"

"Of course, cash."

"Including the sixty thousand?"

"Huhuh."

There was a silence.

"You realize he hasn't got a shell," I said, "so the gun won't fire."

"What?"

"A shell for Big Bertha. The last one was destroyed - probably twenty years ago."

"Oh, for chrissakes! Why didn't you tell him?"

"He said he wanted to buy Big Bertha. Money was no object, remember? He said nothing about shells."

"Can't we make a shell for him? He needs only one, remember."

"Not a hope. Have you ever looked down the barrel of that gun, McGee? It's no longer round. You want to try and make us an egg-shaped shell?"

"Oh for chrissakes!"

It was only when I hung up I noticed a phone message propped on my desk. Stella had called early in the morning, before I was in. Would I come across to her room, the message said.

"Have you been crying, Stella?"

"Crying? Good Lord no, I'm just tired. Why should I cry?"

"Karlson, last night. I thought perhaps - well you asked for it, Stella, you asked for it, but I'm sorry just the same."

She laughed. "So you should be, for wasting my time. Karlson is about as exciting to spend an evening with as a retired bishop. He showed interest once - no, twice. When he was talking about his mother and when he somehow worked the conversation round to Romblé's translation of the Iliad. Have you heard of Romblé, Mike?"

"You're joking."

"I wish I were. I see now why he's been left alone by the gossip columnists. The man's as innocent as a choirboy. Come to think of it I once knew a choirboy...oh, well. Like some coffee?"

"I'd like a drink. What you mean is, he found out you worked for Newsweek?"

"No, he didn't. He couldn't have cared less who I worked for. Didn't you see him? I sat myself down on his knee and he blushed like a ten-year old. But I don't

suppose you remember. I see you still like to drink yourself into a stupor."

She poured two cups of coffee. "He may shoot pigeons but I'd let him go out with my sister. Incidentally, he says it was you or McGee shot that bird."

"He's lying. How did the subject come up?"

"No, I don't think he's lying. How did it come up? Oh, I asked him how he'd enjoyed his visit. He looked at you and McGee - sort of sad like - and he said he didn't like doing business with McGee because McGee was insane. He didn't say insane but some such word in Swedish. He says he had to take the gun away from you and McGee, that you were urging McGee to shoot something - Karlson didn't understand what, he didn't know the words in English."

Shoot the Aquila Chrysaetos? Is that what Karlson and Stella were saying, that I had shot my beloved eagle? Take the gun away from McGee, take the gun away from me? What gun? I had no gun. I held out my hands to Stella so Stella could see I had no gun and my fingers trembled. Look, Stella, at my hands, see how my fingers tremble at the very thought of shooting my beloved eagle. No, I had no gun. "I had no gun, Stella." But she doesn't believe me, I can tell by the way she stares at me she doesn't believe me, and the pain is there again behind my eyes.

"Are you all right, Mike?"

How could she think I shot my beloved eagle? How could she think me capable of such a thing, knowing how long I'd worked with it, how much I loved it? "I couldn't do it,

Stella, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Look at my hands, see how my fingers tremble at the thought of it. What would these hands do with a gun?" But Stella did not understand. Oh Christ, what could I say to make Stella understand? And why were we talking again about Spencer? She had told me years ago it was best forgotten, had said she understood, had said she understood....

"Mike, are you feeling OK? Sit down, here, sit on the bed. You really should go easy on the drinking. I know it's no more of my business now than it was five years ago, but...Mike are you sure you're all right? Mike, don't cry. Oh, for God's sake, don't cry on me...."



Old
Flame

OLD FLAME

The morning Mrs. Paduski sent word to say her furnace wasn't working, McNeely winked at me and said: "Well, m' boy, this is it," and we left the depot carrying our usual tool-kits, and wearing the old uniforms, still inscribed: Home Heating Oil, The Hottest Thing in Town.

Mrs. Paduski was a middle-aged widow who lived alone twenty miles from anywhere, way up the valley beyond Judy Creek, in an old stone house fitted with an early forced-draught Flaxman boiler and with cast-iron pipes throughout. Hers was one of the first houses in our part of Northern Ontario to be heated with oil.

McNeely didn't say much during our drive up the valley, and that was unusual for him. In the four years since I'd left school to join the company as an apprentice to him, I'd got used to hearing his voice, with its residue of Irish, going from morning till night, joking with customers, giving advice to farmers, passing the time of day with strangers, telling them all what was wrong with the world, and how it would never be right until people started to sing again. He didn't sing himself, but he hummed a lot when he wasn't talking. That day, on the way to Mrs. Paduski's, he didn't even hum. He let me drive, and just sat looking down at the snow.

Perhaps he was thinking about his retirement. More likely he was going over in his mind what he had been told to say to Mrs. Paduski, and just how he was going to say it.

Her house had been built in a clearing of trees by a preacher, and all you could see of it from this side of Judy Creek was a large wooden cross on the roof. McNeely said not to risk the ice on the creek, so I steered us over the bridge and stopped in the front yard. We walked round to the back of the house to where we knew the kitchen was, and I guess she must have heard our boots crunching in the snow because she had the door open.

"Come in, come in, take off your boots, nice to see you Mr. McNeely." She stood on short fat legs, in black woollen stockings, eyes watering down her plump red cheeks, wearing a tired blue bathrobe, and over her shoulders an old rabbit coat to keep out the cold, but which made her look like an unshaven barrel. "Come in and sit down. I've got the kitchen stove going so you can take off your coat." She led the way along the corridor to the kitchen, her curlers bouncing up and down to the rhythm of her waddle. Once inside she took McNeely's coat, brushed the collar in an affectionate way with the back of her hand, and hung the coat on a peg behind the door. An old pewter coffeepot was bubbling away on top of the wood stove.

"Aha! Coffee. Sure and my mind has been on nothing else the whole way up the valley, Mrs. Paduski." McNeely spoke in a broad Irish accent - he usually did at the opening of any conversation, but would quickly give up or forget. He also

spoke with enthusiasm, although I'm sure he had been hoping for something stronger than coffee.

"So, you got my message," said Mrs. Paduski, beaming at him. "Lucky for me one of the boys from the village was out huntin' this way yesterday."

"Well, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Paduski, we've been half expecting to hear from you," said McNeely, but before she had time to raise her eyebrows at this he crossed the bare tiled floor of the big, bright, high-ceilinged kitchen, held his head over the coffeepot on the stove, and sniffed away, with murmurs of "ohs," and "ahs," and the odd "begorrah."

I noticed on the wall the same cracked mirror, and the old calendar advertising the Steel Company of Canada, with its photograph of a red-hot sheet of metal going into the jaws of a rolling-mill. When I first saw that calendar, four years ago, I imagined the late Mr. Paduski stoking the coke in furnaces; or Mr. Paduski being cremated in 1980, and she keeping the calendar as a token of fond remembrance. ~~but~~ no. "I picked it up in the plumber's shop in the village and liked the picture, so why should I change it?" I heard her tell McNeely. "Who needs to know what day or year it is, anyway?"

McNeely now stood with his back to the stove, swaying gently on his heels, hands behind his back flapping at imaginary coat-tails while Mrs. Paduski gazed at him admiringly, coffeepot in hand, wishing, I'm sure, that he was a permanent fixture. "Coffee's poured, Mr. McNeely," she said and stood aside to let him pass.

When the three of us were seated at the six-legged farmhouse table with its blue and white squared plastic cloth, Mrs. Paduski smiled into McNeely's brown and handsome face. "Nice to have company again," she said. "It sure is nice to see a friendly soul again." He returned her smile and pushed back his silver hair, and for ten minutes he and Mrs. Paduski talked of old friends in the valley, and of how she hadn't been to the village all winter "because of them terrible drifts, deep as a heifer's head," and McNeely told her about the Tomlinsons losing a sow, and about how the Patty twins had eloped with a couple of boys visiting from the city, and were last seen by the Jensens in a cheap eating-house in Toronto. Jensen used to be the fuel delivery man, and mention of his name must have reminded Mrs. Paduski of why she had sent for McNeely and me.

"The furnace went out during the night," she said, shaking her head as she crossed to the stove to fill McNeely's cup. "You want to help yourself to some more coffee, boy?" (She always called me boy, although I now stood six foot three and had the beginnings of a moustache). Without waiting for my reply she turned her attention back to McNeely. "I just couldn't get it started again. I pushed the reset button, I checked the fuse and cleaned the jets but it still don't work." She said nothing about maybe not having enough oil in her tank, for in twenty years our company had never let Mrs. Paduski run out of oil, and she knew it couldn't be we had forgotten to put oil in her tank. She looked at McNeely, her face open for his praise, waiting for him to tell her, Yes, she had done all the

right things and she could do no more; but when McNeely said nothing and went on sipping his coffee, she said to him: "Could it be the March disease, d' you think, Mr. McNeely?"

I'd heard McNeely tell our customers about the March disease; how, after a long winter, thermostats would start misbehaving, flames would go out, and families would wake up to find pipes frozen and icicles sharp as needles in their thermal underwear. Or, just as bad, furnaces would overheat and dear old maids would find themselves embraced by hot flushes.

"No, no, it ain't the thermostat, I'm sure o' that," said McNeely, but before she could ask him how he could be so sure he held out his cup. "Nice cup o' coffee, that was. Would you have a spot more?"

While she refilled his cup he got up and walked round the kitchen, humming away, nodding his head wisely, running his fingers up and down the cement seams in the grey stone walls. "See here," he said to me, "just like I told you, not a crack in this plaster. Ain't no cold air ever going to get through these walls. These walls are tight as a drum."

"You got a house that leaks?" Mrs. Paduski asked, and I thought I detected a touch of excitement in her voice, as if she were hoping that McNeely, a widower, might be looking for a new place to lodge.

"No, I ain't got no house that leaks, but me and the boy" (and he jerked his thumb at me) "we've been inspecting a lot o' houses lately, looking for places the cold air might get in, like through cracks in the walls, or down old chimneys, or past the frames of windows. And I can tell you, Mrs. Paduski, there

ain't many houses as tight as this house. How old is she now?"

Mrs. Paduski had turned in her chair and was following McNeely with her eyes. He had this effect on middle-aged widows, I'd noticed. On middle-aged women in general, come to think of it.

"How old is the house?" McNeely had to ask again.

"What? Oh, nigh on a hundred years." And Mrs. Paduski sighed as if she suddenly felt as old. "This house was built by my grandfather who was a preacher, and was handed on to my father who was also a preacher, and who ran off, as you know."

We knew about her father running off. She had been telling McNeely about her father for twenty years, so he once told me. And she had mentioned her father running off the first time I'd come to her house, the night her jets waxed up and McNeely showed her how to keep them clean.

"A hundred years, did you say? That I can believe. This house has good thick walls, as thick as a monastery. And nice small windows. Should be an easy house to keep warm. Not hot," he added, "but warm enough to keep the pipes from freezing." He looked at me and I nodded my agreement. "In a house like this," said McNeely, thumping his fist against the kitchen wall, "in a house like this you could keep the pipes from freezing with just a few log fires."

"That's all my grandfather had to keep him warm, just a few log fires," said Mrs. Paduski, and as an afterthought she added; "That was before my father ran off to keep himself warm with the postmistress."

McNeely and I exchanged looks. This was the first time she'd let slip that her father had run off with the postmistress.

"Is that so, now," McNeely said softly, and leaned forward in his chair and raised his brows to her, inviting her to say more. Mrs. Paduski, absorbed in tragedy, continued. "He used to meet the postmistress regular, at the village library. Must have been attracted by her mind, for she was skinny as a lath. My mum and I thought nothing of it at first - he always had likings for queer things, like old books and tombstone rubbings. He used to creep in cemeteries amongst the tombstones," she said.

She got up, crossed the room, ran her fingers in and out of cupboards like a spider, and produced a photograph. "This is him. This is my dad." And we looked at a faded photo of what could have been Mrs. Paduski with trousers, short hair, and a long moustache. "He went to the post office to send a telegram one day - or so he said - and we never saw him again. Didn't take a thing with him except a spare pair of socks and a bundle of books and all his tombstone rubbings. Just disappeared - poof!" (And Mrs. Paduski threw her hands in the air). "Just disappeared, the two of them, my dad and the postmistress, and never been heard of since. First thing we knew was when the postmaster came to the door.

"Your man has run off with my wife," he said to my mum.

"What man?" said my mum.

"Your husband," said the postmaster.

"Run off?" said my mum.

"Run off. Skipped. Bolted. With my wife," said the postmaster.

"Can't be," said my mum. "He ain't finished flooring the attic."

"But he had, you know," said Mrs. Paduski. "Skipped, I mean; run off with the postmistress. Broke my mum's heart, it did, for she never did get the floor of the attic finished." She sighed.

I handed back her faded father, and for a long time she looked at him, lost in memories. McNeely and I sat still, breathing quietly, afraid we would disturb her thoughts. Suddenly a shiver ran through her, and with it the reason for our visit. "Well, boys," she said, "should we go downstairs and fix the furnace?"

I let McNeely answer that. He drew his chair closer to Mrs. Paduski and looked at her sympathetically, and her face brightened, her father seemingly forgotten, and she opened her eyes encouragingly, as if thinking McNeely was about to take her hand and comfort her.

"Mrs. Paduski," he said, "we ain't going to fix your furnace."

Mrs. Paduski shot up in her chair, her cheeks came to a slow boil, and she opened her mouth speechlessly as though to let out steam. She looked at McNeely, then at me, then back to McNeely, and I noticed she had a long black hair at the end of her nose. "What d' you mean, you ain't going to fix my furnace? You ain't on strike, are you?"

"On strike? Of course we ain't on strike. You should

know us better than that." McNeely was hurt.

"Well," she said, "if you ain't on strike why don't you fix my furnace?"

McNeely breathed in. "Because it don't need fixing. Because there's not a bit o' thing wrong with it."

Mrs. Paduski beamed. The thought must have struck her that she hadn't let us down, that no wonder she couldn't find anything wrong with her furnace, there wasn't anything wrong with it to find. But her smile went as quickly as it came. "Then why ain't it working?" she said, and her whole face asked the question.

It was to explain this that they had sent McNeely. "Send McNeely," the Chairman had said when he heard about Mrs. Paduski, and after he had consulted the members of the Board. And McNeely approached it gently, as the Chairman knew he would.

"Mrs. P," he said, knowing full well the intimate nature of the diminutive. "Mrs. P, when were you last in the village?"

"What?"

"When were you last in the village?"

She put a finger to her chin. "Last December," she said.

"Snow's been heavy since then, and Albert stopped coming with his snowplough. He must be dead," she sniffed.

Wisely, McNeely ignored Albert and the reason why he hadn't come to clear the snow.

"And you get no newspapers? Never listen to the news? Never talk to the postman?"

She sniffed again. "I get a weekly paper - seldom read it. My T.V. stopped working in the afternoon - the only time I looked at it. As for the postman - don't talk to me about post-people." McNeely had forgotten about her father and the postmistress. He changed his tactics.

"Mrs. P," he said, "how would you like to be famous?"

Mrs. Paduski blinked. "Dunno," she said, "I ain't never been famous so how should I know?"

"It means a bit o' money, a fair bit o' money," said McNeely, "and your picture in the papers and on the T.V."

She looked at him, suspicious. "They cut off my T.V. - I told you that."

"No, Mrs. P, they didn't cut off just your T.V. They cut off all T.V. in the afternoon. That's why you're famous. Let me explain. Listen careful now and I'll try and explain."

While McNeely was explaining, I went outside to check our equipment. If anyone could handle Mrs. Paduski it had to be McNeely. Look at the way he had convinced Mrs. Bittson to switch to gas; or how, back in 1980, he got Mr. Weinstock to believe our oil was good kosher oil, one hundred percent Canadian oil, and not a drop from any Arab country.

"How are the dogs?" said McNeely, when I came back into the house.

"OK," I said.

"You got sore feet?" said Mrs. Paduski looking at my boots.

I didn't answer. "You told her?" I asked McNeely.

"I was just finishing," he said, and he turned again to

Mrs. Paduski. "So, that's it, Mrs. P. That's the story. Your furnace stopped for there ain't no oil in your tank. And there ain't no oil in your tank for there ain't no oil left to put in your tank."

"You mean you've run out of oil?" said Mrs. Paduski.

"I mean we've all run out of oil," said McNeely.

"In the village?" said Mrs. Paduski.

"In the village, in the town, in the country, in the whole goddam world," said McNeely. "There's not a drop of oil left in the whole goddam world."

I had never heard McNeely say "goddam" before.

"And how come that makes me famous?" said Mrs. Paduski.

"Your furnace," said McNeely, "was the last to go out. We checked the whole country and the flame in your furnace was the last to go out. The last in Canada, the last in North America, could be the last in the world. That's why you're famous, Mrs. P. That's why you'll be on T.V. and in all the newspapers. Do you know what they're calling you in Head Office? 'The Last Old Flame,' that's what they've christened you Mrs. P, 'The Last Old Flame'."

Mrs. Paduski went to the mirror. She looked down her nose as if mentally snipping off the hair from its tip. She took out her curlers and fluffed up her hair with her hands. "How can I help you boys?" she said.

"We want you on T.V.," said McNeely. "We want you to do our company's commercials. We want you to be our 'Last Old Flame.' We want you to tell the world your flame was the last to go out 'cos you used our oil."

Mrs. Paduski put her head to the side to think about this. "But there ain't no more oil for you to sell," she said, knitting her brows at McNeely.

His face flushed with shame, his eyes turned to the floor. "I know, Mrs. P, I know. But life has to go on. So we now sell logs." He raised his head and he was the old McNeely again. "Yes, Mrs. P, we are now into logs, the fuel of the future. And we want you to say you're going to buy our logs 'cos you bought our oil for twenty years. We want you to say that in the papers, and on the T.V., Mrs. P. So, what do you think?"

Mrs. Paduski took a deep breath, moistened her lips with her tongue, and seemed to grow all of six inches. "Why not," she said, "why not."

You probably saw and heard a lot of Mrs. Paduski that year, as we did. Her story was in all the papers, her photo made the first page of the women's magazines, and there was a time you only had to switch on your T.V. at night and there she was. Not just on commercials, mark you. You may remember seeing her dancing at the Insulator's Ball, or signing autograph books at lumbermen recruitment centres, that sort of thing. And the government used her on posters, telling us how to make the best use of logs, and to be sure to keep our temperatures down.

All that summer people drove up to Judy Creek just to see where she lived, and the police had to stop them taking away

her fence-posts and chickens as souvenirs. McNeely and I went to her house once, to take away her force-draught Flaxman boiler so it could be sent to the museum in Ottawa. She wasn't there, of course; that week she was up in Toronto, cutting the ribbon at the Annual Dog-Sled Show. In fact it wasn't until late in the winter that she got back to her house, and a week or so later that she phoned us. That day, McNeely answered the phone. "Home heating service, the finest wood this side of the Rockies." There was a quiver in his voice as he spoke the word "wood." "It was Mrs. Paduski," he said when he hung up the phone. "She wants to see us."

Mrs. Paduski met us at the front door in a blonde wig and a new rabbit coat. "Come in, boys, come in. Nice to see you, Timothy." McNeely blushed and looked at me darkly, but I shook my head. No, no, I hadn't told her his name was Timothy.

"In here, in here," said Mrs. Paduski, guiding us away from the kitchen and into the front parlour of the house, where a large log fire was burning with a coffee percolator on its hearth. I noticed she walked unsteadily on a pair of silver shoes with her toes showing. She sat on the sofa and patted the cushion beside her, but McNeely stood cautiously by the fire. There was a new red telephone on the table.

"I didn't call you here to complain about the logs," she said, "though the Lord knows they spark all over the carpet. No, I asked you boys here for a spot of celebration." She got up and went to the table in the corner, where I could see three cups and a bottle of brandy. "I thought I would lace the coffee, seeing as how it's a cold day, and seeing as how we have

something to celebrate."

"Aha!" said McNeely, rubbing his hands. "And will you let me do the pouring, Mrs. Paduski?"

"Dorothy," she said.

"What?" said McNeely.

"You must call me Dorothy," said Mrs. Paduski.

McNeely blushed, started to hum loudly, and unscrewed the cap of the brandy bottle as she poured the coffee.

"Here's to you," said McNeely as Mrs. Paduski pulled the table out in front of the fire, arranged three chairs, and signalled to us to sit down. I noticed the long black hair had gone from the end of her nose. "How's business?" she said.

"Can't complain," said McNeely, refilling his cup. "But it's not like the good old days. Except for you. We're really proud of you, Mrs. P."

"Dorothy," she said.

"Dorothy," said McNeely. "We're really proud of you, Dorothy. You did a fine job on T.V. We used to watch you every night." He looked at me and I nodded, first to him, then to Mrs. Paduski. She put her hands to where her curlers used to be, then looked down her nose and saw nothing there.

"So much fussing," she said. "All the time somebody was fussing 'do this, do that, say this, say that.' I was all washed out. Was glad of a rest. I don't figure on doing any more advertising. Anyway, I'm off to Florida next week."

"You're taking a holiday?" asked McNeely.

"No," she said, "I'm leaving Canada. I'm off to live in Florida."

"For good?" said McNeely.

"For good," she said.

"By yourself?" said McNeely.

Mrs. Paduski beamed, raised her cup, and took a long slow sip. "With my father."

"Is that so," said McNeely. And then: "Didn't he run off with the scoutmistress?"

"The postmistress," Mrs. Paduski corrected. "Yes, he did, but she left him. Ran off and left him, the same way he ran off and left my mum. Now he's all alone with his books and his tombstone rubbings. And he wants me to go and live with him, look after him. In Florida. In a big house, right on the beach. Just think, boys, no more heating problems, no more snow. And I've got you boys to thank for it."

"For the house?" said McNeely, who was already showing the effects of the brandy.

"For finding my dad. For him finding me. He saw me doing my commercials. On the T.V."

"Didn't he know you were here?" said McNeely waving his hand at the room.

"He said he wrote. Years ago. He said he wrote, but his letter must have been lost. Or stolen. He says you can never trust them post-people."

"Well, well, isn't that nice now," said McNeely, and I could see he was relieved. Maybe he had been worried about,

why Mrs. Paduski was celebrating, suspecting the reason might have something to do with himself. "Here's to you and your dad," he said, raising his cup.

"What's more, in Florida I don't have to worry about this," said Mrs. Paduski, swatting her slipper at a spark which had jumped from the fire to the floor.

"That's true, Mrs. P," said McNeely, "but it's hot in Florida." And he loosened his tie and poured another brandy. "It gets mighty hot in the summer."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Paduski, "I ain't got no worry on that score. My dad's fully air-conditioned. The whole house is air-conditioned. I'll be cool enough," she said.

McNeely looked at me. I shook my head, No, don't say a word. Mrs. Paduski hadn't been in the village recently, she never read the papers, never looked at T.V. and wouldn't talk to the postman. So she wouldn't know anything about the new laws on air-conditioning. But why spoil her celebration? We wished her luck, said goodbye, McNeely gave her a hug, and we went out into the snow.

"Mush, mush," said McNeely, and he hummed happily to himself as the dogs pulled us back to the depot.

BUTTERFLIES ARE BLUE

a

man

spoke

cut the seat belt

slip him under the

trolley and on to

the wing be quick

and mind his legs

oh christ oh christ

look at his bloody legs

rain falls gently swirling white snowpearls suspended in the white

even the sky is white yet it is night the voice says more light

give us more light and tag the bodies nurse don't forget to tag

rip the cloth away and easy easy now easy on to the wing

and down down into a

tunnel of darkness

and a thirst hot

and unquenchable

the voice speaks

in the hospital

the jewish civic

i say i'm no jew

the voice speaks

we know you said

so last week but

our door is open

to all men even to the unbelievers

for the body must heal not the soul

now shut your eyes

and sleep

sleep

sleep

Sixty-four people were killed in the crash; the injured were taken to Riverdale, Illinois.

The hospital psychiatrist, Finestone, sits on the edge of the bed. "They tell me you're in no hurry to leave us."

I shrug. Finestone has a large nose and red, standing on his face like a mountain fired by the setting sun.

"You still having these dreams about the crash?"

I nod. There are 364 white acoustic tiles and 24 dustladen lights on the ceiling, and a plaster crack all the way to the floor shaped like the Mississippi. Where St. Louis should be is only a lightswitch.

"You still having dreams about the girl?"

I should never have told him about Katie. She had sent me flowers, but it was all over between us long before the crash. "No, I haven't dreamed of the girl in a month."

"Good, good. I guess that's something."

I study the far wall. In June a patient had squirted coca-cola, and the still-brown stain above the bed is the face of Lincoln or, when viewed sideways, Lake Superior pointing the finger accusingly at Minnesota. I'd never thought of that before, the lake accusing Minnesota....

"You'll be back to normal within a day of leaving this place," says Finestone.

"Sure, I'll be alright on the day," I say, but he must know from my voice I can't believe him. The ward is quiet, drowsy with faintpiped music. A simple world and safe.

Finestone pats his belly. "They all get this way after a long spell in hospital. It's some sort of reversion to the womb. You lie here, curled up, protected, nourished, building up fierce images of the outside world. It hasn't changed. At least not much. You still having dreams about that girl and Niagara? "No, I guess I've already asked you that." He makes a note on his pad. "My wife and I went to Niagara for our honeymoon. I told you that, eh? I didn't think you young people went to places like Niagara for your honeymoon. I thought young people nowadays went to Mexico or the Islands or to Europe for honeymoons." (What is he talking about? I never said anything about honeymoons in Niagara). He puts his notebook in his pocket, rises to go, has a thought, comes back. "How are you getting on with your friend from Lebanon?"

"My lawyer? Fine. He says he's handled hundreds of cases like mine, yet he looks so young. Is he arab?"

Finestone laughs and puts his head back to show off giant nostrils. "So you can't pronounce his name either. He's been coming here as long as I remember for clients like you, and I've heard him called everything from Maramazouk to Marmalade. Still, he's been winning damage suits for years. Is he arab? I don't know. He's not jewish, that's for sure, but he'll do you justice in spite of your jewish blood."

When I make to question this he adds: "You forget you now have ten pints circulating inside you donated by the sons of Abraham."

He smiles, I smile, and I lie back to study the tributaries of the Mississippi.

When I came out of hospital that fall my lawyer took me by ambulance to City Hall to notarize my claim.

"Why not by taxi? I can walk with a stick."

He turned a sour eye. "So you teach me my business, eh? Don't you know they are watching us, spying on us? You are meant to be poor and in pain, and the poor cannot saddle a donkey. So, we go by ambulance."

With sixty-four people killed in the crash, my claim for damages could take years. "Unless we settle out-of-court," said my lawyer.

"What do you advise?"

He shrugged. "Let us worry later. First we prove how sick you are, that you need money now. You're sure you can live on three thousand a month? And stop clutching my arm."

I let go his arm and turned my eyes from the world racing outside the frame of the ambulance window. "Sorry. Can I live on three thousand a month? Of course, I have my job."

"No, no, no." He pulled his eyebrows. "You do not listen. There will be no jobs. You are too sick for jobs. I have explained. You do not listen. Why do you not listen, eh? Listen. You cannot work. Your health will not permit it. You are too sick. Look at you - pale, thin, you cringe, your lips tighten when you walk, like the wind from the desert is blowing in your face. Why make me suffer by not listening?" He drank white fluid from a bottle, beat his chest with his fist. "What is your job? It says on this form you're an engineer. You tell me you write stories for children. We gotta get our stories straight, OK?"

"I write children's stories in my spare time. I'm a hydraulic engineer with Great Lakes Power. At least I was. I'll probably quit when I'm fit enough to walk, and take up writing full-time."

He let out his breath so fast it hissed in his teeth. "Listen, my friend with the soft head, I tell you this straight. You are an engineer, you gonna stay an engineer. OK? You got that? How much damages d' you think they'd give you if you tell them you make a living writing stories for children. Eh? I'll tell you. A thousand a month, if you're lucky. OK? So until this case is settled you're gonna be a high - whatever you call it - engineer."

"Hydraulic," I said, and spelled it out for him. "I study the flow of water."

He raised his eyebrows. "Water? Like in whisky and water?"

"No, water like in rivers. I help design dams for hydro-electric projects."

"Ah. OK. Now get this, my friend. You will study no water, no dams, till I tell you. You will stay in your apartment. Your job will be kept for you. You will work only when we have won our case or they have settled out-of-court. First we convince their lawyer how sick you are."

Their lawyer wore a blue serge suit, had a briefcase bulging with insurance claims and had questioned me twice in hospital.

"So be it," I said to my lawyer. "So be it."

We sat two hours in the cold marble waiting room of City Hall.

"For notaries, time is like the desert, it has no horizon," my lawyer said with bitterness. "Their minds are the minds of doctors. They summon twenty cases for ten o'clock. They are public servants, you are their master, they like to keep you waiting, it satisfies their ego. They gloat inwardly like bluebottles on the corpse of a fat camel." He made as to spit but caught himself, remembering.

We waited. A clock ticked loud, its arms moved slow. A clerk would appear and shout a name and the front of the queue would be swallowed by a pair of large oak doors.

I squirmed.

"You are in pain, yes?" said my lawyer, and for the first time his eyes smiled, his lips looked happy.

"Four cups of coffee for breakfast," I explained and he swore and went back to his nails.

The clerk shouted my name. My lawyer wheeled me into a room smaller than the large oak doors had led me to imagine. He shook hands with the notary, shook hands with the lawyer for the insurance company, and the three of them talked of last night's ball game. There was much joking and laughing; my lawyer poked the insurance company lawyer in the chest with his finger and laughed, and slapped the notary on the back and laughed.

Suddenly, as if by agreement, the laughter stopped as my lawyer pulled out a document which I knew to be my claim, and pulled a long face, and pointed to me; to my arms, to my

legs, to the scars on my cheek; and I could hear him say Ah, what an engineer I had been, how brilliant my tennis, how fine a son to an aged mother, how delicate had been my mind, since I was also the author of children's books. "Children's stories. Stories for little children. Here is a man once fit to build dams and guide our future generations. But now, alas!" I heard my lawyer say.

The insurance lawyer smiled at this as if bemused to hear catalogued my scars of mind and body. He then produced a document of his own, which he read in a voice I could not hear.

When he had finished, my lawyer produced a third document, and I heard him read the opinions: broken like a twig; unable to play again; rib-cage collapsed; a steel pin in the left leg. At which he came over and lifted my left leg. I shouted "Christ." He dropped it again and I screamed.

"You see, you see," he cried triumphantly, and all three went back to their huddle.

The four cups of coffee had worked their way fast through what my lawyer called my intestinal organs. I called to him. He turned his head, gave a flick of annoyance, and went back to his argument. I prayed for the strength of my stomach muscles.

"Oh Jesus," I said aloud. My lawyer turned, his face softening as he stood aside to point to my twisted face.

"Oh Christ!" I said aloud, as my thigh felt warm, and as the warmth spread down my leg.

"For God's sake, get me out of here," I shouted to my

lawyer and shut my eyes at the shame of it.

He paid no attention but went back to his argument, his voice raised in excitement, his hands cutting the air into slices.

I forced myself to think of other days; of Katie and the blue sky and the sun and the trees and the time we'd gone swimming to make love in the sandhills. Oh lovely, lovely Katie, who had left me only a month before I'd taken that plane for Tulsa; who had said goodbye forever, who had sent me flowers, but whom I knew I would never see again.

My lawyer came over, patted me on the shoulder and wheeled me out of the room.

"You are a genius," he said, dropping his voice into his throat.

"You bastard," I said.

"A genius," he said. "The piss, it was a masterstroke. Why did you not tell me? Aha!" he said, "the torment on your face was worth five hundred, but the piss," (and he put his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss to the ceiling) "the piss was worth a thousand." He wheeled me into the waiting room. "You are a quiet one," he said. "Never," said he, "have I seen such a masterstroke." He unfastened the belt, took the sling off my arm. "It has been agreed; four thousand five hundred a month until the case is heard - unless we settle out-of-court. Tell me, who is that woman?"

"Take me home, I'm wet."

"Why is that woman staring at you?"

"For God's sake, take me home!"

He wheeled my chair around to face a woman seated on the other side of the room.

"My God!" I said.

She came over and looked down at me in anger. As she shouted, I ducked my head, fearing for a blow, and her words were lost. She made as though to strike me, but a man in a brown suit caught her arm and pulled her away.

"You all right?" said my lawyer.

After months of only sympathy her actions left me cold and sick.

"I'm all right," I said.

"Who is the cookie with the scars on her face?"

"She sat beside me on the plane."

"In the crash?"

"In the crash."

"So what happened?"

"I don't know. Get me out of here."

"Christ," said my lawyer, "it takes all kinds of vegetables to make a stew. Let's get my genius home and into dry pants."

Next morning, Otis came round with news from the office. He laughed at my story. I said nothing about the woman.

"Give me four thousand five hundred a month and I'd go off for a year to Bermuda," Otis said.

"Two weeks in Acapulco will do me fine," I said.

He nodded to the table. "That your scrapbook?"

"My first crash. I'm going to call it the scrapbook of my first plane crash."

"My God," said Otis, "you can't be superstitious, calling it your first crash, and you flying off to Acapulco. Is it tax-free?"

"I'm not superstitious. Is what tax-free?"

"Your loot. Your four thousand five hundred a month."

"I forgot to ask."

"You'd better find out. You'd better find out before you squander it all on a woman." It was no sooner said than he hit his head with his hand. "Oh hell, I'm sorry Joe, I'm sorry." He knew how I felt about Katie leaving me.

"That's all right," I said to Otis, and to make him feel better I threw away my sticks and waltzed round the room.

"I'm not sure I'd know what to do with a woman," I said, "but I guess we could always dance."

"Not bad," he said, "not bad. At this rate you'll be back in the office in a month. We miss you. And the project misses you."

I sat on the couch and waved to him to take the seat opposite. "I'd like to talk about that, Otis. I'm not sure I want to come back to the office in a month. I'm not sure I want to come back to the office at all. I'm thinking of quitting."

He made as though to reply, seemed to think the better of it, drew his chair closer so he could put one hand reassuringly on the plaster on my left leg. "Look, I know what you've been through, first Katie, then the crash, but

don't do anything you might regret later. If it's a change of job you'd like, we can take you off the Niagara project. We have a new one coming up. A 1000 megawatt station on the Nashwauk River; north of Duluth."

I shook my head. "It's not just Niagara, Otis, it's all rivers. Putting a dam across a river is like blocking an artery, stopping the lifeblood. Rivers were put there to flow, not to be stopped up like drains, overflow, silt up, become fat and unhealthy. You ever been back to the Oconamowac since we strung that dam across it? I went back last year, with Katie. This side of the sluice gate it's just a fat, dirty, slob of a river. It used to jump through Oconamowac county like every day was spring."

He patted the plaster below my knee. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Joe. I look at it differently. If it's a choice between oil and coal and nuclear, or damming up a river to generate good, clean electricity - well, to me, there's no choice. I'd rather string a dam and kill a river than pollute a city and kill you and me. But I'm an engineer, not a poet."

"For chrissakes, Otis, I'm not a poet! Writing children's stories doesn't make me a poet."

"I didn't mean you - I was talking of Katie," he said.

He got up, took his coat from behind the door. "Look, if you come back to the office we could always second you to Pacific Power for a few months - they're looking for a man to help on a flood control project in the San Fernando Valley. How about that? You could lie in the sun, play tennis in

December."

"Thanks, Otis. Let me think it over. Maybe I'll get enough sun where I'm going."

"You leave Saturday?"

"No, Monday. I've put it off till Monday." I didn't tell him I'd put it off because of the woman. He drew a long face. "No, don't worry," I said, "the party is still Friday night. Come round early and mix a bowl of your special. What do you call it?"

"Sweet Chariot."

"Sweet Chariot it is," I said,

"See you Friday at seven."

When he had gone I spread the newspaper clippings on the table. The list of those killed in the crash was in the nationals, and her name came back to me as soon as I read the list. Michael Hellar, aged 35; Anthony Hellar, aged 4, of Riverdale, Illinois. "Mary Hellar," she had said from the seat beside me. "My name is Mary Hellar."

I had first seen the Hellars waiting to board the plane for Tulsa. The room was full and, like me, they stood; the mother with her back against a pillar reading a book; the father looking out the window at the men refuelling the plane; and the boy. It was the boy that attracted my attention to the three of them, for the boy was the only movement in the sultry heat of the waiting room. The boy swung from the handrail in front of the window, and with his arms and legs extended his feet just touched the glass, leaving long black scuffmarks on its surface from the rubber of his shoes. Twice

the mother scolded him, but from the way she kept glancing at the plane, I guessed her mind was on a seat and a long cool drink. The father had a short beard, and I remember labelling him a college professor or architect.

They boarded the plane ahead of me and to my surprise she did not sit beside the man and the boy, but took the seat beside me at the back of the plane. After take-off the stewardess came from the front with a miniature of vodka and a glass of ice-cubes.

"Mrs. Hellar? Your husband said you'd like vodka on the rocks."

"Thank you," she said, and must have felt bound to explain, for she turned to me: "My husband is up front with our son. We couldn't get seats together."

"Too bad," I said. We introduced ourselves, found we lived in Riverdale, and talked briefly. But I was tired, and when she turned to her book I put my seat back, hoping to sleep most of the way to Tulsa....

The telephone rang. "I haven't a date for Friday," said Otis.

"Not to worry," I told Kim, "I've invited two nurses from the hospital."

That night, for the first night in months, I dreamed of the crash and of Mary Hellar screaming in my face.

In the morning I found the name in the phone book.

"Mrs. Hellar, please? I'd like to speak to Mrs. Hellar."

"She's not here."

"Are you expecting her?"

"She's not here. She doesn't live here any more."

"Do you know where she is?"

"I don't know. She didn't say."

"Didn't she leave a forwarding address?"

"Hold on."

There was shouting in the background.

"She didn't leave an address. She said she'd collect her mail."

"Thank you."

"If you see her tell her to come collect her mail."

"I'll tell her," I said, "I'll tell her."

The party was a success, said Otis. He and Ryan had taken at once to the nurses. Grant brought a gallon of suntan lotion and his wife Gerry a box of photographs of their kids, and the Martins - who had really been Katie's friends, not mine - excused themselves and left at ten o'clock just as the couple in the apartment next door arrived with Jake and June, who said their babysitter had been late and how you could no sooner trust a babysitter than a member of the U.S. Supreme Court.

At midnight I told Otis to mix a second gallon of Sweet Chariot and slipped into my bedroom to phone my lawyer.

"For chrissakes," he said, "isn't four thousand five hundred enough?"

"I'd like you to trace a woman," I said.

"Your money will buy you any woman in your neighbourhood." He sounded as if he'd been drinking.

"Very funny," I said. "I want to trace the woman who spoke to me in City Hall."

"She tried to flatten you," he reminded.

"I want to trace her. She was in the crash. You know her lawyer?"

"I know him. The fellow in the brown suit."

"I thought so. Who is he? I'll phone him."

"Not a hope," said my lawyer. "You are spitting in sand. He won't speak to you. She is his client."

"Then you ask him. I have to find her."

He swore.

"Ask him."

He swore and hung up.

I tried his number in an hour, and an hour after that, but his phone was off the hook.

"Have a drink, have some Chariot, relax man, relax," said Otis.

"I don't want a drink," I said. "I haven't had a drink or a cigarette since coming out of hospital."

At two o'clock they left and I took myself to bed.

Saturday, I phoned the travel agent and explained I was just out of hospital, had had a relapse, and would have to put off my vacation for a week. One hundred dollars cancel-

lation fee, she said, unless I could get a certificate from my doctor. I'll get one, I said.

I phoned my lawyer. "I need a doctor's certificate to say I can't fly for a week."

"Six weeks, if you'd like," he said. "After your phone call last night I could have you certified. Which reminds me, I have her telephone number."

"You have what?"

"I have her telephone number. The lady who wants to kill you."

"God bless you."

I sat on the edge of my bed staring at the telephone until the courage came to speak to Mary Hellar.

"Hello? Mrs. Hellar?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Hellar. My name is Joe Hurst, but that won't mean anything to you..."

Mrs. Hellar made a noise and the phone went dead.

I dialed again. "Mrs. Hellar?"

"You've done enough, leave me alone," she said, and hung up on me.

I tried again. There was no answer. I phoned my lawyer.

"She won't speak to me."

"Tell her I'll have the doctor's certificate by tomorrow."

"No, no, I'm talking about Mrs. Hellar."

"Ah. ~~She~~ she won't speak to you."

"I need her address. The telephone company won't give it."

"I have it," he said.

"God bless you."

I bribed the doorman five dollars and told him Mrs. Hellar, was expecting me.

He put the money in a wall safe. "She's not in," he said.

"When did she go out?"

He shrugged. I waved a ten-dollar bill.

"She's in," he said. "But she won't answer the door."

A youth came in with a tray.

"For 410," he said.

"That's Mrs. Hellar," I said.

"It's her dinner," said the doorman.

"Phone her," I said to the doorman. "Phone her and say her dinner is here. And if you mention me I'll have my lawyer sue for extortion."

She opened the door and I put my foot in the gap. She pushed hard on the door and it shut tight on the plaster on my left leg. "Oh Christ," I shouted, and lay on the bare hallway in front of her door until the police came and helped me up and made me leave the building.

Acapulco was warm and pleasant and I came back after a week.

"I told you," said Otis when he picked me up at the

airport. "You should have gone to Bermuda."

"The weather is the same as Acapulco," I said. "Too much sun, the sky is too blue, and when your left leg sinks the sea has few attractions. I'm full of sand and envy," I told Otis.

I phoned her from the airport, but there was no answer. I phoned my lawyer.

"They're getting near to the money we want," he said.

"You will be a rich man."

"And a lame man."

"Very well, a rich lame man. Better a salt sea than a dry oasis," said my lawyer. "We'll have what we asked for by Christmas."

"How much did we ask for?"

"You do not listen to me. We agreed the night you left, but you do not listen."

"I've forgotten," I said. "I've lost my memory."

He swore. "You have? Are you serious? How bad is it? When did this happen? Why did you not phone me?" He swore.

"I'm joking, I'm joking."

He swore. "I should have let you rot in hospital. Which reminds me, your friend is in hospital."

"My friend?"

"The lady who wants to kill you."

"For God's sake, why didn't you let me know?"

"Brown-suit told me this morning. You remember, her lawyer."

Yes, they said at the hospital, she was allowed visitors.

I bought a dozen red roses and went to her room.

No, the nurse said, she'd had no visitors. Yes, the nurse said, go in, but she's sleeping.

She was paler than before, hollow-eyed, her lips cracked, asleep. The scars from the crash still showed on one cheek. I stood looking at her for a long time wondering about the tapes and bandages on her wrists, and the need for the saline drip. Much later she opened her eyes.

"How are you?"

She shut her eyes, turned her head to the wall.

"Please listen to me. I don't know what happened between us, what I did to you. Is it because I wouldn't let you unfasten your seatbelt? Is that it? Is it because I wouldn't let you leave your seat?"

She spoke, but her dry lips choked the words.

I walked to the other side of the bed. "What did you say?"

"You wouldn't let me go to them," she said.

"You would have been killed. You wouldn't have got there. The front of the plane was on fire."

"Go away."

"Please, how can I help you?"

"Go away."

"Please?"

"Go away." Her eyes looked for the bellcord.

"All right. But please let me come and see you."

She put her hand out for the bell and I left the room.

Next day she saw me come in and turned her head away. I

put my stick across the foot of her bed and sat in the chair and spoke to her.

"I need your help. Will you help me? I write stories for children, but I'm at home these days and don't have anyone to read to. Will you listen? If you don't like any of them, just shake your head. Will you do that for me?"

She said nothing.

"The first one is about two butterflies, a boy and a girl, who fall in love. During a storm they get separated. They miss each other so much their wings turn blue and they become outcasts. Other butterflies don't understand....Are you listening?"

I read to her Butterflies are Blue. She did not move, but from her breathing I knew she was awake.

"The second is an Irish fairy story, beautiful but sad, about a prince and princess who fall in love, one lives in the north, the other in the south. Ireland breaks up and the south floats off, away into the Atlantic." It has a happy ending, I told her.

That day I read her Mulligan's Wig, Black Stockings, The Magic Harp and Green Green the Rushes. I was halfway through Three Cheers for O'Sullivan when I knew she was asleep.

My lawyer phoned next day as I was about to leave for the hospital.

"They will settle for two hundred thousand with no further medicals. If we push for more we might get it. Then

again we might not. They might examine you and find you fit as a violin, except for the steel in your leg."

"As a fiddle," I said.

"What?"

"As fit as a fiddle."

"That too," he said.

"Take it," I said.

"Tch, tch," he said. "You haven't asked is it tax-free, or what happens to your monthly payments."

"All right," I said, "what about tax, what about the monthly payment?"

"Jesus," he said, "it's exciting to have you as a client."

"Tell me," I said.

"No tax, the monthly payments stop in December."

"Take it," I said.

"Aren't you going to ask about my fee?"

"All right. How much does my thief of a lawyer, that son of a no-good Byzantine, take as a fee?"

"Twenty per cent."

"You're worth double," I said.

He swore and hung up.)

For four days I read to Mary Hellar. Often she was asleep and I read softly, but when she was awake - and I could tell only by her breathing, for she kept her face away from me, and her eyes shut - when she was awake she said

nothing.

On the fifth day I didn't bring any stories. "Talk to me," I said. "Remember, I was in the crash with you so we have that in common, I'm not just another friend. You've got to talk about it, at some time you've got to talk about it or the wounds will never heal." She said nothing. "Talk to me. Tell me how you feel. I don't know what it's like to lose ones so dear so quickly."

But if she heard she gave no sign of it.

Next morning I talked to her of flying and of my leg.

"I have a problem. This is my problem. My job takes me out of town and I have to fly. I have to go by plane."

She was lying on her back with her eyes closed, but I knew she was awake. She gave no sign that talk of planes and flying was unbearable.

"Travelling by plane presents problems because of my leg."

She opened her eyes momentarily.

"You know what happens when I try to board a plane? The alarms sound, the bells ring. The bells ring and make one hell of a noise the minute I try to pass the security barrier. I know, because I flew down to Acapulco last week."

Her head turned and she opened her eyes and looked at my leg now propped on the bottom of her bed straight out in front.

"This leg is a problem. I'm not sure what to do about it, but one thing's certain, the minute this leg tries to walk past the barrier to board a plane, every goddam security agent in the airport hears the alarms and come running."

I turned my head and looked at her. "I have a metal pin

in my leg. Steel. Goes from my thigh to just above the knee."

We looked at my leg. I hit my thigh with the palm of my hand.

"At the airport they don't believe me. They think I'm hiding a shotgun up the leg of my trousers. How do I convince them it's a steel pin in my leg? Perhaps I should say 'Pull my leg, but you'd better be careful, if you pull too hard it might come off — it might come away in your hand'."

For the first time since the plane I saw the suggestion of a smile, not much, but enough, and suddenly it was the happiest day of my life. I went down beside her bed and took her hand and put it to my cheek and held it there till, slowly, gradually, I felt the warmth returning.

That weekend, when she came out of hospital, I made her walk in the park. She had lost weight, her coat hung loosely on her shoulders, her face was thin, her hair dull and lifeless, there was a flatness in her voice.

"You must get about," I said.

"I don't want to get about." She walked, hands in pocket, examining the cracks in the asphalt footpath.

"How about family, relatives?"

She stopped and looked at me before saying: "I have a sister in Boston. She has a husband and a son." There was no bitterness in the voice.

"You have to start living again, meet people. How about friends?"

This time she didn't stop, but pulled her coat collar up around her neck. "They were our friends. And I don't need people. People will talk about things that don't have, much importance any more."

I shut that door, tried another. "I haven't walked in this park for years and I can't think why, for I'm a country-side man. I hate seashores. Went to Acapulco for two weeks and came back after five days. Too much sand, sea and naked bodies."

"I like cities," she said.

I took her hand. "My lawyer tells me I should buy real estate in Florida and live in the sun. He can't understand why I like living in a city apartment, how I can be happy with just hills and woods, country and rivers, at weekends."

She freed her hand. "When I was a schoolgirl we lived in Boston, and my people had a summer place in Cape Cod. They could never understand why I liked to stay alone in the apartment when they went off to Cape Cod."

"I've got a large apartment," I said. "Got it a year ago when it seemed I might be getting married."

She stopped again, looked at me. "What happened?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do. She didn't like the job I was doing."

For the first time there was interest in her eyes. "She didn't like you writing stories?"

I laughed, took her arm and led her to a bench. "I guess

I'd better confess," I said, when we were seated. "I only write stories in my spare time. I'm an engineer with a power company. You know the Ocanamowac dam? I helped design the water channels."

"So what's wrong about building dams?"

I told her how dams take the life out of rivers, flood good farm country, change the habits of fish and wildlife. How, after ten years of helping to change the course of nature, I'd come to see - after she had left me - that Katie was right, and I planned to quit.

When I had finished she shook her head slowly, looked at me, then away. "I guess you know what you're doing."

"I know what I'm doing. Now that my lawyer has settled with the insurance company I'm going back to my job to finish off some projects we're working on, then I'll quit. That means for the next few months I'll be out all day, and away, oh, maybe two or three days a week in different parts of the country."

"If they'll let you on the plane," she said.

"What?"

"Your leg. How about your leg?" A smile came to her lips, and the park was beautiful.

"You're right," I said, "I'd forgotten about my leg. I was saying about my apartment. I have a large apartment and it seems such a waste, these rooms lying empty by themselves. Will you think about it?"

She was silent and I wasn't sure she'd heard.

"No strings," I said. "You come and go as you please."

Try it for a week or so, and if it doesn't work..."

Her voice was soft. "Let me think about it, Joe, let me think about it."

I helped her move her personal belongings - she had sold everything else - into the larger bedroom.

For the first two weeks I worked late, stayed out with Otis and tried to be away to give her freedom, but when I did see her she gave no sign she would be leaving. At first when we met in the apartment and spoke, the words would lie uneasy between us, but as the weeks passed so did the apprehensions, and the air no longer filled with tensions. The days when we saw little of each other grew fewer, but long silences still spaced our talk.

Mary Hellar lived on a fine dividing line between recovery and remembrance. At times, when memories touched her, she contracted within herself defensively, sat mute and deathly, engulfed in sadness; words had to be dragged from her. I attacked the silence; where had she gone today? had she seen the Chinese exhibition? what did she think of this book? Often answered in thin smiles of politeness, of murmured thanks. I never knew her better than when I sat looking at her refusing to close her mind to them, fighting against acceptance, as if from guilt. If she ever looked beyond that winter; or imagined a time after, she gave no hint of it.

Early in the winter, and without warning, she asked me to

drive her up to the Ocanamowac dam, and she had me explain to her how we had overcome the problem of stabilizing the river banks at the entrance to the channels.

"You must be very proud," she said, waving her hand at the expense of water above the sluice gate.

"This water covers ten thousand acres of what used to be good farmland, Mary."

"What happened to the farmers?"

"They were compensated. I guess they bought land elsewhere."

"Did they complain about it?"

"Sure. Some of them wrote to the Governor."

"How many farmers lost land?"

"Oh, twenty, thirty."

"How many people would suffer from a coal power-plant in a city, or a nuclear plant anywhere?"

"I don't build these, Mary, someone else does."

"So you can't stand a little heat, is that it?"

Her words took me by surprise. I tried to frame an answer to them but could not, and this troubled me at the time and in the weeks to come when they kept coming back to me. What pleased me most at the time was the spirit with which she talked to me. But these days were few.

On the boy's birthday, and again at Christmas, she sat silent, her eyes redrimmed. She would not join me and Otis at the office party so I left early and came home, saying my leg hurt. She was sitting by the fire.

"I've been reading some of your stories," she said. "I

see you never did finish the one about the butterflies."

"Help me," I said, and took her hand. We sat by the fire till it died away. Her hand felt like that of a child, sleeping.

Later that winter I took her to see the project we were completing at Niagara. As we stood looking at floodlit icicles dangling on the falls, a cold wind blew and she shuddered. Instinctively I put my arm across her shoulders and for a moment our bodies touched and away, as her hands went to her mouth to warm them.

She no longer shrank from mention of her husband's name. For months now she had been able to say the name Michael, and her eyes would not fill, her throat not harden. But she could not say the name Anthony. She still nursed grief for the boy, open in her mind.

Suddenly in the spring, with the flowers, she seemed to give up the fight against living, a joy returning. Drop by drop, like moisture to a flower, life re-entered nerves and senses, dry and unused. Her features softened and lost their barren tearfulness and blossomed; smiles came more often to her face, and her laughter no longer had an edge of guilt; her voice lost its dullness, her eyes their apathy, they glittered, sparkled; her body filled, her hands moved as if to an old excitement.

It was nice to come home at night and have her there and I told her. "And you're a good cook."

"Michael's father was a chef and Michael taught me."

"He was a good teacher."

"He was a good man."

We went to theatres and a ball game - she'd never been to a ball game - we drove to Vermont to see the trees alive again, had maple syrup and chocolate grasshoppers, drove up Mount Washington, cruised for a day on the lake, ran out of gasoline on the Loop.

In April, with my projects completed, I knew I had to speak to Otis.

"I love her, Otis, and I want to marry her. But before I ask her, I need to get a job."

"You've got a job. You're still part of my team, remember."

"I know, but I don't mean that job out in California, I mean a job here, with Great Lakes Power."

"You want to go on working in hydro-electric projects, is that it?"

"If you'll have me."

Otis poured us another drink. "Here's to us. And to you. I wish you both luck."

"How about my resignation?"

"I tore it up months ago."

"You knew?"

He nodded. "That lady you're going to marry has a lot of sense. She came to me one day, asked me why you were so intent on not using your talent as an engineer. I told her to be patient, that you'd change your mind. She agreed. She

said it was just a matter of time."

"You think she'll have me?" I said.

"I know it." He opened the drawer, pulled out a bottle and two glasses. "Sweet Chariot. This calls for a celebration."

"You know I don't like liquor, Otis."

"Today you do. Today, you and I are going to finish this bottle. Today is your last day as an uncommitted man, remember."

She opened the door of the apartment and all the words I'd planned to say later came out simply as: "I love you, Mary, will you marry me?"

She put both hands over her face and for a second I didn't know if she was hiding tears or laughter. Then she came to me and our arms went out and around each other like two old friends before a long goodbye; but it was not goodbye, I told myself, but the first step of a long journey yet to be made. I held her gently, silent, knowing she felt as I, that this was a time to let the mind enjoy the luxury of knowing, not a time to say more, or do more, for one word could have robbed the moment of its pleasure. Let the phone not ring, let no-one come to the door, let nothing happen that will mean she has to speak or I have to speak, or she move or I move.

I did not put lips to her hair or lift her head between my hands or kiss her eyes, her lips, her throat. I did not

say my darling, lovely Mary.

In time she dropped her arms, took my hand to press it to her cheek and softly said "You know then, Joe?" I heard my voice say "Yes," but I did not understand the question. When she asked "Are you ready for me?" I answered "Yes, my sweet, I'm ready," but the full meaning of her words came later.

"I will always love them," she said, turning her face up to look at me for the first time. "Michael and Tony will always be there, but so will you, always. You understand?"

"I understand," I said, brushing the hair from her brow and holding her face between my hands.

"Love me, Joe," she whispered. The nerves in my stomach tightened with the excitement of the moment, the remnants of Sweet Chariot were on fire inside me. I lifted her hand and my lips touched her fingers so light and the smooth of her wrist and the soft upper part of her arm where there were no scars, then up to her neck, part scarred, a deep red - Oh, my sweet, if love could but heal you! — where the pulse beat hard, and down to brush her lips, now dry like mine, and the curve of her throat, unmarked, under the collar of the soft shirt that covered her shoulders. As my lips touched her flesh a fine sweat came to my brow and the nausea of the liquor surged in me.

I opened the buttons of her shirt, my arms going around her naked to hold her tight against me. Suddenly she cried out, her hands going up to push their palms against my shoulders, forcing her body away.

I loved Mary Hellar, so there was only shock, pity, and a deeper sense of love when I saw her body for the first time; the purple scar tissue on her breasts, the red puckered skin under one arm, the raw herringbone stitch across her stomach. As I made to speak, the residue of liquor caught in my throat. Putting my hand to my mouth, I ran half-stooped, for the bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

I lay retching till the Sweet Chariot had gone and the sweat had broken and cooled my face. I put my head under a full tap, rinsed my mouth, brushed my teeth, dried myself on a towel, and went back to her, crying, "Oh God, Mary, forgive me."

But she was gone, and there was only the sound of the elevator. I made for the stairwell, ran faster than I should, was making the turn at the second landing when my leg twisted and I fell face down. All I remember is pain.

The hospital psychiatrist, Finestone, seats himself on the edge of the bed. "They told me you were back."

I nod. The Mississippi, now plastered, looks like the St. Lawrence in winter. Fresh stains bewart the face of Lincoln.

"Our friendly lawyer wants to see you," says Finestone.

"Has he found the girl?"

"The one you had those dreams about? I thought she'd left you?"

"No, no, the other girl Mary."

"You found another girl? So soon? That how you broke your pin, trying to make it with a girl?"

"Has he found her?"

Finestone shrugs: "Don't know. He says he wants to see you."

My lawyer sweeps in with sketches on a clipboard which he throws on the bed. "I have examined the stairwell. It is narrow and badly lighted. We can hit them for twenty thousand. OK? How is his leg?" This last question to Finestone who answers: "I only look after his mind."

"His mind? You say he as a mind, eh? He has no more mind than a mouse who won't leave a sinking boat."

"Rat on a sinking ship," says Finestone.

"Mouse, rat, I don't argue," says my lawyer and turns to throw his hand accusingly at my bandaged head. "Why did you not phone me before they fixed you up, eh? Have I not told you that one red photograph of blood is worth a thousand greenbacks? Yet you do not phone me, eh?"

I remind him I was unconscious.

He curses and hands me a pen. "Here, sign this."

"Did you find Mary Hellar?"

"Find her? What is the matter with you? You think I got time to look for all the women you lose? I already told you I got no time to look for your women. Are you deaf like the dromedary? Here, sign this. One look at you and they'll settle for twenty thousand."

"Find the girl."

My lawyer sucks hard on his teeth. "So she can break

your other leg? Is that it? You want her to break your other leg? Have you a broken leg footish?" asks my lawyer.

"Fetish," says Finestone.

"Whatever," says my lawyer.

"Find her," I say. "Tell her we're in this together."

The nurse enters. "Everybody out. You know he shouldn't be in here," she says to Finestone and points to my lawyer.

My lawyer curses. As he leaves, I hear him say to Finestone: "He is mad, like before. Truly the leopard never changes his shorts."



Later that day they wheel me into the theatre. The needle goes in and slowly I float into space, weightless. Weightless, as when the plane went into the spin. I shout to Mary don't go, don't go, don't leave your seat, but the horror of all dreams grips me for the words are silent in my throat. We freefall further and I put out my arms to hold her but the trolley pins my leg to the seat and its coffee spills over my thigh.

Now I am in City Hall waiting for the large oak doors to open and when they do there stands Mary gowned for our wedding. When I walk to her she turns and the face is the face of Katie, and I scream. Now a butterfly afloat on the southern half of Ireland, I cry to Mary don't be afraid, I'll come back and find you, but again the words are silent as in a vacuum. And when I try to fly to her my wings are blue and will not support me. Sad butterfly, and blue.

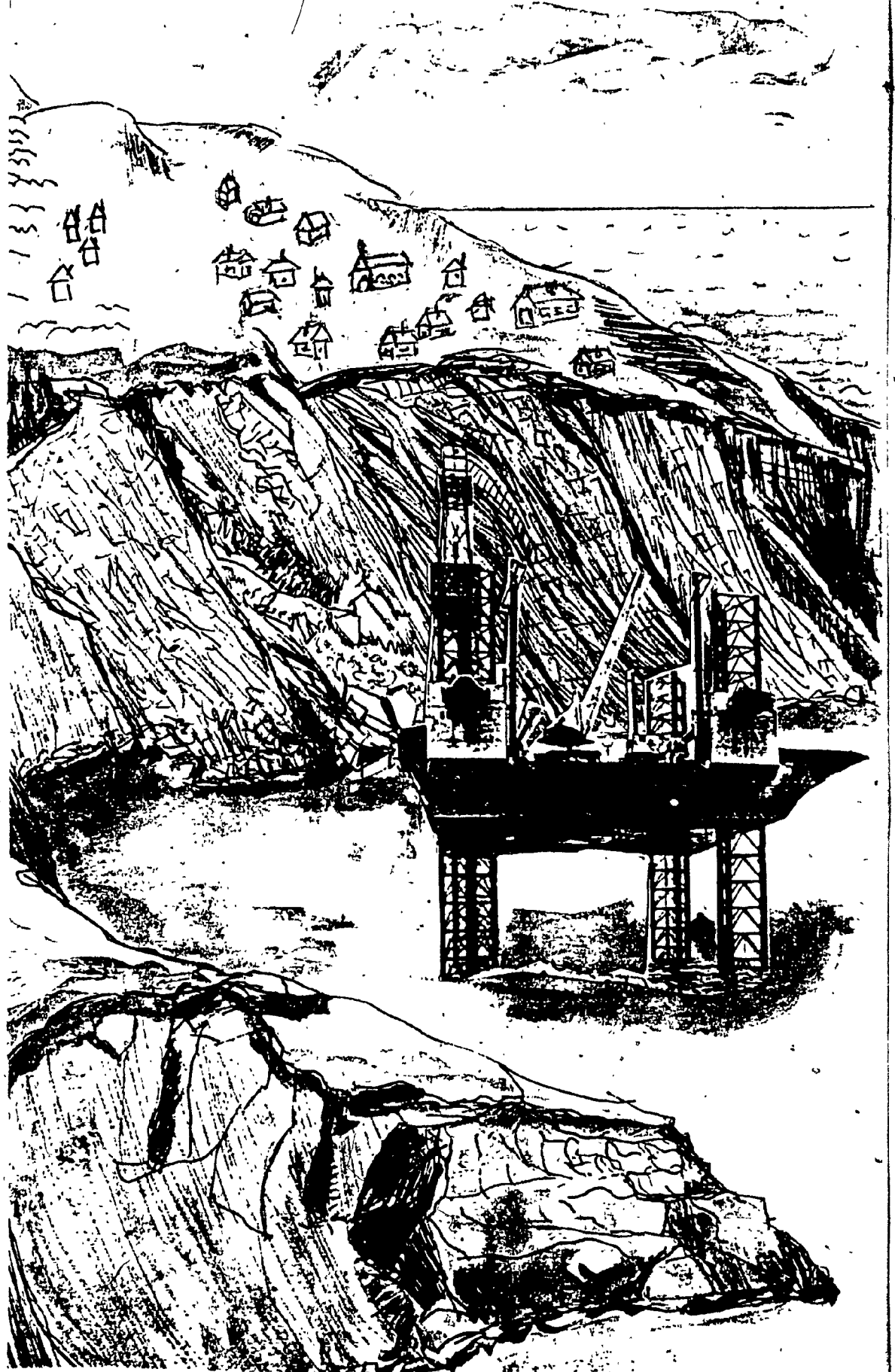
Blue butterflies can't fly. Goodbye, goodbye.

And I dream that I wake up and Mary is holding my hand in hers. And I dream that I wake up and Mary has a finger on her lips. "Don't speak." And I sleep and dream and wake, and there is Mary more real than in my dreams. And I know I am not dreaming.

"I've come back, Joe. Would you like some water?"

I nod.

Mary says: "I'm going to read to you - some stories for children. Tell me if you like them. You don't have to speak, just smile or nod your head." The first story, she says, is about two butterflies, a boy and a girl who get lost and who miss each other so much their wings turn blue and they can no longer fly. But with time and patience and lots of understanding they grow new wings, as beautiful as the first, and they learn to love again....



THE PORTAVADIE HOLE

In 1975 the British Government dug a large hole close to the sea beside the distant village of Portavadie, Argyllshire. Inside the hole they constructed a dry-dock, hoping to persuade oil companies to build drilling platforms in the dock, open the dock to the sea, and tow the platforms to the oilfields in the North Sea. Portavadie (population 56, not counting the sheep) was chosen because the sea there is very deep.

But the oil companies didn't really want to build drilling platforms in Portavadie. The village, you see, is in the west, and the oilfields lie off the east coast.

Today, five years later, the dry-dock is still unused, unseen except by seagulls, forgotten by all, even by those who live in Portavadie or in the nearby villages of Kames, Millhouse and Tignabruaich. Forgotten? Well, not quite....

Before calling the meeting to order, McWhinny, Chairman of the Portavadie and District Taxpayers Association, moved his chair six inches to the left to avoid the rain dripping through the tin roof of the backroom of Menzies' bar. No longer wrapped in warm memories of his lunchtime whiskeys,

he looked with cold eyes at the other four members. Except for the minister a snobbish lot, no respect, little help to him, full of trivial complaints about clogged drains and straying sheep and the wickedness of the few summer visitors who came to this remote part of Argyllshire from the town of Dunoon or the far-off city of Glasgow. Look at them, sitting there, toffee-nosed, waiting for him to speak, and all the time laughing behind his back — at him, McWhinny, owner of the Portavadie General Store, a self-made man (well, nearly self-made, he admitted guiltily with a flash of acknowledgment to his absent wife). Aye, he could well imagine what they said about him when he wasn't there. He could tell by the way they looked at his face (puffy-eyed from liquor, blotched with circles of red-blue veins) and by their half-concealed smiles when he spoke. As he glanced round the table all he could see were uplifted noses like those he had known as a boy gutting fish in his father's shop in Dunoon.

He lifted the gavel and brought it down on the table, shivering its planks of wood and causing a fine dust to rise, but stopping the chatter. He got to his feet, a man outwardly devoid of every instrument of grace.

"Lady and gentlemen" pause "I have called this extraordinary" pause "spe-shul meeting" pause "to discuss the Hole." He spoke as he always did, in short, well-articulated phrases, as his wife had taught him and as though translating another's speech from a foreign tongue, so that his words fell in lumps upon his audience. It had always been so with McWhinny. A clear-thinking, logical man, if somewhat slow, he had never

been able to express his thoughts, no matter how brilliant. He was like a three-year old child who sees his mother - tall, beautiful, radiant - and lifts a crayon to draw her from this image, but who produces instead a ludicrous figure with a round head, round belly, four spindly limbs and hands like spiders. Somewhere between McWhinny's mind and mouth his lines of articulation became crossed. He saw himself as being possessed by a demon, as constantly fighting to free his stream of thought from the clutches of some infernal machine such as is used in war-time to scramble messages, put them into code, and make them unintelligible.

"Solely - eh - to discuss the Hole," he said again, for fear it had not been clear the first time.

"May the Lord have mercy on all our souls," said the minister, who was hard of hearing and thought McWhinny had said "wholly to discuss the soul."

"Agreed?" said McWhinny.

The minister nodded but the others were far from approval.

"Fences. We need more fences for the sheep," said young Mrs. Scott who ran the Post Office at Kames, a village served by a narrow, twisting, single-lane road. "Four more sheep have been killed since our last meeting, one by the school bus." She looked round the table with a face that suggested the driver of the bus had been drinking the blood of lambs.

"Four more sheep," she repeated.

"In His eyes we are all sheep," said the minister.

McPherson, the chemist from Tignabruaich, lifted his gaze

reluctantly from the legs of young Mrs. Scott. A middle-aged bachelor, whose main pleasure in life was his secret knowledge of the ills and sins of those who lived in nearby villages, his receding hair and expanding waistline now made it difficult to entice single young ladies into the back of his dispensary. "I have here a petition signed by all 27 householders in my village complaining about the state of drains." He twitched his nose and his disapproving eyes settled on McWhinny's blue serge suit, which was loud and commercial and smelled of all kinds of cigarette smoke and residues of camphor.

McWhinny said nothing but waited, hoping for support from McHewn, the building contractor from Millhouse. McHewn's eyes and thoughts were on the walls of the room which were thin and prefabricated and which rattled in the winds blowing in from the Atlantic. He could replace these walls with his surplus cement blocks - add a few shelves, new lights - electric heating for the winter, and do away with the paraffin stove....

In the momentary silence there could be heard the noise of distant plumbing and a voice counting empty bottles in the bar beyond the curtain. This caused McWhinny's throat to harden.

"Did you say somethin', James Menzies?" he shouted to the voice in the outside bar, hoping Menzies would understand his need and offer him refreshment. The least Menzies could do, McWhinny told himself, to show his appreciation for all that McWhinny did for the community. But the only answer from beyond the curtain was the tinkling of glasses.

"He doesn't open until six o'clock," said young Mrs. Scott, with what McWhinny took to be malicious pleasure.

"I know, I know that well," said McWhinny, with more than a trace of annoyance. "Now where was I? Aye. I was sayin' this is a special meetin' to discuss only the Hole."

The minister was now humming "Rock of Ages."

"You can't call it just 'the Hole'," said McPherson.

"If this is going in the minutes you'd better call it by its proper name -" taking a deep breath - "The Argyllshire Oil-Rig Dry-Dock Project, 1975." He leaned forward to get a better view of young Mrs. Scott's bosom. "That's what the Government called it when they built it," he added, and young Mrs. Scott nodded her approval.

"Built it? Built it?" said McWhinny with scorn and a deepening of his cheeks, flushed with the pleasure of correcting McPherson who had been to Dunoon High School. "You don't build a hole, man, you dig it. What do you say, McHewn? Did they build the Hole or dig it?"

The Millhouse Contractor, who had built himself a new house since the digging of the Hole, was always a man for compromise. "Both," he said. "First they excavated the cliffs and the channel, then they constructed the dry-dock inside the excavation. Round the periphery," he added, looking into McWhinny's eyes, hoping the Chairman would be foxed by the word.

McWhinny dismissed the periphery with a wave of his hand.

"No matter, it's clear as day - I don't think - what I mean is, the Government - they aren't going to use the Hole. Not

ever."

"Don't blame the Government," said McPherson. "It wasn't built for the Government to use, it was built for the oil companies. If them foreign oil companies won't use the dry-dock you can't blame the British Government."

"Not British, English man, English!" cried McWhinny. "It was the English civil servants in London who had the Hole dug." He pointed his finger accusingly in a southerly direction, and opened his mouth, struggling for the words to remind them that he, McWhinny, had warned them of the hypocrisy of the English and their Argyllshire Oil-Rig Dry-Dock Project when it was first proposed. "This manifestation of English concern for Scottish unemployment is only a sop. The English won't remove the sting from the thistle of our nationalism," he'd tried to tell them but the words had been lost on the way. Yes, he'd known the dry-dock would never be used. It was an English idea, and what Englishman had ever done good for Scotland? The Hole was a political, make-work project, and the fools couldn't see it for what it was.

But then, as now, when McWhinny got to his feet to tell them, his fine-flowing stream of reasoned argument fell from his mouth in incomprehensible phrases, loosely strung together like raw lumps of uncooked meat from a sausage machine.

"Are you trying to say something, Mr. McWhinny?" said young Mrs. Scott, seeing his facial contortions.

"I warned you - English politicians - built it on the wrong side of Scotland - no sense, no sense, not for the oil business," McWhinny managed to get out.

"I've got a niece in the oil business," said McHewn, in a manner which suggested she was a secret well in the desert.

"My God, can you - will you try and stick to the point!" cried McWhinny, in the sound of a man going down in a swamp.

"In His name," said the minister.

"The secretary will record in the minutes," said McWhinny, forsaking any further explanation, "that this meetin' has been called to discuss only the Hole."

"He's not here," said McHewn.

"Who's no' here?" asked McWhinny.

"Willie Frazer."

McWhinny turned to the empty chair beside the stove where the secretary usually sat. "Where the devil's he off to?"

"He's gone to fetch the tea and sandwiches."

"Ugh," said McWhinny. The mention of tea one hour - no, fifty minutes - before opening time was somehow profane. And then: "Is there a volunteer to take the minutes till Willie Frazer comes with the tea?"

"I agree, I agree," said the minister, who had been thinking of next week's sermon but who heard the word "volunteer," a word he always favoured.

"Thank you, minister. Are we agreed the minister will act as secretary till Willie Frazer comes back? Good. Now for the first item on the agenda."

"It's the only item," McHewn pointed out.

"No, no, man," said McWhinny, "there's Any Other Business."

"You said this meeting was called to discuss only the

Hole," McHewn reminded..

The Chairman wisely ignored this. "Now, he said, "when in God's name are we going to decide what to do about the Hole?"

"In His name be praised," said the minister.

"We could use it for the rubbish," said young Mrs. Scott, with one eye on McPherson, looking for his support.

"Good idea," said McPherson, who would gladly have supported Mrs. Scott at any time of the day, or night. He had his hand out to pat her encouragingly on the thigh when he caught McWhinny's look and scratched his nose instead.

"No, no. No use. Not practicable. We've been over this before. The hole is half a mile wide and three hundred feet deep and Mr. Telfer, the arithmetic teacher, says it would take two hundred years to fill it with all the rubbish from Portavadie, Millhouse, Kames, Tignabruaich and Dunoon."

"There's plenty of rubbish in Dunoon, God knows," said McPherson.

"He has an all-seeing eye," said the minister.

"Now, now, we shouldn't speak that way about Dunoon," said McWhinny. He had been born in Dunoon, gutted fish in Dunoon, worked his way up. Some day he'd go back to Dunoon as the mayor. Away from these fools. First, put Portavadie on the map, make it famous, get it in the news, then he could hope to be mayor of Dunoon. There were no straying sheep in Dunoon, no clogged drains. But there was a large distillery in Dunoon. He looked at his watch, moistened his lips.

"Don't put that in the minutes," he said to the minister.

"What did he say?" the minister asked McPherson.

"He said not to put anything about Du'noon in the minutes. In the minutes. The minutes. THE MINUTES:"

"What minutes?" said the minister.

"Don't be shoutin' at the minister," said McWhinny.

"Now, any more suggestions?"

Mrs. Scott leaned forward to give McPherson a chance of looking at her warm, pink skin and have the pleasure of catching him doing it. "Why not a swimming pool for the children," she said, and McPherson's eyes lit up at the thought of her in a swimming costume. McWhinny's inclination was to ask her to stop being a fool but he told himself to be patient. He saw, too, the fire in McPherson's eyes and quickly extinguished it. "Too expensive. For one thing, we'd have to employ a life-guard."

"The Lord is our Saviour, said the minister:

"We might get a grant from the government," said young Mrs. Scott, crossing her legs, knowing this would lower the inquisitive eyes of McPherson. "After all, they've already spent twenty million on the digging of the Hole."

"Twelve million," corrected McHewn the contractor. "The other eight million was for deepening the channel and constructing the houses for the men supposed to build the oil rigs."

"Mrs. Scott has proposed a swimming pool," said McWhinny, shaking his head in despair. "Now, tell me, how many children do you think would use a pool?"

"We are all children in His eyes," said the minister.

"Well," said Mrs. Scott, "there's your boy, and the four wee McBratney's, and Mrs. Miller has two, and Sarah Pollock has one on the way, and...."

"I didn't know she was married," said McHewn.

"Next week," said Mrs. Scott.

"What was that?" said the minister.

"Sarah Pollock," said Mrs. Scott.

"She's getting married next week," said the minister, "to an American sailor from the nuclear submarine."

"She's already been torpedoed," said McHewn and slapped his thigh and was about to open his mouth to laugh when he caught the Chairman's frown.

"Let's say twenty children at the most," said McWhinny. "A sheer waste - you see - a waste of taxpayers' money, Mrs. Scott. Three thousand pounds a year on a lifeguard to look after twenty bairns? Never. If there are no more suggestions...."

"A multi-storied carpark," volunteered McPherson.

"If we lined it with cement and put on a roof it would make a fine auditorium," said McHewn, who'd bought six hundred bags of cheap cement when he'd first heard of the plan to build oil rigs for the North Sea.

"Did he say an auditorium?" Mrs. Scott whispered to the minister.

"You'll have to speak up, child," the minister whispered back.

"I think we can rule out an auditorium," said McWhinny.

"So, now that's settled, I'd like to make a suggestion myself."

He could see that McHewn was about to point out that nobody had voted against an auditorium, so he hurried on: "I was down in Dunoon last week talkin' to Mrs. McBride - her in the travel agency....What in the name are you laughin' at, McPherson?"

McPherson had his hand over his mouth. Gossip had it that McWhinny went to Dunoon to collect a bottle from Mrs. McBride in exchange for mentioning her travel agency at least once at every meeting. "I was about to cough," said McPherson.

"As I was saying before McPherson coughed," the Chairman continued, "I have a - I'm going to make a proposal. Mrs. McBride - her in the travel agency - tells me people fly - people go all over the world to look at notorious places, famous places. Like famous holes. Like the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and the Black Hole of Calcutta. Take the Black Hole of Calcutta," he said, looking around. "Now if we were to...."

He was interrupted by Willie Frazer, who had run through the rain with a kettle of tea and a tray covered with triangles of underdone toast and dry sardines, small brown squares of bread heaped with weak tinned salmon, and dry digestive biscuits. McWhinny watched him come in as though waiting for a fly to settle so he could swat it. "So you've arrived, Mr. Secretary," he said, but his sarcasm was lost on the wet and dripping figure. "A cup of tea?" he offered McWhinny, who shuddered and declared a ten-minute recess in a

thick dry voice.

When the cups had been cleared McWhinny stood up to call the meeting to order, and was surprised to see a face on the far wall where a cracked mirror advertised Sailor's Gut tobacco, a name he hadn't seen since childhood. Was that his face? Did he really look so old? He put a hand to his chin to see the same hand rise, ran it over his face like an electric razor, feeling its flabbiness under the stubble. "Right," he said, sitting down with a thump, "back to the agenda. As I was saying, people will fly - will travel all over the world to look at famous holes. Like the Black Hole of Calcutta. Not because it's a black hole, but because it's a famous hole. People would come and see the Portavadie Hole if it were famous."

"You're suggesting we paint the Hole black?" said McPherson in mock seriousness, and Mrs. Scott laughed.

McWhinny clapped a hand to his brow and looked in desperation at the curtain which led to James Menzies' bar. "No, no, man, you miss the point. What our Hole needs is notoriety, not a coat of paint."

McHewn, the contractor, who had been calculating the profit he could make on painting the Hole black, looked up in agitation.

"If you'll kindly sit in peace, McHewn, we'll get on with the meetin'. Now, as I was saying, what we need for the Hole is a bit of notoriety. We have to get it in the news."

There was silence. No one, it seemed, had a good word to say about the news. Mrs. Scott yawned and raised her arms, allowing the sleeves of her blouse to slip up past her elbows. McPherson gave her exposed flesh a lingering, covetous look. He had got to know her throat very well and had fierce visions of kissing it, but he had never seen her arms naked above the wrists and he now had to do something with his face to hide his feelings.

"Well," asked McWhinny, "what do you think?"

McHewn said: "We don't know what you mean, McWhinny."

"Are you addressin' the Chair?" asked McWhinny.

"What?"

"I said, are you addressin' the Chair, for if you are you should call me 'Mr. Chairman.'" He turned to Willie Frazer: "Don't minute that, Mr. Secretary."

"The minister is takin' the minutes," Willie Frazer reminded him.

"No, no, no," said McWhinny, "that was only while you were fetching the tea. Now, let's get on with the business, the bar opened at six o'clock."

McHewn spoke up. "Perhaps, McWhinny - Mr. Chairman - you'd tell us what you have in mind when you say all the Hóle needs is a bit of notoriety."

The Chairman leaned forward conspiratorially but immediately drew back, as if he'd opened some door by mistake, when he found himself looking down the blouse of young Mrs. Scott. "Just suppose," he said, clearing his throat, "just suppose as a first step we were to take the — to sue the

English government — to sue them for digging the Hole. Take them to court for...." He paused, grasping for the words to explain the constitutional illegality of the Hole, that it violated the intent of the Treaty of Union of Scotland and England which dated back to 1707. "For taking away part of Scotland," he cried, "for removing - part of our heritage - our soil - our native land - illegally. We should invoke - you know...."

"What is he saying?", the minister asked of young Mrs. Scott.

"Something about suing the government. Last year Miller lost three sheep in the Hole, worth all of twenty pounds each," she said.

"We are all lost sheep," said the minister.

"Suing the government won't make the Hole famous," said McPherson. "Why don't we publish the story about the minister's bones."

McWhinny looked at McPherson, then at the minister, eyeing him up and down, then back at McPherson. "What about the minister's bones?"

"Tell them about your bones, minister."

"What was that?"

"Your bones. YOUR BONES."

"You'll deafen the poor man," said young Mrs. Scott, but the minister understood and was talking about bones. "I found them when I was a student," he was saying, "near the place where they're going to build the oil-rigs."

"I remember," said McPherson, taking his eyes off young

Mrs. Scott.

"Yes, the bones," said the minister. "The bones of Mhadaidh. We found his grave not half a mile from here, where they're going to build the oil-rigs. Mhadaidh, the Patron Saint of Sinners."

There was a silence like the wrath of the Lord had descended on the backroom of Menzies' bar.

"You mean he was buried where the Hole is?" said McHewn.

"But of course," said the minister sitting back in his chair, surprised by the sudden attention. "The grave of Mhadaidh was right where they're going to build the oil-rigs."

"And who the hell - I beg your pardon, minister - and who was Medad?"

"Not Medad, Mhadaidh. It's the gaelic name for the Patron Saint of Sinners. He lived in this part of Argyllshire and when he died they buried him out on the point, overlooking the sea. The poor people who had sinned would come to him, seeking absolution. He was a compassionate man. This was a thousand years ago, remember.

"Jesus Christ!" cried McHewn.

"No, He was 1980 years ago," corrected the minister.

But McHewn's mind was in the future. Sinners in their thousands would come to see the grave of this Medad; gamblers from Edinburgh, bookmakers from Ayr, ladies from the streets of Glasgow, they'd flock to Portavadie looking for forgiveness. Visitors would need hotels and restaurants and pubs. More than that, they'd want dance halls and bingo parlours, casinos even. And who better to build them than he, McHewn?

"Did you put the minister up to this?" McWhinny asked him, with more than a hint of suspicion; but McHewn was in a cloud, encircling a mountain of cheap cement.

"No, no, it's true, I've seen the bones in the Glasgow Cathedral," said young Mrs. Scott.

The Chairman raised his hands to the ceiling. "So, the bones are already on display, are they? And where's the news in that? How in heaven's name, tell me, how is a bunch of bones in Glasgow Cathedral, how is this going to bring Portavadie notoriety? Unless you plan to steal them," he said to Mrs. Scott with a humph.

"Can't we get on with the question of the sheep? It's getting late," she threw back at him.

"Aha!" cried McWhinny, "I haven't finished. I said the first thing we do is sue the English government. Listen, listen...." With the veins pulsing on his cheeks, he opened his mouth, speechless, wanting to explain to her that suing the English government was only the first phase of his plan, was intended merely to focus attention on Portavadie, have the newspapers send down reporters, put television crews on the alert. But all he managed to say was: "Wait, listen - I tell you - listen - suing is only the first step - this is only the beginning."

"And in the beginning there was nothing," said the minister.

"And since there's nothing more to discuss," said young Mrs. Scott, "I'd like to get on with the business and bring up the question of sheep."

"No, no," cried McPherson, "drains is next. In alphabetical order, my dear Mrs. Scott, drains is next, coming as it does before sheep. Unless, of course..." he whispered, and put his hand on her knee, his eyes going wild at the daring.

"Out of order, out of order!" cried McWhinny, sensing the meeting was getting out of control. He rose to his feet, gavel in hand, searching for words with an air of increasing despair, his face twitching like that of a man caught in the brambles. Ten years of sheep and drains, drains and sheep, was enough for any man. Look at that piteous face, staring at him from the old tobacco mirror! Where were the bright eyes of his youth, so full of promise, fired with ambition by a heart and mind brimming with fine speeches yet to be delivered. What would this youth have said to these fools? "Silence. Hear me out. Why are we so divided? Do you not see that this is their strength, the strength of the English, to keep us divided? Let us not squabble over the fate of the Hole, for the Hole is a temple to our exploitation by the English, a shrine to their greed, a symbol of English lust which perceives Scotland as a bottomless pit to be mined without limit. But no more! Let us, together, show them they have gone too far. And let us, united, demonstrate our new strength by asking - by demanding - that the English give back to us the native soil they have stolen from the Portavadie Hole. Let us make the Hole the graveyard of all English ambitions. How do we do this? I will tell you. We will appeal, through press and television, to all Scots, everywhere,

in all corners of the earth to make a pilgrimage to the Hole. As they pass through England they will seize a handful of English soil and will carry it as a tribute and will cast it into the Hole until the Hole is full again. And to those Scots who cannot make the pilgrimage we will say:

'Send us an English token to be buried in the Hole: Stilton cheese or double Gloucester, Queen Anne Legs or royal Worcester, Eton collars, Oxford bags, Chippendale, Chesterfields, Bloomsbury scones, Wedgewood china, Coals from Newcastle, old Cardigans, and anything belonging to Cromwell or the impious George The Third.' Oh! how the words of his youth would have rung in the ears of these fools, stirred their blood, fired their passions. But it was too late. He was powerless. Face the truth, McWhinny, he told himself, face the truth. Words from his mouth would never inflame; they couldn't raise a spark in his neighbours. No, McWhinny, this is the end of the road. The future holds nothing but ten more years of McPherson, McHewn, and an aging Mrs. Scott, fighting over trivialities.

"...and unless we deal with the sheep I shall be forced to resign."

"...the drains cannot be left to the next meeting."

"...three hundred bags of the finest cement."

McWhinny stood, swaying in front of the mirror, eyes shut to keep out the horror of his face, and a vision came to him of three bodies hurtling into the Hole. McHewn first, bouncing off the sides of the dry-dock, landing with a thump on his rotten cheap cement, cracking the bottom of the Hole in the form

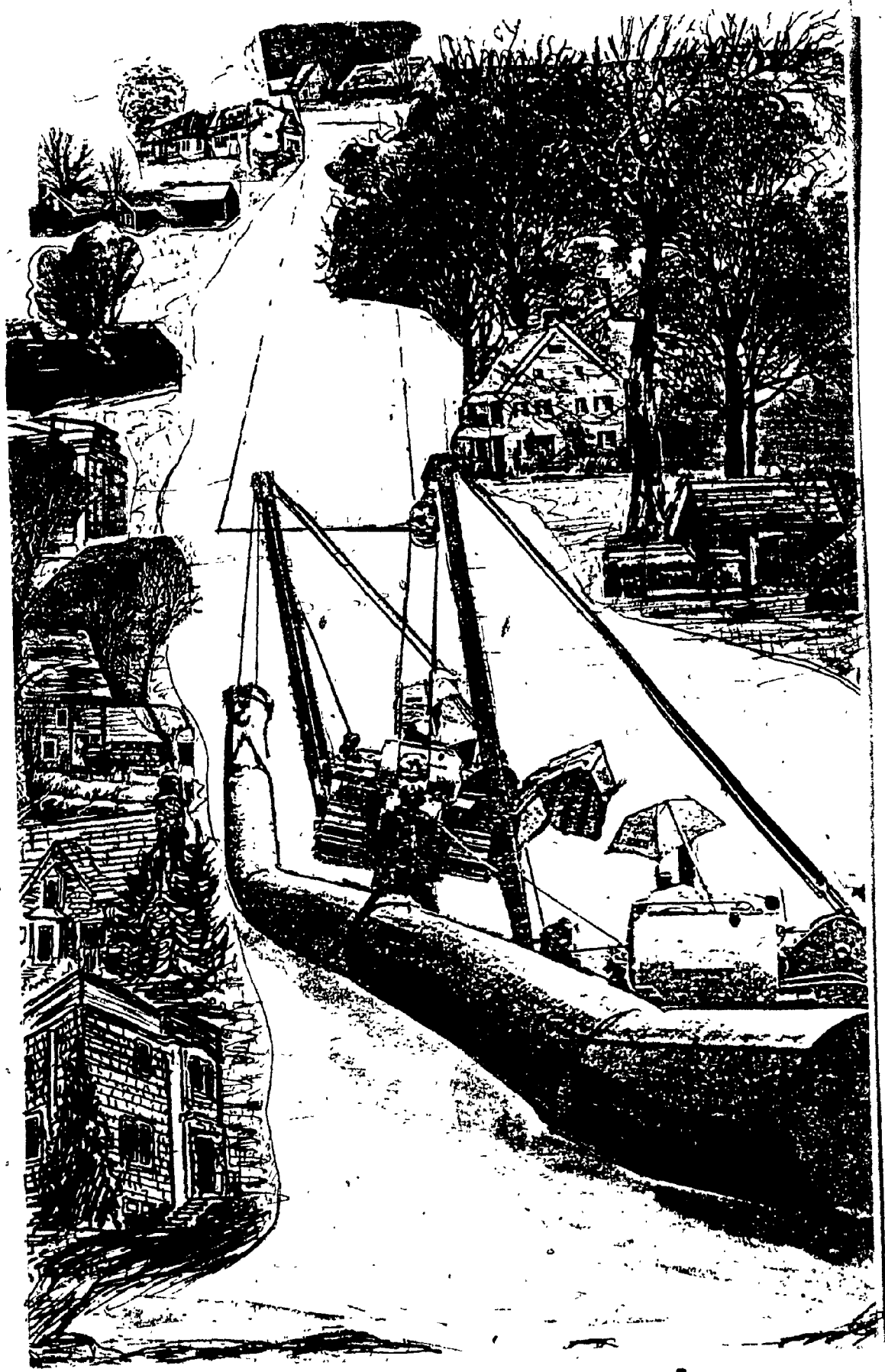
of a giant web. Then McPherson. McPherson would scream going down and his eyes would look back beseechingly at young Mrs. Scott. Ah! young Mrs. Scott. Maybe, with luck, she'd land on top of McPherson. That should please McPherson, having young Mrs. Scott land on top of him. McWhinny opened his eyes and looked at Mrs. Scott and at McPherson and at McHewn, and a wild satanic grin spread over his face at the thought of the notoriety the triple suicide - for it would surely look like suicide - would bring the Hole. As he swayed, his shoes creaked, and McHewn, turning to the noise, was shocked by the expression on the Chairman's face.

"McWhinny, are you all right, man?" said McHewn.

"The man's mad," said young Mrs. Scott and rose to leave. The movement broke McWhinny's fascination with his reflections. "To the Hole!" he cried, and pushed back his chair. "We're all going to the Hole! Let us walk hand in hand to the Hole."

Young Mrs. Scott looked at him with alarm. McPherson made for the curtain, but McWhinny reached it first and blocked his way. The secretary, Wilkie Frazer, drew further into his corner beside the stove.

"Put down that gavel, McWhinny," cried McHewn, his voice risen by an octave. "McWhinny? Do you hear me, man? McWhinny, what the hell...."



IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT, ALICE

The village clock strikes

Wunnnnnn..... and the sound pours from the belfry, down through the ivy on the short sharp steeple, built by the sweat of the servants of the Cabots ("And by their blood too, don't forget," Miss Dingle would remind her pupils).

Twoooooo..... sound streams past the dry flaked tablets of tombstones, bearing names from afar, almost illegible, names that still live in the village ("They loved the village with their lives," Miss Dingle told her children).

Threeeee..... around the roofs the sound comes tumbling, skims the leaves of stately elms, across the wide expanse of Green ("Every blade of the Green is our pride," she would lecture her boys, and make them write these words a hundred times for one dropped wrapper) across the Green where the children of the children Miss Dingle taught, today play with frisbies or lie in the sun or smoke grass in the long shadows of the trees she loves.

Fourrrrr..... along the dry road swirls the sound, stirs

the dust ("This dust was once the man," she'd say, as Whitman did) skirts the hedgerows, hurrys through lawns, slips under the long arch of trees in the driveway, up the stone wall and in the open window. Inside the room sits young Mrs. Boulton, trying to raise money for her Committee of Women for Greenspace - or "COW for Grass," as Miss Dingle irreverently calls it.

"There is no way," Miss Dingle was saying, "there is no way I'll ever believe that any child is fundamentally wicked. Let me tell you..."

"Alice, please," said Mrs. Boulton, and put a restraining hand on her friend's arm, "we really don't have time for that." Then turning to Mrs. McNulty: "We need your help, Jessica. We need to raise money quickly to hire a lawyer if we're going to stop them tearing up the Green."

Mrs. McNulty shifted uneasily in her chair but didn't take her eyes off the door leading to the hall.

"Is Jeremy still bothering you?" Mrs. Boulton asked, and without waiting for a reply went to the door and opened it. There was a sound of feet scurrying down the corridor. Mrs. Boulton shouted after them, "Jeremy, we've had quite enough of you for one day. Will you please stop your nonsense." She shut the door. "He imagines he's Benedict Arnold, spying on our meeting," she said apologetically to Mrs. McNulty.

"Aha!" cried Miss Dingle. "One of the dear boy's finest essays was on Benedict Arnold. And he once locked Rodgers in

the poison cupboard, accusing him of being Benedict Arnold - Rodgers the Science teacher, that is. Young fool, ran off with one of his own pupils - what was her name? Jessica, what was the name of the girl that Rodgers of Science got - the girl Rodgers eloped with?"

But the nose of Mrs. McNulty was pointing again at the door. Such a long nose, thought Mrs. Boulton. So long, so sharp, like the fin of a white...oh, no, Mrs. Boulton told herself, she really shouldn't think things like that; but still the vision persisted of Mrs. McNulty swimming on her back in the sea to the screams of the scrambling children.

"Jessica, what was her name?", Miss Dingle persisted. "Jessica? Jess-i-ca!". Miss Dingle leaned forward so that one large chin hovered over the sugar bowl, and down came her wrinkled hand firmly on Mrs. McNulty's knee, causing her to jump like a fish and to drop her empty sherry glass which Miss Dingle deftly caught, to place beside her own on Mrs. Boulton's coffee table.

"What? Yes, yes, it's a bad year for raising money," said Mrs. McNulty turning her nose to the front.

"We were talking about God," lied Miss Dingle, wagging her finger at the nose.

"I heard you," said Mrs. McNulty.

"Ladies, ladies," said Mrs. Boulton.

"You're lying, Jessica, lying like that day fifty years ago when you said Ed Dixon took you up into the woods."

But Mrs. McNulty's attention was once again on the door.

"Is he still out there?" she asked, with half a glance at

Mrs. Boulton.

"He's gone to his room."

"Dear boy," murmured Miss Dingle.

"Is he - alright?"

"You mean that noise? Only his television. He likes television - has it on most of the day."

"Music, Jessica, that's what's missing from your life," said Miss Dingle. "Take time off from your funeral parlor and listen to some music." She lifted a spoon, tinkled on the rim of a sherry glass, and sang the note "Ahhhh."

"Ladies, ladies," said Mrs. Boulton, one eye on the mantelpiece clock. "Shall we get back to business? We need to raise money quickly, Jessica. There are petitions to organize, ads in the papers, halls for meetings, but first a lawyer to file an injunction to stop them digging up the Green. And we'd like you, Jessica, to use your influence with the Daughters of the American Revolution."

"They don't plan to leave it dug up," said Mrs. McNulty. "The Gas Company only wants to dig a hole and put in a reservoir under the Green and lay a pipe to fill it. From what I hear, a lot of people in the county would like to have gas. It's cheaper than oil, you know."

"But not the villagers," said Mrs. Boulton. "They don't like the idea of all that gas being stored under where their children play."

"No, perhaps not, but I was thinking of those who live throughout the county. The villagers contribute so little to our community," said Mrs. McNulty, and she went on to speak

at great length of the deficiencies of the villagers; and it seemed to Mrs. Boulton that as she spoke of them her mouth hardly opened but her jaws moved up and down, up and down, as though chewing them like cud. Mrs. Boulton asked herself again if she had been wise in asking this woman to help them with their cause. Miss Dingle had warned her it would be worse than blood from a stone ("Blood? We won't get half a tear," were her words), but after all Mrs. McNulty was said to be the finest fund-raiser in the county, and everybody knew her, whether they lived in the village itself or in the new, brick, cement-washed houses that every year seemed to creep further along the far side of twelve-mile creek, serving as homes for the workers in the paper mill. And if they didn't know Mrs. McNulty to meet, at least they knew of her, and would have seen her sere, gaunt figure coming at them on her bicycle, her face "slicing through the New England mist like the prow of a ship; or they might have listened to her speak, an underfed body on spindle-like legs, standing on the platform of the Daughters of the American Revolution; or they might know her only from her photograph in the Free Press (for it seemed to Mrs. Boulton that when Mrs. McNulty wasn't busy promoting something she was busy being promoted). But mostly they would know her from her motoring around the county, sitting in the long black car (one of their old hearses, according to Miss Dingle) by the side of her husband - and a full head higher, or so it seemed - her eyes fixed ferret-like on the paths and yards and sidewalks, mouth going like a trap, giving him a commentary on all she saw and who was doing what and with whom, his eyes never moving from

the top dead centre of the wheel between his hands.

On one occasion, Mrs. Boulton remembered with a shudder, she had gone by mistake into a back room of the funeral parlor and found Mrs. McNulty, jacket off, sleeves rolled up, bare-handed, swabbing a body with what looked like a wad of yellow cotton wool. A white enamel pan was beside her, liquid was boiling and bubbling on a stove and all the odours of death were hanging, fog-like, in its steam.

Later that same day she watched Mrs. McNulty in the hall of the Daughters of the American Revolution, slicing crusts from ham and chicken sandwiches, and for some reason (which she had never been able to explain satisfactorily to herself, or to Jeremy) she had been unable - quite unable - to eat anything at that day's summer picnic.... "And remember this," Mrs. McNulty was saying - and she now spoke as if addressing the D.A.R. - "remember this, the Gas Company has said it will pay for the cost of connecting up gas to any house that wants it...."

"And to the McNulty Funeral Parlor," said Miss Dingle. "...and it will sell gas at half-price to the church, and as the Reverend Scrivens said last Sunday, the Ways of the Lord should be served, and if a gas pipeline will let more people serve by coming to church to worship and sing the praises of the Lord...."

"Hallelujah!" sang Miss Dingle, tinkling a sherry glass with a spoon and framing her lips like a goldfish.

"But not a gas reservoir under the Green!" said Mrs. Boulton.

"To be used to heat the house of the Lord, and to warm good, god-fearing churchgoers," said Mrs. McNulty, sitting up straight as though afraid of being consumed to ashes for speaking of the Lord from a slouch.

"And also used to cremate their bodies cheaply in the McNulty Funeral Parlor," said Miss Dingle in a low bass, bringing the spoon down sharply on Mrs. McNulty's knee.

"What was that? And stop hitting me, Alice Dingle. What did you say? What did she say? I didn't come here to be insulted, Mrs. Boulton."

Miss Dingle gripped the other's knee. "The first true word you've spoken today. And you didn't come here to give away money, either. You always were a tightwad, Jessica, even as a schoolgirl."

"Alice!" Although a Boulton only by marriage, her voice had all the authority of the last six Bouldons whose portraits beamed down from the wall. Then, turning to Mrs. McNulty: "We need your support," she said soothingly, "we need money for a lawyer, and if the D.A.R. would be kind enough to donate the proceeds from its speakers' nights? We know you carry a lot of weight...."

"Weight?" cried Miss Dingle incredulously, and she looked at Mrs. McNulty as if examining a collection of bones.

"...a lot of weight with the D.A.R., and if you could persuade them to give us their proceeds, for a few months, say six months.... What do you think, Jessica?"

"Humph," said Mrs. McNulty with a bitten-off yawn.

As if her 'humph' were a signal, the door flew open with

all the unexpectedness of a summer snowstorm. The ladies shot back in their chairs as the long barrel of a gun fanned the room, now silent but for their heavy breathing.

"I'm Ned Kelly. Hands up, all three of you."

"The Lord preserve us!" cried Mrs. McNulty, and her hands shot to her head as if to stop her wig flying off like a pigeon.

Mrs. Boulton got to her feet and pointed to the door.

"Jeremy, put down that gun, put down that gun at once."

"Stick-em-up," said Jeremy, and brought the gun round to the prominent feature of Mrs. McNulty's face.

"Oh my God!" she cried, her body collapsing in several places and - it seemed to Mrs. Boulton - her nose receding into her face for protection.

"Stop it, Jeremy, stop this nonsense at once, we're in the middle of a meeting."

"Hand it over," said Jeremy and the hole at the end of the gun lowered to the chain round Mrs. McNulty's neck.

"Humor him Jessica," whispered Miss Dingle, but Mrs. McNulty gave only a low moan and crossed her hands on her chest.

Mrs. Boulton started to move from behind the coffee table but Miss Dingle's hand went out to stop her. "Humor him Jessica, give him your chain," she said louder and rapped the spoon on Mrs. McNulty's knee.

"Here, drop it in this bag," said Jeremy, releasing one hand from the stock of the gun.

Mrs. McNulty took an imaginary chain from around her neck

and dropped it in the imaginary bag. Jeremy backed to the door which led to the hall, put a hand out behind him to grip the handle, and was out and away in a flash.

"Well!" said Mrs. McNulty from a face now ravaged, by fear. "Well, well, well, well, well! They were right, he has changed, and not for the better, I would say."

Mrs. Boulton's mouth had opened as if about to apologise but these words set her back in her chair. "It's all your fault, Alice." This to Miss Dingle, and before the other could reply Mrs. Boulton got to her feet. "If you'll excuse me, ladies, I'll go have a word with Jeremy."

When the door closed, Mrs. McNulty blew loosely from her lips. "Well, did you ever! Did you ever see such a thing! The Boultons may be the Boultons, and I know they have a reputation for being eccentric, but that doesn't excuse behavior like that. And what did she mean it was your fault, Alice?"

Miss Dingle put her fingers to her lips. "Not so loud - they are all very sensitive about Jeremy, dear boy. But not a word when she comes back. Yes, very sensitive. Of all the Boultons I'd say he is the most - how shall I put it? - imaginative - and talented. Oh dear, yes! But not a word when she comes back. She knows there's been talk in the village - the usual gossip - talk, talk, nothing better to do, most of it from envy - the Boultons being what they are...."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. McNulty with more than her usual asperity, "but what did she mean it was your fault, Alice?"

"What? Oh, that. She blames me - thinks it was my fault

for encouraging Jeremy. Which I did. He was in my class, you know, and such a dreamer, such an imagination! He used to write the strangest essays on brigands and pirates and on the supernatural. Ned Kelly was one of his favorites - he was the Australian Jesse James, you know. She thinks I encouraged Jeremy to dream - which I did. 'You are a Boulton, I would remind him. 'And as a Boulton, living in Boulton's Landing, you are invincible.'" Miss Dingle paused, remembering. "I reminded Jeremy that they can conquer who believe they can. I reminded him...."

"Yes, yes, we know all about that," said Mrs. McNulty, cutting the flow of words. "That explains what I heard in the village."

"And what, pray, did you hear in the village?" said Miss Dingle looking over her spectacles.

"Oh, certain rumours. When I told Mrs. Scrivens I was coming here today she looked at me in the strangest way."

"Mrs. Scrivens? The minister's wife? Huh! Miss Dingle blew her nose. "Mrs. Scrivens is a fine one to talk, that hypocrite. Prays for the poor while wearing her jewels and mink. And she's as bad as you - yes she is," (this as Mrs. McNulty opened her mouth to protest). "You don't fool me, Jessica McNulty, you never did - you and Ed Dixon, indeed! Oh yes, I remember. And now the Green. You'd let them destroy - you'd have them - those trees, three hundred years - and the only place for my children - where will my children play? Eh? To help heat the church, you say? Fiddlesticks! And if it does, who wants to hear old Scrivens bore us to

death with platitudes from the pulpit? Eh? Let me tell you...." She stopped as Mrs. Boulton came back into the room.

"Well, shall we get on with the meeting, Ladies?"

Mrs. McNulty's eyes were on the door.

"No, it's all right, Jessica; we shan't be disturbed again. Now, what would you say to another glass of sherry?"

"Good idea," said Miss Dingle with a quiet belch that was also a note of praise.

The village clock struck five, and the music of its bell found its way to the Boulton's house along the same circuitous path it had followed for hundreds of years, and with the sun now hidden by the elms the first few wisps of evening mist refused to be dispersed, but lay in the hollows of the Green, sending the children home who should have been at school all day.

"So that's it," said Mrs. Boulton. "We need to raise five thousand dollars by the end of the year."

"Quite impossible," said Mrs. McNulty. "I've been looking at your account book and you've collected only two hundred and forty-three dollars in four months."

"Including your two dollars," said Miss Dingle, "and three dollars from our righteous Mrs. Scrivens - probably pinched out of the collection plate."

"Now, Alice, you know that's wrong."

"You're right, I doubt if he collects that much in a

week."

"Alice Dingle!"

"Impossible," said Mrs. McNulty, her nose in the account book. "It can't be done in three months."

"How much are we short?" asked Miss Dingle.

"You might as well give people their money back and close the fund," said Mrs. McNulty.

"Our life is closed, our life begins," quoted Miss Dingle.

"Tcchh," said Mrs. McNulty.

"No, Walt Whitman," corrected Miss Dingle. "'Joy, Shipmate, Joy.' That's what you need more of Jessica, joy. You've spent too much of your life with coffins and the uncut hair of graves. Now, tell me, how much are we short?"

"Close to four thousand eight hundred."

"I can raise the eight hundred," said Mrs. Boulton.

"Leave the four thousand to me," said Miss Dingle.

Mrs. McNulty said, "Impossible," closed the account book and handed it back.

"I said leave it to me."

"That's kind of you, Alice, but can you really afford it?" said Mrs. Boulton.

"Oh, I don't have a cent, just my pension, but there are ways. Like prostitution, and blackmail...."

"Tcchh!" said Mrs. McNulty, and opened her purse and started to powder her nose as if to shield it from the coarseness of such conversation.

"Don't worry, Jessica, I shan't sell my body." The thought set Miss Dingle rocking back in her chair, laughing.

at the ceiling. "But I am prepared to sell my soul," she said, straightening up, her face solemn and giving Mrs. Boulton such a look as to cause her to get up and close the window.

"Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity; when I give, I give myself," said Miss Dingle, and when she saw the consternation on Mrs. Boulton's face: "Don't worry, my dear. But if I do pop off - kick the bucket, my boys used to say if I remember rightly - if I do kick the bucket you shall have enough money to hire the best lawyer in Boston."

"Boston!" cried Mrs. McNulty jumping to her feet. "My God! I'd forgotten about Mrs. O'Keefe. Her train arrives at 6:30."

"But it's only 5:15," said Mrs. Boulton, consulting her watch and the clock, "and you can drive to the station in five minutes."

"Who's Mrs. O'Keefe?" asked Miss Dingle.

"I can't meet Mrs. O'Keefe like this," said Mrs. McNulty with a sweep of her hands to her grey tweed suit. "I must go home first and change."

"Who's Mrs. O'Keefe?"

"This month's speaker," said Mrs. McNulty. "Don't you read our circulars? Here. She's going to talk to the D.A.R. on 'The Environmental Advantages of Cremation'."

"How exciting," said Miss Dingle. "That should raise ten cents for your funds. Who the hell - I beg your pardon - how many ladies will come to the hall on a Friday night to learn about cremation?"

Mrs. McNulty ignored this. "I met her when I was President of the D.A.R." She fingered her gold chain and medal. "Before your time," she said to Mrs. Boulton. "No, please don't get up, I can let myself out."

Mrs. Boulton sat down again. "Right, Jessica, and thank you for coming. And you'll let us know about money from the D.A.R.?"

"Humph," said Mrs. McNulty, and she snapped the clasp of her purse and left the room.

Miss Dingle did not acknowledge the departure of Mrs. McNulty until the door closed behind her. She lifted herself from her chair and stood stretching, her arms too short for her dress-sleeves, her generous body looking as soft and comfortable as a well-stuffed sofa, her spectacles perched on the end of her nose like a pair of under-nourished donuts. Hands behind her back, she waddled across the room, looked up at the Boulton portraits, read their names out loud, pronounced their names distinctly as to a child, then moved along to examine the wallpaper, pale yellow with long green ferns, like seaweed scattered loosely on a beach. She shook her head. "So much for Jessica McNulty."

When Mrs. Boulton made no reply she lowered herself into the rocker. "You're worried about what she'll say about Jeremy?"

Mrs. Boulton nodded.

"Leave her to me. Will you let me deal with her, my

dear?"

"It's not only Jeremy's reputation that concerns me," said Mrs. Boulton. "Goodness knows it's probably too late for that. It's the money. I shouldn't think the D.A.R. will give us much help if we have to rely on Jessica."

"Old fool," said Miss Dingle, swinging the spoon in the air as though at the spirit of Mrs. McNulty. "You can see why Ed Dixon would have nothing to do with her."

"I didn't know Ed Dixon."

"Of course not, of course not. I keep forgetting youth has caught up with me, will soon be old itself. Ed Dixon was a year older than me." She took a sip of sherry, put her head back and rocked in her chair so that her face caught the light from the ceiling. As Mrs. Boulton looked at her, she realized she had never viewed Miss Dingle from this angle before. How her face was transformed! She smiled as she rocked, as though some memory had touched her, some fragment from the past. And her eyes! At first Mrs. Boulton attributed the bright, rich gleam in Miss Dingle's eyes to some reflection from the overhead light. But no, ~~it~~ wasn't that, the more she looked the more sure she was that it was not the overhead light, nor any external light for that matter. And what was she humming?

"The old school song," said Miss Dingle, as if anticipating the other's question. "You wouldn't recognise it, would you? They changed it after the war. Ed Dixon was killed in the war. At Sakishima, on the 8th of May 1943. The boys used to sing that song after football. Don't know why they had to change it." She hummed and rocked and smiled, as

if seeing for the first time some exotic plant spring from the soil of her dream-garden, forced into premature bloom by the warmth of her feeling. Then an indecipherable shadow passed fleetingly across her face. "I knew about Ed Dixon before they told his mother. 'This island is called Sakishima,' I said to my class that day, the 8th of May, and when I looked at it, a spot on the map, I saw Ed Dixon lying on the beach.... I had to send the class home." She stopped rocking, was silent, and for the first time Mrs. Boulton saw another Miss Dingle, saw two Miss Dingles, one inside the other, fighting to get out. "Imagine the nerve of that Jessica McNulty ever thinking she was good enough for him." Her voice tailed off, and after a moment's silence she pulled herself up, sat erect, but when she spoke her voice still echoed some long-lost feeling, and the pleasure of its memory still showed upon her face. "Should I say hello to Jeremy?"

Mrs. Boulton, mesmerised, was caught quite unprepared.

"What?"

"Jeremy. Should I say hello to Jeremy?"

"Jeremy? Oh yes! Jeremy. No, no, I don't think so, Alice. He's best left alone when he's in one of his moods." She drew in one deep breath, then another. "Perhaps we should get on with our business."

"Not much left to discuss," said Miss Dingle. "Jessica won't help us, that's clear, but we'll find other ways."

'Tempus abire tibi est', I used to tell my boys, 'Tis time to quit the scene, 'Tis time to think.'" She picked up the pamphlet Mrs. McNulty had left behind. "'The Environmental Ad-

vantages of Cremation'! That talk might not raise even ten cents. And next month's is no better. 'Conversation in the Kitchen'. Now I ask you!"

"Conservation, Alice."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Conservation. Mr. Zenbaum of the Department of Energy will talk about 'Conservation in the Kitchen', it says. How to save energy by using less toasters and ovens and...."

"I eat mostly salads," observed Miss Dingle.

"...by using less ovens and electric mixers and carving knives and refrigerators and chestfreezers and...."

"Tut, tut," said Miss Dingle.

"What have I said, Alice?"

"It's not you, my dear, it's the chestfreezers. Oh dear, how I despair for words! If a nutcracker is to crack nuts, what might a chestfreezer be? A boy of mine would not be responsible for a word like that - nor a girl, for that matter. We may have had our little language, my boys and I, words of our own creation - we made up words, you know, to develop imagination. 'Let loose your invention,' I would tell them, 'heat your mind with incredibilities'. She stopped and nodded. "And dreams," she added, reflectingly, "and dreams... now where was I? You see how that Jessica McNulty has me all confused? My mind is all of a dither. Oh well, 'dulce est despire,' said Horace, 'it is pleasant to be foolish'."

"Horace?" said Mrs. Boulton and knew at once it was a mistake to ask. But Miss Dingle's mind had flitted, giving Mrs. Boulton time to lead the conversation away from Horace.

"Talking of conservation," she said, "do you suppose Jessica saved energy by walking home? I didn't hear her car."

Miss Dingle stopped rocking. Mrs. Boulton went to the window. "She's either conserving energy or she's got a bad memory. She's left her car in the driveway."

"Jessica is getting very absent-minded these days. Last week I spoke to her in that supermarket - what's it called? - and she looked right through me."

"Old age and senility affect some people before others," observed young Mrs. Boulton. "They say the first thing to go is one's memory," she added.

Miss Dingle giggled.

"Did I say something funny, Alice?"

Miss Dingle did her best to smother her smile. "Passing thoughts."

"You know it annoys me when people snigger and won't say what it's about," said Mrs. Boulton.

Miss Dingle took a breath. "I thought the first thing to go was the urge."

"The urge? What urge?"

"I meant it as a joke, my dear."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Boulton, and looked at the ceiling as if for guidance.

"What was that?" Miss Dingle was suddenly up in her chair.

"What was what?" asked Mrs. Boulton who had started to gather up the coffee cups and glasses.

"I thought I heard a scream."

"Probably Jeremy and his television. The things he looks at! Shall we declare our Committee meeting closed?"

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure of what?"

"That noise."

"The television, I tell you. And if you'll excuse me I'll clear up now - Stephen will soon be home." She shoved the cups, saucers and glasses on to a tray.

Miss Dingle did not move till the sound from the kitchen told her Mrs. Boulton was washing the dishes. She then got up, walked carefully over the floorboards and opened the door leading to the hall.

Mrs. Boulton had hummed her way through the cups, saucers and plates and was drying her silverplated spoons when Miss Dingle's feet came rushing back along the hall and through the swing door to the kitchen.

"Good gracious! Alice, you startled me."

Miss Dingle, breathless, pointed to the kitchen door.

"It's Jessica."

"Jessica? She's here? She's back?"

Miss Dingle shook her head and put an arm out as Mrs. Boulton made for the hall. "She's in the room at the end of the corridor."

"In the study?"

Miss Dingle nodded.

"Goodness me! Do you mean she never left?"

"She couldn't. She's tied up."

"Tied up? Tied up with Jeremy?"

Miss Dingle shook her head. "Tied up by Jeremy. She's tied to a chair, my dear."

Mrs. Boulton's hand flew to her throat. "Jeremy has tied up...? You must be dreaming, Alice."

"He says he's Ned Kelly and Jessica is his hostage."

"Oh my God! This time he's gone' too far. Let me go, Alice, I'll...."

"He won't let you in. He made me leave and locked the door."

"But this is nonsense! Let me speak to him." She pushed her way passed Miss Dingle and along to the end of the corridor.

"Jeremy!" (twisting the handle of the door). "Jeremy, will you answer me!" (beating the door with her fist).

"Jessica, are you all right?"

"She can't speak," said Miss Dingle at her shoulder, making her jump.

"Why can't she speak?"

"He's gagged her. With a towel."

"Good heavens!" She shook the door more violently. When there was no reply from the room, she took Miss Dingle by the arm and led her back to the kitchen.

"To do this to Jessica of all people. You know what she's like, Alice, the story will be all round the village by tonight, and she'll exaggerate it so." They sat facing each other over the kitchen table. "We'd better wait till Stephen gets home. He's the only one who can handle Jeremy when he gets in one of these moods."

"Stephen mustn't be allowed in the study," said Miss Dingle.

"Oh, don't worry, he won't say a word about Jessica being tied up and gagged."

"It's not that, my dear." Miss Dingle hesitated.

"Jessica would be so embarrassed. You see, she's naked."

Mrs. Boulton's chin slipped from the cup of her hands.

"Naked? - You mean undressed naked?"

"Completely," said Miss Dingle. "Not a stitch."

"Oh my God!"

"Jeremy says Ned Kelly stripped his hostages to keep them from escaping," said Miss Dingle, and she cocked her head and put a forefinger to her chin as though considering the veracity of such a statement.

"Damn Ned Kelly! And damn you, Alice, it's all your fault."

Miss Dingle ignored this. "He's right, you know."

"Who's right?"

"Jeremy. About Ned Kelly. He really did strip his hostages to keep them from escaping. We once discussed the...."

"Alice Dingle, why do you gabble so? Jessica McNulty is tied to a chair in my house without any...you know...and all you can think of is...Oh! I do wish Stephen would come home."

"Perhaps we could climb in the window," Miss Dingle suggested.

"If you can jump ten feet you might reach it," said Mrs. Boulton.

"How about a ladder?"

"Let's wait till Stephen comes home. But not a word about Jessica being naked. I'll...is that him? Is that you, Stephen?"

Miss Dingle shook her head. "I didn't hear anything. Sit down and let me get you a drink, you look pale."

"Thank you, Alice."

"Where is the liquor cabinet?"

"Liquor? I don't want liquor. I'd like a...Stephen, is that you? Stephen, we're here in the kitchen."

The door swung open. "Hi mum," said the boy. "Hi, Miss Dingle."

Mrs. Boulton got up, took her son's satchel and led him to a chair at the table. "Stephen, I'm so glad you're home. It's your father. He's up to his nonsense again."

"Jesse James?" asked the boy, stretching his arm for a cookie.

"No, this time it's some Australian ruffian called Ned Kelly, and - here, let me get you some milk - and he's got (Mrs. McNulty tied up as a hostage."

"Old Mrs. McNulty?"

"Is there another?" asked Miss Dingle.

"He's tied her to a chair in his study, and gagged her. With a towel."

"That's new," said the boy. "Why Mrs. McNulty?"

"Who better," observed Miss Dingle.

"Alice, keep quiet if you please. Now, Stephen, when you've finished your milk I want you to go speak to your father. You're the only person he'll listen to."

"Tell him you're Joe Bryne," said Miss Dingle.

"The pop singer?"

"No, no, the bandit. Joe Bryne was Ned Kelly's best friend. Your father knows all about Joe Bryne. When he was your age he once wrote a magnificent essay on Australian bush-wranglers....bush-wranglers? isn't that what they're called? Stephen, can you...."

"Alice, please let get to the point," said Mrs. Boulton in a voice that caused Miss Dingle to give her a searching look.

"Now, now, my dear, not to get flustered." She took the boy by the arm. "Right, Stephen, go to dear - go to Jeremy - go to your father and tell him you're Joe Bryne, and that the police are on their way. Tell him the police are coming for you both and it's time to get down to the railroad. That'll make him come out."

"The police are coming from where?"

"Don't worry about that, my boy. Just tell him they're coming, and he'd better get down to the railroad."

"Now finish your milk, Stephen, and do as Miss Dingle tells you."

"And don't go into the study, my boy."

"That's right, Stephen, if he asks you in, tell him no. Tell him he's got to get down to the railroad."

"O.K.," said the boy, and wiped his lips with his sleeve.

"You coming with me?"

"No, we'll wait here in the kitchen. He might look out through the keyhole."

They heard the boy shout, a voice answer, the boy shout again. After a long silence the boy came back to the kitchen.

"Father's gone," he said.

"You're sure?"

"I heard him open the window. He said he was off to the railroad."

"Good," said Miss Dingle. "Come to think of it, Ned Kelly did go off by himself."

"But how do we get in?" said Mrs. Boulton.

"There's a ladder down in the orchard," said Stephen.

"Go get it, boy," said Miss Dingle. "I haven't climbed through a window in years."

Mrs. McNulty, hair in disorder, was tied, gagged and blindfolded, with words bottled up inside her, squeezing to get out.

"I see he didn't take your chain," said Miss Dingle as she removed the rag from the other's mouth.

"Police!" said Mrs. McNulty hoarsely. "Get the police!"

"Now, Jessica, you mustn't get over-excited. You don't really want the police. Here, put your clothes on, you'll feel better after a drink."

"I want the police. That man. He's insane. Look at me, look at me!"

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind," said Miss Dingle.

"Remember, I haven't seen you in the buff for fifty years. And forget about the police. You'd be the laughing stock of

the village."

"That man is a lunatic. What do you mean, the laughing stock?"

"I'd have to describe to the police how I found you. Can't you imagine what the old Misses Potts would say?"

"Jessica McNulty, alone in a room with a man, and naked. The story would be all through the village in an hour. They'd have you raped and ravished, and you know it."

Mrs. McNulty, now dressed, looked up, and for the first time the full horror of her predicament seemed to strike her, for her lower jaw fell, loose as a pelican's, a shudder of weakness shook her body and her hands collapsed to her sides as though her skirts had been lifted in a high wind.

"What...?" She tried to speak, but the words wouldn't form in her mouth.

"You can rely on the Boultons not to say a word, and now that you are going to be our chief fund-raiser, Jessica, you can count on me. And I shall get hold of the photographs from Jeremy, never fear." Miss Dingle picked up the loose, silver-coated wrapper and the small, oblong, yellow box. "He used a color film, I see," she said, and her eyes went to Mrs. McNulty's pale grey skin and back again to the box.

"Waste of money, I should say, but there you are." When she saw Mrs. McNulty's eyes flying round the room she added:

"No, the camera has gone, I suppose he's got it with him."

Mrs. McNulty could not speak nor take her eyes off Miss Dingle, as though bound to her by some common disaster, too terrible for words.

"You shall have the film, I promise you. First thing tomorrow when I call to collect your cheque. Make it out to the Committee of Women for Greenspace, will you, Jessica? Good. Now off with you to the station and meet your Mrs. O'Keefe." She unlocked the door, and Mrs. McNulty, without a glance or a word to the boy or his mother, went from the house to her car, her suit hanging loose on her frame.

"She's going to the station to meet Mrs. O'Keefe," explained Miss Dingle.

"What if she meets Dad?" said the boy.

"He's gone to blow up the railroad," said Miss Dingle.

"He's what?" said Mrs. Boulton, her hand at her mouth.

"Oh dear, I didn't tell you, did I? You see, Ned Kelly blew up the railroad. He thought the police were coming by train so he blew up the track of the railroad, where it crossed a bridge. Here, take my car and go down to the bridge in Old Station Road. I shouldn't be surprised if you find Jeremy - Mr. Boulton - sitting on the tracks with his imaginary sticks of dynamite."

Left alone, Miss Dingle went back to the study and sat in the chair, humming the old school song. Her eyes swung round the walls, admired the prints, past the bookshelves, the trophy cupboard, and settled on the door of the closet in the far corner of the el-shaped room.

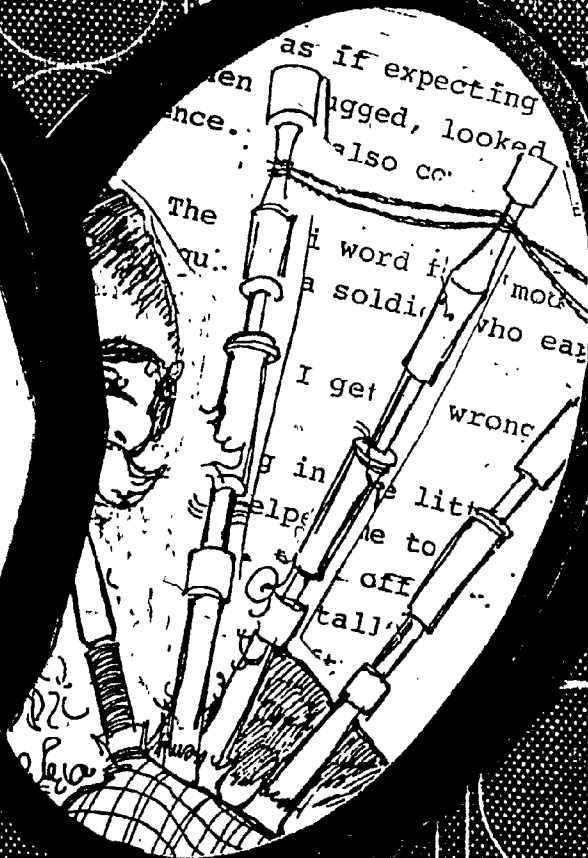
"You can come out now Jeremy, if you wish." Then back to her humming, eyes still on the door, till she said again,

louder. "They've all gone, Jeremy, time to come out." She closed her eyes, and when she spoke again it was as if he were standing in front of her as a boy, in her class. "Dear boy. Do you suffer much? Do you feel you have sold your soul? Do you think, perhaps, we have both sold our souls, and all for a piece of grass?" She sighed. "They sold their souls for a blade of grass," she said, shaking her head sadly as though imagining such an epitaph.

As she spoke, the village clock struck six, and the sound poured from the belfry, down the steeple, past the tombstones and across the expanse of the Green.

The Love Song of Bridget MacLeod

I hid behind a bunch of dates, but the Iranian soldier spotted my white dress shirt or gold cufflinks glinted in the light.
"Point that bloody rifle" I said in Farsi, "I don't seem no more than three feet six in a fitting uniform."



THE LOVE SONG OF BRIDGET MACLEOD

I hid behind a bunch of dates, but the Iranian soldier must have spotted my white dress shirt or gold cufflinks glinting in the moonlight.

"Don't point that bloody rifle," I said in Farsi. Viewed from my place in the tree he seemed no more than three feet six, a thin dark dwarf of a man in an ill-fitting uniform.

"It's not loaded," he said.

"Then why point it?"

He considered the end of the rifle as if expecting to hear the answer come out of the barrel, then shrugged, looked up at me. "I suppose it gives me confidence. It also commands a modicum of respect."

I looked down at him sharply. The Farsi word for "modicum" is not a word that trips lightly off the tongue of a soldier who earns five cents a day. "Did you say modicum?"

He answered in English. "Yes sir. Did I get it wrong? Did I mispronounce it?"

I fell breathless from the tree, landing in the litter of dates at his feet. He put down his rifle, helped me to my feet, brushed the dates from the back of my tuxedo, took off his forage cap and swished the legs of my trousers. He was taller than I had imagined, up to my chin, and forty-

five, maybe fifty years old. Old enough to be my father.

"Did you speak in English?"

"I'm right sorry, sir. Did I give you a fright?"

"My God, you are English."

"Scottish, sir."

"All right, Scottish. Why are you dressed like this? You can't be - don't tell me you're a....You're not in the Iranian army!"

Yes, he was in the Iranian army, sir. Yes, he knew Iran was now violently anti-British, sir. He stood to attention, eyes straight, as though answering questions on the parade ground. "They were friendly enough when I joined them, sir."

"That may be so, but they're about to throw us out. Didn't you know that, eh? Us, the British, your own countrymen!"

He gave as much of a shrug as his uniform would allow. "They're very emotional people, and easily swayed. When I enlisted they were shouting 'death to the Russians'".

"When was that? And how in heaven's name did you come to join this bunch of ruffians?"

For the first time his eyes lowered, his face fell and his mouth looked ragged round the edges. He swallowed hard and I noticed he had an extraordinarily large Adam's apple which dipped briefly below the collar of his tunic. "It's a long story, sir." He took a deep breath as though to engage his mind in reverse but then, remembering he had a present duty, he lifted his eyes to face me. "I should be

questionin' you, sir. Can you tell me, please, what were you doin' up that tree?"

"What was that? What did you say?"

"Up the tree, sir. Why were you up the tree?"

My breath came out in a rush. "Hiding from you. I thought you were a bloody soldier."

"I am, sir."

"Pshaw! my good fellow, you know what I mean."

"And is that all you were doin', sir?"

"Of course. What the hell do you think I was doing? Counting the dates?"

He ignored this and pulled out a three-inch notebook from his tunic, a stub of pencil from his belt, and started to write.

"What are you writing?"

He cleared his throat. "I have to report you, sir, for bein' out of the Bungalow Area after the curfew."

This was too much. "Good God, man! - can't you see I've been to a party - a farewell party - one of my friends leaving - had a few drinks - had to escort a lady home - over there" - (I pointed to the Benson's bungalow) - "I was taking a shortcut." All of which was true. Benson had been called up-country, to Masjid-i-Suliman, to supervise repairs - saboteurs had blown a hole in the pipeline - so I had taken Judy Benson to the Fletcher's farewell party. "Look, I'm not more than fifty yards outside the Bungalow Area, and it was only five minutes past midnight when you spotted me."

His face lacked sympathy. "I'm right sorry, sir, but fifty yards is fifty yards, and five minutes is...." He stopped. His eyes followed my hand into the inside pocket of my tuxedo and out again, fixed on the Hershey bar under his nose. His head did not flinch, but his eyes turned up, unblinking, to give me a withering look. "You wouldn't be tryin' to bribe me, sir?"

Suddenly feeling much smaller than my soldier, I pulled off the wrapper and nibbled at the chocolate. He went back to his writing, and when his eyes were down I examined him more closely. Beneath the forage cap was oil-slicked hair, black as jet, a thin face burned brown with the sun, a small military moustache under a long, aristocratic nose. Brown eyes? Hard to tell in the moonlight, but dark, yes dark, with heavy brows. A distinguished face, like that of a Bakhtiari tribesman.

"Look," I said, conciliatory, "let's be reasonable. It's only minutes after curfew, my bungalow is yards away, you can see I'm respectable. Why not have one of my neighbours vouch for me?"

He stopped writing, thought about this for a moment. "Right, sir, if you'll lead the way...."

He slung his rifle over his shoulder and walked beside me along the dusty road, past the line of palm trees and over the watered lawns to the row of bungalows. The night was still, and above the steady hum of machinery from the distant refinery I could hear the food slosh around in the soldier's nightpail which he carried in his other hand.

There was a strong smell of curry. He saw me look.

"Hungry, sir?"

My stomach shuddered. "No, thank you - all I need is a drink."

At the word "drink" his shoulders stiffened, his body quivered, and his tongue darted out to moisten his lips. It was a warm night, and what breeze there was came dry and dusty from the desert. I pressed home my advantage.

"Nothing like a drink on a night like this." There was no doubt about his tongue; it flicked out, curled over the ends of his moustache, ran along his lips and retreated. His eyes rolled and he swallowed. "How right you are, sir."

I pressed further. "Let's hope the vodka is in the icebox. I've run out of Chehel-o-Chahr" - the popular brand of vodka which sold for forty-four cents a bottle - "but I've got a full bottle of Makhsoos." Makhsoos cost fifty cents, was distilled from more select potato peelings, then aged for a week.

There was no doubting the soldier's quiver; it racked his body and caused him to stumble.

"Are you alright?"

He answered, but the words came hoarsely, and after a moment's pause on we went, across the front lawn of my bungalow.

"This is where I live. Will I ask a neighbour to identify me?"

He shook his head. "That won't be necessary, sir. But perhaps I could...?"

"Yes?"

"A drink of water would be very welcome."

"But, of course." I opened the door of my bungalow, switched on the lights, and led the soldier along the corridor, through the mosquito netting, and into my sitting room.

He blinked against the light, took one look and stiffened, his eyelids stretching as he surveyed the room slowly, darkly, and with the silent imputation of disgust, his head turning in short, sharp movements as though on a ratchet, his face wincing with each movement as his eyes took in the scene: the tombs of dust, the floor unscarred by the sweep of a brush, the discarded bills and bottles, the rancid butterdish, the sofa dappled with the crumbs of cookies, the scattered dice, magazines, socks, tennis balls and assorted golf clubs. He turned to me, silent, but his eyes spoke of the horrors they had seen: a room, peddling furiously downhill, winning the race to become an everlasting slum.

"It's comfortable," I said. "I have no servant," I said. Why was I making excuses? I loved my room, warts and all.

He tried to smile.

"My servant left me a month ago," I said.

"One month?"

I did not like his tone. I did not care for his tone one bit. His incredulous tone implied my mother had been one in a long line of sluts. Without answering, I walked

stiffly to the icebox and threw open the door. "How do you like your vodka?"

My soldier fizzed like a half-opened bottle of soda as his eyes lit on the mildewed melon and the blue-moulded bowl of prunes. I repeated my question. "How do you like your vodka - with orange or lemon?"

His eyes were now on the bottle in my hand, the state of the room seemingly forgotten.

"Vodka," I said, "with orange or lemon?"

There was no doubting the struggle within him. He had to tear his eyes from that bottle.

"No, thank you, sir."

"You don't want a drink?"

"No, sir."

I looked round the room. "You needn't worry - it's a new bottle - it hasn't been contaminated."

"It's not that, sir."

"What is it then? Don't you drink?"

His eyes rolled and his voice came through lips of sand. "A cup of tea, sir - just a cup of tea."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite serious, sir."

"You don't drink?"

"No, sir. Haven't touched a drop of the Demon in five years and three months."

"And before that?"

He shuddered. "I never talk about those days, sir."

"What made you stop?"

He did not answer.

"Come on man, out with it."

"I was visited, sir."

"Visited?"

"I had a vision, sir. It came to me one night when I was stoned to the gills. My late grandfather MacLeod - my mother was a MacLeod - he came to me in a vision. Since then I've never touched a drop of the Demon, sir."

I waited, but my soldier was silent, looking at the ceiling.

"Right," I said. "Let me get you some tea." I left the sitting room and walked along the corridor to the kitchen.

The soldier put down his rifle and nightpail and came bounding after me. "No, no, allow me, sir." He went to the sink, pulled out the plug, rinsed out the socks, filled the kettle, plugged it in, took a dishtowel, dried the week's dishes and put them away in the cupboard. "Excuse me, sir." I followed him back to the sitting room. He took a deep breath and moved swiftly round the room, flicking things about like a conjurer. Clubs, balls, magazines, bottles, and the rancid butterdish vanished to hidden corners. In three minutes my sitting room had regained some of its virginal essence. He looked vainly for a brush, took off his cap, swished the crumbs from the sofa, waved for me to sit down, which I did, having followed this performance with something approaching awe.

"You are a miracle worker, corporal...eh?"

"Smiley, sir. Corporal James Smiley." He put on his cap, stood to attention, clicked his heels.

"An old military man, I imagine?"

"Yes, sir. Of The Highland Light Infantry, the Foreign Legion, the Hong Kong Scouts, and the Iranian Army."

"The Hong Kong Scouts?"

"The Hong Kong Scouts, sir. While servin' as butler to his Excellency I was also Assistant Scoutmaster in the Hong Kong Scouts."

"Butler? Excellency?"

"The Governor, sir. I was in his employ for two years."

"As a butler?"

Smiley removed his forage cap and bowed stiffly from the waist. "First Underbutler, to be exact."

"To the Governor of Hong Kong?"

"Yes, sir. For two years."

I got up, poured myself another drink, and pointed to the sofa now free of golf clubs and the crumbs of cookies. Smiley did not move but fixed his eyes on the picture of my mother, now straight, on the far wall. "Sit down, corporal, I'd like to speak to you."

"I'd rather stand, sir."

"As you will."

I walked round the room examining corporal Smiley, encircling him twice like a dog.

"Corporal, I will be blunt. I am beginning to smell

a rat."

"A rat, sir?"

"A rat. Do you follow me?"

"No, sir."

"Then let me think out loud. A certain corporal in the Iranian Army, whose time in the Army is nearly up, and who has worked as a butler, is looking for a job. He hears of a gentleman who has been without a servant for a month. Do you follow me so far, corporal?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. The corporal also knows that this gentleman is in the habit of returning to his bungalow late at night, after curfew. The corporal follows him one night, forcing the gentleman to hide up a tree. The corporal refuses to be bribed by a Hershey bar. He has himself invited to the gentleman's bungalow. He whisks round the place, rinsing out socks, cleaning up crumbs, and he lets it be known, quite casually, that he has been a butler to the Governor of Hong Kong."

"First Underbutler, sir."

"Alright, First Underbutler. Am I right so far, corporal?"

"Not quite, sir. My time in the Iranian Army is not nearly up."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, sir."

"You plan to skip, to desert?"

"Not desert, sir. Retire."

"Come, come, corporal!"

"As you wish, sir. Desert."

"And you want to work for me?"

"If you'll have me, sir."

"Not on your life, corporal, not on your bloody life. What do you think they'd do to me if they found out I was hiding a deserter?"

James Smiley said nothing. Without moving his head he turned his eyes to his notebook which lay open on the table. I picked it up, read what he had written, looked at him, read it again, and put it down. I went to the icebox, poured myself a large vodka Makhsoos with two ice-cubes and a dash of lemon, raised the glass to my lips, downed the lot.

"I see, corporal. So that's what you had in mind. To report me as being up a tree outside the bungalow of the Hospital Matron. To say I am a Peeping Tom. To say I tried to bribe you, first with a Hershey bar and then with vodka Makhsoos. You will report all of this unless I give you a job. That, corporal, is blackmail." He did not answer. "But I will forgive you Smiley, for my mother was Scottish, and I am also a man of compassion. The job is yours." Proud of myself, I waited for his words of gratitude.

"I think the kettle is boiling, sir," he said.

On the day Prime Minister Mossadeq promised the

Iranian people that the dirty British would be thrown out in a matter of weeks, the meticulous corporal James Smiley came to work for me. From the first he ran my house like an Army Camp. From reveille at six till the last post at nine he toiled with a fervour that bordered on the fanatical - sweeping, brushing, dusting, washing, scrubbing, and polishing. He seemed constitutionally incapable of doing nothing.

The transmutation of my bungalow was immediate. Floors flashed with polish; walls, lamps and pictures surfaced from a sea of cobwebs; carpets were beaten mercilessly to reveal secrets hidden for years; books were lined up for inspection, resplendent in dusted jackets; the stove shone like the barrel of a new rifle; cutlery and pans were scoured of long forgotten meals, and copper pots now hung in the kitchen, glistening like bronze medallions; shirts and suits paraded shoulder-to-shoulder in closets, shoes heel-to-heel below them with faces sparkling and laces trimmed to equal lengths; my bed was tucked with eight inches - not nine, not seven, but with eight inches of the top sheet showing.

The mere suggestion of a sandstorm would send James Smiley leaping for his duster, and he seemed to know intuitively when a fly had walked the polish off his furniture. An untidy visitor would have him fussing and clucking like an old hen. By the end of his first week I had come to believe in one unique physiological fact - Smiley had been born with a brush in each hand.

When his day's work was done, he would stand in the

middle of our sitting room - it quickly became "our bungalow" and "our sitting room", although he never sat in it - he would stand there, his passion satisfied for the time being, hands on hips, smiling contentedly like a Roman lion replete with Christians! He would then say goodnight, sir, and disappear into his room.

Somewhere, Smiley found the time to cook. "Good wholesome food, sir," is how he described it. His meals were good and wholesome, and he had a wonderful way with spaghetti.

"Rations are low, sir," he said in his second week, and away he went to the local bazaar which was now out of bounds to the British. He came back some hours later in a truck.

"Buy in bulk, sir, and you get the usual quartermaster's discount." And he unloaded sacks of potatoes and other "hard rations" in quantities that would see us through a siege.

Smiley had a dread of insects. The air in our sitting room glistened in the sunlight with the mist of Imshi. "Make them swim in Imshi, sir," he would say, "and they'll get so weak they canna' bite you." He would pump gallons of the insect repellent at one mosquito visible only to his eye.

In all this time he seldom spoke of anything but domestic matters, and never offered any comment on the events around us - the riots, the bannered parades, the chanting crowds, the roll of army tanks, the occasional rifle shot, the wail of the refinery siren after another

bomb threat - these were all part of an ugly world in which Smiley had no interest. He never opened himself to any display of feeling, nor did he offer any word on his personal life. On one arm he had the tattoo of a girl's head and shoulders and the name "Annie," and below it were the words "Jesus Loves Me," which looked somehow bluer, brighter, although they had been added much later, like the price tag on a second-hand book.

I asked him about Annie. He stood away, looked through me. Would I like more tea? Annie, it seemed, was just a comet in his life.

"Smiley," I told Judy, "has saved my life. He could not have deserted at a better time. What do you think of my bungalow?"

She had come over for a drink at sundown, as she often did these days when Benson was away in Fields, and she now lay stretched out on my rejuvenated sofa, displaying her long, tanned, and disconcerting legs. She had a mole on the inside of her left thigh, I observed, and wondered why I had never noticed the mole when on the tennis courts. Her eyes were shut against the flow of warm dry air being pumped gently round the room by the ceiling fan, but when she spoke her lips were moist. "Did I tell you Arthur phoned again? He'll be away for another week. Are you going to the party at the Yacht Club on Friday?"

"What? Oh, yes, I suppose so. I haven't given it much

thought." Which was true. That summer, the summer of '51, life was one long string of farewell parties, of drinking with friends from many countries who had come to this small, green, hot oasis to run the largest, richest oilfield in the world. We never said goodbye; all of us feeling, I suppose, that goodbye was too final; all of us hoping, I suppose, in spite of threats and deportations, that something, somehow, would happen before the last of us had to shoot the last pet dog, drown the last cat, pay off the last of the loyal servants and lock the last door. But the farewell parties were becoming shorter and sadder. I did not want to talk about parties. "Do you know where Smiley is now? At church! Would you believe it, Judy, the man goes to church regularly, every Sunday." I started to tell her Smiley's story, how he never missed church on Sundays, not since that night his grandfather MacLeod had come to him in a vision.

She opened her eyes, sat up, covering the mole, and held out her glass for another drink. "Arthur really doesn't enjoy dancing, you know, but he goes to these parties for my sake. Are you going to the Yacht Club with the Parkers?"

"The Parkers? Namifahmam memsahib," I said to her in Farsi. "Did I tell you that Smiley and I speak to each other only in Farsi? He speaks it like a native. We do that to protect him - which reminds me, Judy, not a word about him to anyone. I wouldn't want the poor fellow to be arrested and put against the wall. Besides, he's such a good cook. Same again?"

"Thanks. Cheers." She took a long drink. "Ah, that's

nice, I needed that. Do you find yourself drinking more these days? You know, since the troubles began?" She put her glass on the table, crossed her arms over her breasts, putting her hands on her shoulders as though embracing herself. "When Arthur is away our bungalow is so empty I'm frightened."

"Are you cold? Let me turn the fan down. Did I tell you that Smiley played the bagpipes?" Smiley had collected his few possessions from somewhere in the bazaar, two faded green duffel bags and a black case with polished metal hinges which held, he said, his bagpipes.

"Cold? Good Lord, no! Listen. What's that?"

Faintly, from the bazaar, came the melancholy cry of the muezzin, calling the Moslems to prayer.

"Only the mullah saying the sun is now down. You having one for the road? Better still, why not stay for dinner?" I could see she was in no mood to hear about Smiley. "Yes, why not stay and have something with me. Smiley will soon be back from church, and he makes the most wonderful curry. Last night we...."

She held up her hand, got to her feet, and dismissed Smiley with a smile. "You mix us another drink and I'll see what this new fellow of yours - what's his name? - has in his kitchen. I can cook, you know. Since you're taking me to the party at the Yacht Club, it's the least I can do, don't you think?"

Judy and I went to the Yacht Club dance, that week, but

the Iranian police, vindictively, arrested the waiters for breaking some obscure local law, and the party broke up shortly after ten o'clock. Having seen her home, I went back to my bungalow and straight to bed. It was a bright, moonlit, August night, and I opened my bedroom window, leaving it covered with only the mesh of the mosquito netting. The sound of the grasshoppers and the gentle hum of the nearby bazaar soon lulled me into a peaceful sleep.

I'm not sure how long I had been asleep, or for how long I had been conscious of the music before it fully awakened me. I awoke with a start, my face wet with tears, my skin tight and cold, the sheet of my bed feeling like chilled sandpaper. As I lay in bed listening to the music, I was engulfed by a fierce melancholy. The music came from the depths of some poor and tortured soul; it clawed at the heart, tore at the emotions. It brought back memories of a childhood holiday spent with my mother on the Scottish Island of Skye, where I had stood on a cold wet hill to witness the burial of the infant son of a Gaelic Chieftain.

I got up, went to Smiley's room, and knocked. He did not answer. I opened the door. The lights were off but the room was bathed in moonlight from the curtainless window. Smiley was sitting on a stiff, upright, cane chair in the middle of the room, playing his bagpipes. He appeared to be naked except for a dark kilt, and he held the bag of the pipes under his left arm, his fingers moving slowly over the holes in the chanter. His eyes were closed and I could see the glint of tears pouring over his puffed cheeks. I stood there for five

minutes, unable to tear myself away from the music, but Smiley did not once turn his head or open his eyes. He was playing the dirge softly, and each note came out of the chanter filled with the grief of a thousand widows. The attraction of the music was fierce, and when I shut Smiley's door I had to fight my way stubbornly along the corridor and into the sitting room, shutting each door behind me. The force of the music lessened. I poured myself a drink and willed myself into an armchair.

Then, of a sudden, the music stopped, and its spell was broken. The silence was like a snap of fingers under the nose. I shivered, put down the drink, went back to bed and fell asleep, exhausted.

"Smiley, what was that tune you were playing?" I asked, as he served breakfast.

"Which one, sir?"

"The tune you played last night - about midnight - a dirge of some sort."

He cupped his chin in his hand and looked for inspiration at his sandals. "Ah, yes, that would be my grandfather's tune. The one he taught me as a child. It's called 'Lament for Bridget MacLeod.'" He spoke the name in English. "Bridget MacLeod was my grandmother," he explained.

"Why the lament?"

"She was carried off, sir, shortly after giving birth to my mother."

"Carried off? By the English?"

"By her Maker, sir."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry. It's a very beautiful tune, but very sad."

"Thank you, sir."

At work that day my thoughts were constantly on Smiley's music. Had I been drinking too much? Was I becoming emotionally unstable, like the others? These were trying times, with old friends leaving, giving up a way of life, and the stresses showed in different ways. People who had never been introduced would speak to each other in the company liquor store, exchange rumours at cocktail parties, phone up neighbours and invite them over for a drink. And Judy had a strange longing in her eyes, these days; her voice was lower, huskier, she clung to my arm, gave me goodnight kisses with a warmth I found disturbing. Twice, when Benson was away, she phoned me late at night. "You lonely? I'm lonely, can I see you?" And I said: "The curfew, remember the curfew." Yes, these were disturbed times. Smiley's music, I told myself, was all part of this impermanent, hallucinatory world.

By the middle of September the tanks were rumbling hourly in the streets, filling the air with a fine dry dust; effigies, some with daggers in their breasts, others with ropes around their necks, all labelled "British pig," or worse, hung from trees around the bungalow area; shouting youths threw stones from trucks; busloads of women screamed obscenities from

behind their black chadurs; other voices, on the radio, became daily more hysterical.

One day, Benson came back from Ahwaz with the news that he'd been accused of spying, and had been given one week to leave the country. When Judy came to tell me, she cried at first, then laughed; for Benson, with his frayed moustache and watery eyes, didn't look one bit like a spy. He was fifteen years older and she was more of an age with me. "I want to leave - but I don't want to leave."

I nodded, understanding what she meant, but unable to put into words my own sudden feeling of desolation.

"On Saturday night I'm throwing a farewell party for the Bensons," I told Smiley.

At first his eyes lit up (he had never forgiven Judy for making dinner in his kitchen, and after her visits he would pointedly lift the long, blonde strands of hair, one by one, from the covers of the sofa), but then he put on his worried look, and his eyes flitted round our sitting room, wiping one speck of dust off the radio, straightening a chair cushion, washing the curtains, rearranging the furniture.

"No, no, Smiley, this will not be a dinner party. It will be quite informal. Just a few people for drinks and dancing."

"No food, sir?"

"No food. Except for the usual tidbits. But we require a well-stacked bar, two crates of oranges, eight bottles of cherries, ten pounds of mixed nuts, and plenty of ice. And clean out the verandah - we will be dancing on the verandah."

Smiley said nothing, but his eyes told me that the Governor of Hong Kong never gave parties where there was no food, only drinking, and dancing on the verandah.

On the night, and by eleven o'clock, the party was showing little sign of success, with Winkley drunk and asleep on the sofa, Helen Winkley attached to Smithers (who was twenty years younger and who had been seen to jitterbug), Fred and Janet Grayson predictably talking too much but not to each other, Brenda Forsyth tipsy and argumentative - Ken was up in Fields and she had brought Arthur Jimpsey who talked about golf - the Stingleys, Cynthia and George, who seemed to have little heart for their usual capers of throwing oranges at ceiling fans, dropping cherries down low-cut dresses. The hospital Matron had recently been deported for refusing to give an Iranian army captain a private room, and her replacement ("Please call me Miss Fortescue - Matron is too formal") a woman immense in hips and bust, discussed appendectomies in a corner with Al Bates who had a hearing aid and a mechanical nod. The Bensons arrived late and not talking ("What do you think?" Judy asked. "Is my dress indecent?") Benson stayed close to the bar, Judy tried to laugh but I caught her crying quietly in a bedroom. The others were acquaintances who had dropped in, hoping for a smile, but who now stood in small sad clusters, exchanging nods and the latest rumours.

"Jolly good party." Smither's hair dripped with fresh

orange.

"Watch those bloody nuts," said Grayson, treading them into the carpet - Smiley's carpet.

"Yes, jolly good party," said Smithers, and I had hopes we would see him jitterbug. But no. Everyone, it seemed, had forgotten how to dance.

Something had gone wrong with parties, Judy said. There was something grim and grey about parties, these days, no life, no colour. Had I noticed that? Yes, I had noticed that. Why, she asked, didn't she enjoy parties any more? Was it because she was getting old? Did I think she looked any older? She was much younger than Arthur, did I know that? Yes, I knew that, and no, I thought she looked as young as ever. And as beautiful. Did I really think she was beautiful? Yes, I thought her the most beautiful woman - girl - most attractive girl.... Why had I never told her that before? Why did I have to wait until her farewell party? Why...? I didn't really know. Well, I suppose the circumstances of the moment, the times in which we lived. Like London (I said) during the war, when a word not spoken at the time might never be spoken; when a deed not done at the time might never be done, might be left undone, forever.... What deed? she wanted to know. Confused, I said I was generalizing, and went to the kitchen to pour myself a vodka Makhsoos.

Smiley was in the kitchen. He had put out the bottles of liquor with an increasing air of fidgetting discomfort, and had gone to his room before my guests arrived. He now stood by the table, making himself a cup of tea, looking at me with

an air of disapproval.

"How is the party, sir?"

"Like the last one held on the Titanic, Smiley. The guests are quietly contemplating Armageddon."

"Perhaps a spot of music, sir," he suggested politely.

The record player, I told him, had been hit by an orange which Stingley had thrown at the ceiling fan. Smiley winced, his face full of condemnation, and having squeezed his tea bag and added milk and sugar he was about to leave the kitchen when he seemed to think the better of it. "If you need my help, sir...?"

"Yes?"

"Perhaps I could play some music, sir."

The thought of Smiley's "Lament for Bridget MacLeod" and what it would do to this party, made me shudder, and I told him so.

"I could play something cheerful, sir."

"Like what?"

"Like 'The Love Song of Bridget MacLeod,' or 'The MacLeod Jig.'"

"You're sure? - these are not? - I don't want them all in tears, Smiley."

"Quite sure, sir."

"Very well. Let's have the jig first. But not too loud. Pianissimo, Smiley, pianissimo; we don't want to attract the army."

"Don't worry, I'll close my door, sir."

Back in the sitting room I found Benson asleep at the

bar, and Judy keen to carry on with the dialectic. Why, she asked, is it so hard to make conversation at parties with people you can normally chat with at ease? A party, I explained, is like play-acting, and when you speak to one person you also speak to an audience. But isn't life out here no more than a play? she wanted to know. "It is a truth universally acknowledged," she said, then hesitated before going on, "that I do, very much, want to dance." The irrelevancy of this last statement must have struck her, for she looked at me quizzically. "Why did I say that?"

Before I could comment, she put her hands up, as though in surrender, jumped two feet in the air, executed an exquisite pas de deux, and came down gently on her toes. This movement took no more than a second, but in that short time my own body became weightless and charged by a current of wild excitement. I remember thinking: We have been struck by lightning, or some secret Iranian weapon! We are experiencing one last, brief, moment of ecstasy before we all shrivel up and die! But no, we were alive. Another second had passed, and we were still alive, Judy and I. And in that same second I became aware of the music in my ears.

The sound of Smiley's bagpipes, playing "The MacLeod Jig," came skirling along the corridor, softly at first, like the first warning swell of the typhoon, testing itself on the shore.

"What's that?" cried Smithers, mouth wide open.

The group huddled in the corner opened up, their bodies stiffened, their heads turning to the door.

"I say!" said Stingley, opening his eyes. Grayson, once slouched beside Benson over the bar, got to his feet and threw down his drink with a gulp.

"Whatho!" cried the Matron, and Winkley, now sober, grabbed hold of Brenda Forsyth who stopped straightening her bra.

Within a minute, the full force of the music burst upon the sitting room, drenching the room in a wild and exotic fervour. The music brought visions of blazing glens, sharp hills of heather, the flash of daggers, the swish of kilts and sporrans, long hairy legs and soft bare bosoms, all veins afire with raw red whisky. With ears twitching, eyes dilated, shoulders straightened and breasts uplifted, the party rose to meet the music. It stirred their bodies like a transfusion of wineblood, turned on the inner fountains of youth.

The scene comes back to me dimly, through a haze; Smithers bounding to the floor, throwing off his jacket, whipping Helen to her feet, spinning her like a top, kicking his heels in the air, she responding, shaking out her hair, clasping her hands behind his neck - Fred and Janet throwing their arms and legs in the abandon of a Highland Fling - Sarah bouncing on the sofa, her vodka slopping over the carpet, Grayson trying to catch her by hooping his arms around her silkclad legs - Brenda leaping round the room, gazelle-like, looking for a partner - the Matron, Miss Fortescue, stooping as though to touch her toes, coming up with a frilly pink garter, placing it round Henry's brow, crying "Hail Caesar," slapping him at the

top of his back as though he had swallowed a plumstone, getting up on her toes and squealing "Ooh" before collapsing into his arms - Cynthia and George in a corner, twirling like majorettes, tossing golf clubs in the air.

Within moments the sitting room and verandah were alive with bodies charged with some wild electricity, dancing and jigging, whirling like dervishes, arms and legs thrashing like some giant, epileptic centipede. I found myself, jacket and tie off, pounding the nuts on the carpet with Judy clutching my neck.

"What's the music?" she shouted.

"A jig, a Scottish jig. Smiley is playing the pipes."

"The what?"

I had forgotten she didn't know about Smiley and his bagpipes.

"My grandfather," I shouted. "He visits me - in a vision, you know - and plays the bagpipes."

"Oh!" she cried, "tell him to keep it up - isn't this fun! - takes me back - schooldays...."

And then, quite suddenly, we stopped dancing as the whole nature of the music changed. The wild and frantic skirl of the pipes now softened to "The Love Song of Bridget MacLeod." A music charged with a fierce, yet gentle, tenderness; now falling to low sweet notes of longing, now rising to some high pitch of passion, it dimmed the lights, warmed the cool breeze from the desert, brought the stars closer.

Such memories as I have are fainter still: Henry, burying himself in the heart of the Matron, thrusting strongly against her breasts she with his face between her hands, sucking greedily at his moist lips - Sarah and George, eyes with a hot, dilated glow - Smithers locked in a restless torment - Bill stroking the smooth brow of a shoulder, slipping a hand behind a warm and pliant waist - Cynthia, eyes shut, sighing at some gentle exploration - Fred with urgent lips on skin I'd never seen before - husky, irresistible voices, words molten in the throat, sighs and heavy breathings, all barely heard above the soft, sweet ambience of the music.

A sensual spasm shot through Judy's body, and a low moan of pleasure came from her lips as she nibbled the lobe of my ear. I put my arm round her generous body and took her with me along the corridor to Smiley's room, her distracting thighs pressed tight against my own. I threw open the door. Smiley was playing the bagpipes, sitting, as before, on the upright cane chair, his eyes closed, his face glowing with beatitude.

"Play on, Smiley, play on," I said in a voice I did not recognize as my own.

With the door open, the music poured out and flooded the house.

Flushed with longing, Judy and I looked at each other. "I want this party to go on for ever," she whispered.

There is little more to be said of these last days in

Abadan, back in '51. Much has been forgotten; what recollections I have are of life becoming even more confused and unsettled. What I do know is that my party - intended as a farewell to the Bensons - was the last party for all of us. For me, it also meant the last of Smiley. Yes, he left before morning. When he didn't waken me for breakfast I went to his room, to find it empty. He had gone, and everything with him. At first, I was angry. It was his fault, after all. He had played the music. So why the righteousness? Damn Smiley and his Scottish puritanism! But where had he gone? For days I questioned houseboys, servants, cooks and soldiers, all around the Bungalow Area, but no-one, it seemed, had ever seen Smiley or had heard of him. They looked at me strangely, shaking their heads, exchanging glances, thinking no doubt that the heat or liquor had turned my mind.

Then, early in October, the Iranian government formally took over the oilfields and the refinery; the few of us left were shipped down the Persian Gulf, on a British cruiser, H.M.S. Mauritius. At the time we did not know that history was being made. We grieved for a much more personal loss - for fond friendships which, quite suddenly, had come to an end.

Years later, I ran into Benson in a London club. "How is Judy?" he asked, and even after all this time, with memories darkened, I still felt guilty. All I could say was: "She's fine, just fine."

"And the children?" he wanted to know, although he had never seen our children.

I told him the children were fine, too. We stood there, silent, each hoping the other would not suggest a drink - or worse still, a meal - which the other knew he would have to refuse but wouldn't know how to.

And then, as he was about to shuffle off, Benson said: "I say, did you ever find the fellow who played the bagpipes that night?"

For a long moment I stood looking at Benson, taking in his words, then I shook my head and told him No, I never found Smiley. On saying which I broke into a broad smile and patted him heartily on the back, an act which seemed to embarrass him further. I left the club, feeling a strange elation, a sudden warmth returning, and it came to me that for a long time I had doubted the very existence of Smiley, had come to suspect that he had been some figment of the imagination, or, like so many other things in life, some long-lost dream of youth.

A FAINT SMELL OF GAS

SALES JOURNAL FOR THE MONTH

| Date | Year | NUMERO DE COMPTE ACCOUNT NUMBER | DATE FACTURE BILL DATE |
|------|------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 10/1 | 1987 | 2256 240 0030 | 12 08 87 |
| 1/1 | | | |
| 1/1 | | | |

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|-----------------------|---------|-------|
| URGENCE/SA SERV | | |
| FACTURATI DEBITAGE | | |
| C H2K 2X3 | | |
| CONSUMPTION | 139 | 8 |
| CONSUMPTION | 1000.00 | 139 |
| TAXE - TAX | | |
| MONTANT - AMOUNT | | 5.0 |
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LE PLAN PAR
VERSEMENTS
MENSUELS
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EQUAL
MONTHLY
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PLAN IS
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TO EQUALIZE
YOUR ANNUAL
HEATING COST

139 CPC/C

145

2K2 REVERSE

7012
DATE READ
13NOV80
RATE
1A

224 INTER
RENT + EOL-BILL
DESCRIPTION
0.21TAK

READING
METER EXCHANGE
METER NUMBER
DAY MONTH

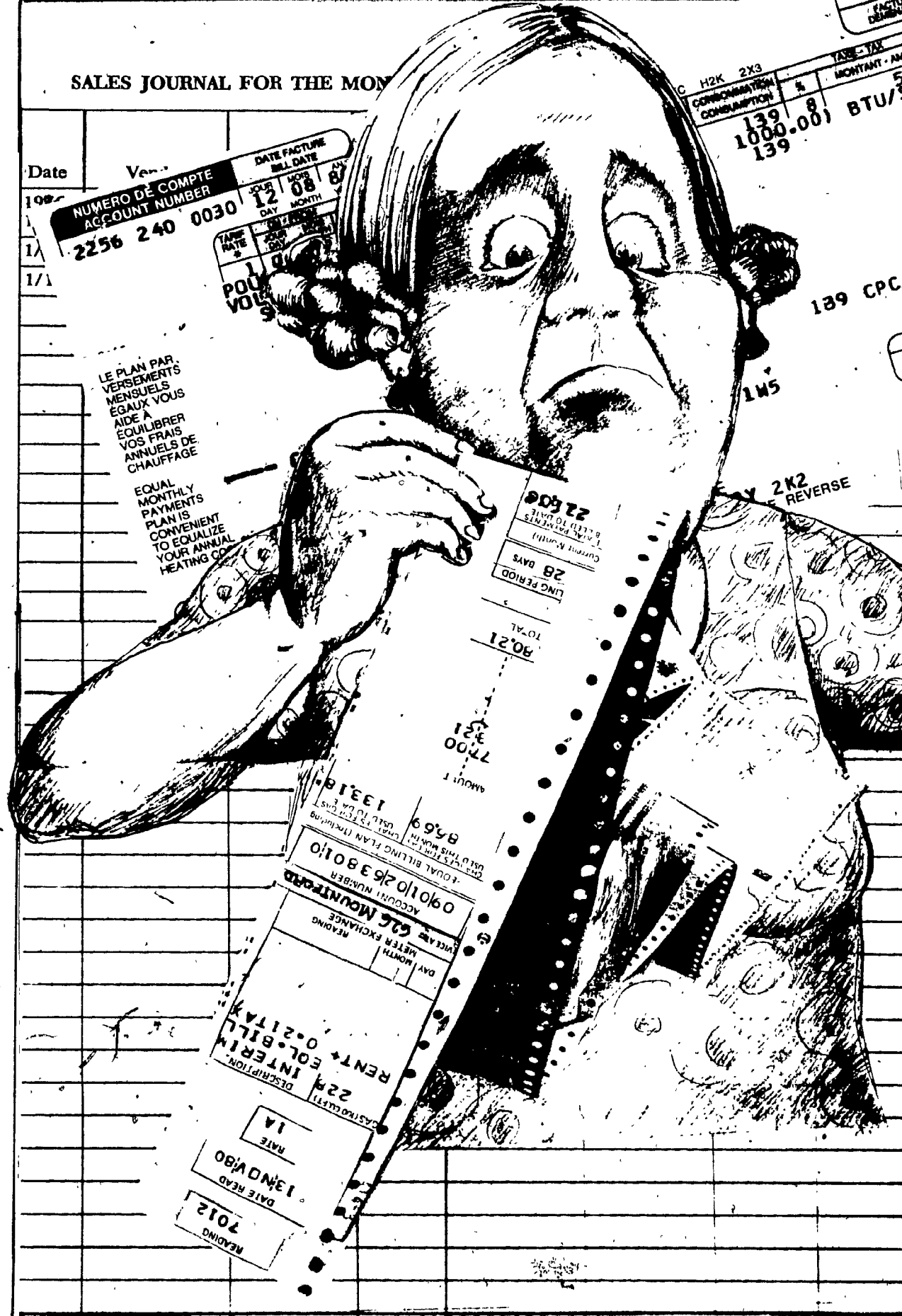
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ACCOUNT NUMBER
090102638010

8.96
AMOUNT
7700
321

90.21
TOTAL

LING PERIOD
28 DAYS

22560
TOTAL PAYMENTS
PAID TO DATE
Current Month



A FAINT SMELL OF GAS

"Come in, Bennington, nice to see you, please take a seat," said Mr. Percy, Manager of the Gas Company, a blue-suited, smooth-haired man with a round polished face. "And how is the legal profession? I was thinking of you only last week - was down in Florida, fishing and golfing - nice to get away from the Montreal snow - was thinking about you - let's see now, what was it? Ah, yes! Do you collect flies? Or is that George Widdrington?"

"My partner," said Mr. Bennington, the lawyer, and sat down.

"Of course, of course. Getting mixed up with my Ingtons, am I?" And Mr. Percy laughed to show off his new gold teeth. "Now," he said, pulling down his cuffs and moving his gas-operated clock and the silver dish with its six sharp pencils to get a better view of his visitor. "Now, Bennington, you said you wanted to see me about some overdue account?"

"The late Mrs. Da Silva," said the lawyer.

"Ah, yes." Getting up from his chair the manager went to a wallmap spotted with small steel pins with purple heads.

"Da Silva, of 626 Mountford." He plucked out a pin with his manicured nails and came back to the file on his desk.

"Account 626 Mountford," he repeated and leaned forward to

show his visitor his tan. "I have a surprise for you, Widdrington, a very pleasant surprise. Have a cigar? No? Don't mind if I? Right. Yes, about 626 Mountford. We owe it - that's right, old boy - the Gas Company owes 626 Mountford about - let me see now, I have it right here - yes, account 626 Mountford is blacklined to the amount of 228 dollars and 38 cents."

"Blacklined?" said Mr. Bennington, raising his eyebrows.

"You know. Is non-negative, has a positive plus, is in the black, has 228 dollars and 38 cents to its credit. When our computer makes out the customer's bill it puts a black line under any amount owing to the customer. It also prints out CR for credit."

"How did that come about?" said Mr. Bennington,

Mr. Percy looked at him in some astonishment. "It's been that way for years. Computers, you know. Not like when we were young, no more ledgers and scribbling clerks with leaking pens. We must not try to stay the onward sweep of science, Widdrington, even if we could" - he held up his hand as though stopping the traffic - "and I doubt we could halt it for an hour, not for a minute" - his eyes turned to the gas-operated clock and away again. "Yes, all gone, the ten men and twenty girls we used to have working on monthly accounts. Since our DODO-600x has been in charge, it's done away with all of that. Progress, Widdrington, progress."

"No, no," said the lawyer, "you misunderstand me. I mean how is it that you owe Mrs. Da Silva - or rather the estate of Mrs. Da Silva - as much as 228 dollars and 38 cents?"

Isn't it rather unusual for the Gas Company to owe money to its customers?"

Mr. Percy moved uneasily to the other side of his seat, slid his gas-operated clock back to the centre of his desk, and put a finger to his sunburned nose where the skin was peeling. "Ah, yes, I thought you'd ask that, and I had our Accounts Department give me a special print-out. Unusual case, 626 Mountford. We don't often get a credit we can't deblack in a month. Depositive, wipe out, reduce to zero," he added, seeing the question on the lawyer's face.

"Is that so."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Percy, juggling the papers on his desk. "Back in April, we sent 626 Mountford a bill for 18 dollars. To be exact, 18 dollars and 24 cents. The customer paid the bill twice. Often happens, you know. Either paid the same bill twice or we sent out two bills. No matter," said Mr. Percy, with a wave of the hand, "at the end of April 626 Mountford was blacklined to the amount of 18 dollars and 24 cents."

"You mean you owed her?"

"That's right, 18 dollars and 24 cents."

"Mm," said the lawyer thoughtfully. "I've known Mrs. Da Silva since her husband died. She had to look after every cent. Not like her to pay a bill twice."

But Mr. Percy has pressed a small red button at the side of his desk and a girl appeared at the door. "How do you like your coffee?" he asked the other man. "Black? No sugar? Make it two, if you please," he said, and turned back

to his visitor. "Now where was I? Ah, yes, in April. At the end of April 626 Mountford was blacklined 18 dollars."

"And 24 cents."

"Exactly."

"What happened next?"

"Well, May was very mild - we were golfing in the first week of the month, remember? - and 626 Mountford used only 7 dollars and 10 cents worth of gas. That left a balance, owing to the customer, of 11 dollars and 14 cents. And that would show on the bill, of course, as a credit. But would you believe it, Widdrington, 626 Mountford sent back the bill with a cheque for that amount. So we now owed it 22 dollars and 28 cents."

"You mean Mrs. Da Silva sent you a cheque for the 11 dollars and 14 cents that you owed her?"

"Exactly. So we sent out a chaser."

"A chaser?"

"A mid-month bill. Our computer prints out a special mid-month bill when a customer is more than two months in arrears."

"But Mrs. Da Silva wasn't in arrears!"

"Aha!" cried Mr. Percy, "our computer knew that, and the figure on the bill was shown as a credit."

"Blacklined?" asked Mr. Bennington.

"Exactly," said Mr. Percy. "Blacklined with the letters CR for credit. But that's not all. It also prints out the letter J, and if the customer refers to footnote J on the bill the customer will see that the Gas Company will either

carry the amount forward or will credit the amount to the cost of a new gas appliance." He put his hand affectionately on the handle of his gas-operated pencil-sharpener.

"I've read the footnote," said the lawyer. "I've read it several times and I think I understand."

"Good," said Mr. Percy. "Ah, here comes the cup that refreshes."

While drinking his coffee Mr. Bennington spoke across the desk to the red veins on Mr. Percy's nose, where the skin had peeled. "So Mrs. Da Silva got a mid-month bill telling her the Gas Company owed her 22 dollars and 28 cents?"

"That's right," said Mr. Percy, moving his cigar-lighter so that it sat beside his clock. "And do you know what?"

"She sent you a cheque for that amount?"

"Ah!" cried the manager, "you know about that. Correct. She sent us a cheque for 22 dollars and 28 cents."

"So you now owed her 44 dollars and 56 cents?"

"No, Only 41 dollars and 56 cents. We have a minimum charge of 3 dollars a month. It seems the customer wasn't using much gas." He shook his head sadly.

"So you sent her a bill showing you owed her 41 dollars and 56 cents. And she paid that too?"

Mr. Percy nodded wisely. "You meet the most peculiar people in this business, Widdrington. You just would not believe it."

"Mrs. Da Silva was an old woman. She knew a lot about cats but not much about credits and computers."

"So I see, so I see," said the other man, trying to look

at the tip of his nose.

"Please go on."

"In November, when we owed the customer 63 dollars, Mr. Kernitz from O.A.B. went to the house."

"O.A.B.?"

"Overdue Accounts Branch," said the manager, knocking the ash from his cigar.

"But Mrs. Da Silva wasn't an overdue account. She had settled her account several times over."

Mr. Percy smiled patiently. "We don't have a Branch to deal with overpaid accounts, Widdrington. That'll be the day," he said with a laugh, "that'll be the day when we need a Branch for overpaid accounts." He laughed again and made a note in his diary with one of his six sharp pencils.

"What happened when your Mr. Kernitz spoke to Mrs. Da Silva?"

"That's the problem, she wouldn't speak to him. She kept her door on the chain and told him to go away."

"It's hard to understand accounts through a crack in the door," observed Mr. Bennington.

"But she wouldn't let him in," said Mr. Percy, bitterly.

"She was an old lady, and she lived by herself."

"Mr. Kernitz is a fine young man," said Mr. Percy, brushing cigar ash from his waistcoat.

"I'm sure he is," said the lawyer. "How about the man who goes to read the meter?"

"The customer wouldn't let him in after October. We've had to estimate consumption."

"Don't you think, perhaps, she might have been afraid?"

"What? Afraid of our men? No, no, no, no, no. We choose them specially, Widdrington, well dressed and respectable." And he smoothed his hair with his hand.

The lawyer shook his head to signify that the other man had misunderstood his question, opened his mouth to speak, hesitated and said: "Please go on."

"In December, when we owed her well over 100 dollars, we sent her a letter."

"Would that also come from your Overdue Accounts Branch?"

"Let me see - I have it here - yes, our O.A.B. wrote to 626 Mountford referring to footnote J and enclosing our catalogue of new appliances. The letter wasn't answered, so a few weeks ago we wrote again. This letter was returned - unopened, I see."

"Yes," said Mr. Bennington, "I can understand that."

"So, there we are," said Mr. Percy, spearing his cigar in the ashtray.

"Yes, there we are," said Mr. Bennington and stood up to go.

"Don't mention it," said Mr. Percy, "we like to be helpful."

"And you'll send me a cheque for the estate of Mrs. Da Silva," said the lawyer, "for 228 dollars and 38 cents?" Then, correcting himself: "Less, of course, any gas consumed in February."

"What? A cheque? Oh! No, no, can't do that, old boy. No, can't send a cheque. DODO-600x hasn't been programmed to

send out cheques. Not yet."

"I see. Then what do you suggest?"

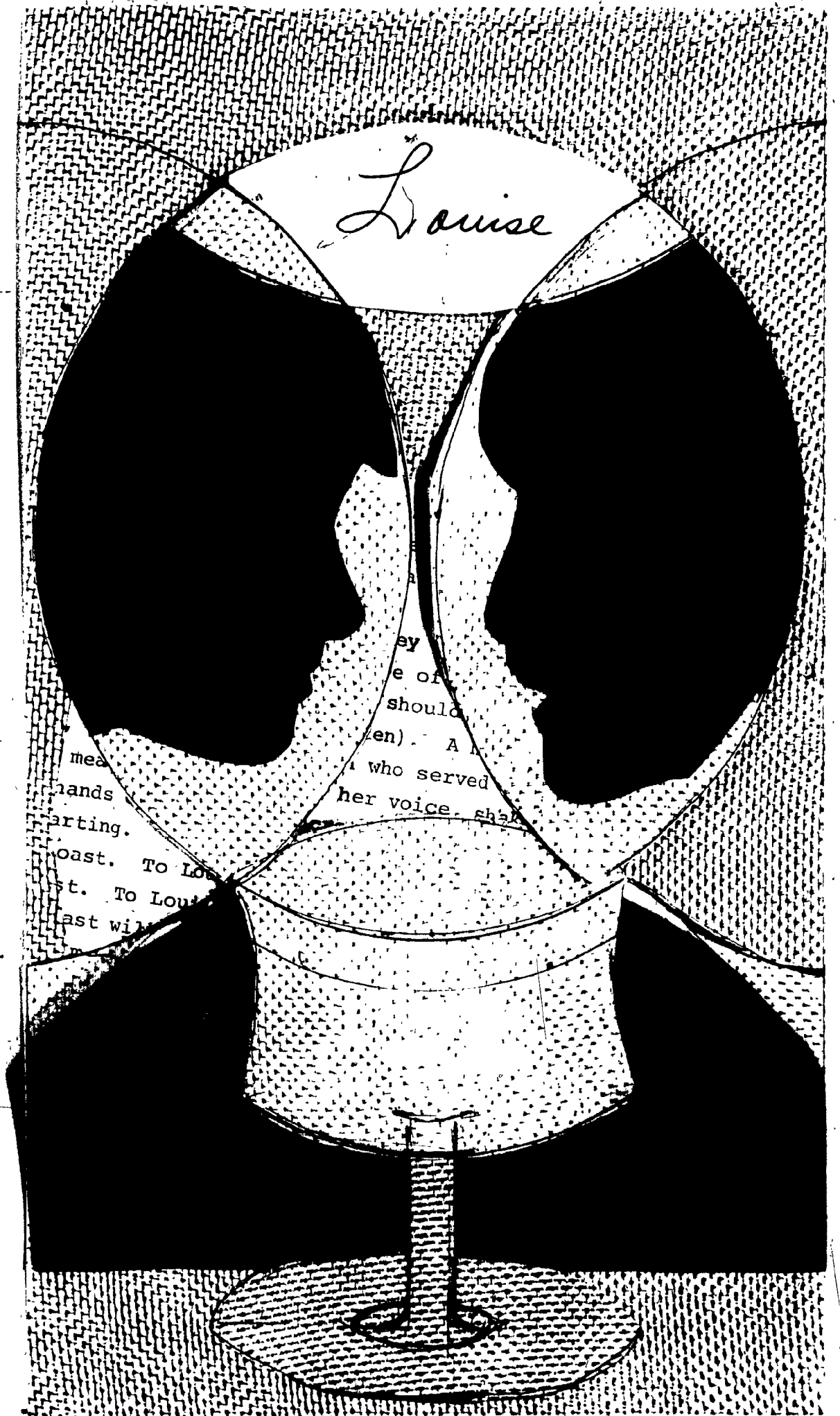
"Anything you say. A floor polisher, perhaps? Or our new gas stereo? Or an executive oven? For her heirs, of course."

Mr. Bennington looked at Mr. Percy's round, polished face. "No, not an oven," he said, "certainly not an oven." "Perhaps you could make out a cheque in the old-fashioned way?" he suggested.

Shaking his head sadly, the other man said: "I suppose so. I'll see what we can do about that."

When the lawyer had left, Mr. Percy threw the file into his out-tray and smeared more cream on the tip of his red, peeling nose.

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LOUISE

...and always, when I think of Louise, I see her as a girl in Bruges.

"Steward, do we fly over Bruges on the way to Montreal?"

"No, madame, Bruges is to the north. From Paris we fly west to the Atlantic."

I know that, of course. So, why do I ask? He'll think I'm a stupid old maid, weak on geography. I want to speak the name Bruges, I suppose. Or hear him speak it. Like when I asked him for champagne, for Moët et Chandon. Like when I told the man in the next seat - (look at his black moustache, grey at the roots, ginger at the tips. Does he really tint his moustache? If a character in one of my novels was described as having such a moustache, the critics would question the credibility) - like when I told the man in the next seat I had not been to Montreal in years, and was looking forward to seeing an old friend, hoping he would ask about this old friend. Old friend? Oh God! Louise, is that how I must describe you, as just an old friend?

"You'll see a big change," the man says, and I shake my head, No, we won't have changed. At least, not inside, not where it matters. Then I realize the man means the city has changed, the buildings, for he is talking of highrise office

blocks on Sherbrooke Street and Côte St. Catherine.

"On vacation?" he asks. "No, to attend a convention of Canadian writers." His eyes betray his feelings, a new respect, a new awareness: be on guard, she's a writer, be careful what you say. The fool. So why do I speak to him? Hoping he'll ask about my friend, so I can speak your name. "Her name is Louise," I would say, and speak the name again. "Louise, Louise." But he goes back to reading his financial paper, and I sip my Moët et Chandon and shut my eyes.

Louise, Louise. This sudden urge to speak your name. I have not spoken your name aloud since I spoke to you, nor told anyone of our love, afraid it would be judged by the hypocritical moral standards of our time. But you have always been there, my dear, in my heart. And in my books, thinly disguised as Diane or Miriam or Sarah. As I wrote about them, you were there, reminding me of all we shared: the weekend in Breskens, the country lanes of Bruges, the summerhouse, our poetry, the half-bottle of Moët et Chandon in Ostend on our last day together. (Strange I should remember that, when the wine with last night's dinner is forgotten). The woman who served us said something in Flemish and gave you a flower, sadness in her voice, looking at our hands clasped across the table, knowing, I suppose, that we were parting.

Oh Louise! Even now when I close my eyes I see you, young as you were that summer, and inwardly I smile as all manner of half-forgotten memories come back to me. Memories, sweet Louise, as fresh as though I had met you for the first

time, yesterday....

Why was that summer in Bruges longer than any other summer since the war? Of course, I was only nineteen, and perhaps the cold of winter does not linger in the bones of youth. No, no, it was more than that, for I remember, late April, the lunchtime customers of the Café Romany sitting outside in the shade watching the horses; horses with thick, black leather harnesses, shining and sprigged with flowers, horses pulling early summer visitors, and clip-clopping down the Kaiserlai. When did you last see a tree in the Kaiserlai give so much shade, so early in the year?

My photograph of Louise was stolen early in the war, with her letters and the poems she wrote for me, but I have her image clearly in my mind - the high cheek bones, the sweep of her hair, the arch of her throat. Strangely, I can see her clearer now than I could some years ago. One day, by the Seine, a girl walked past and I said, "That's my Louise, that's the Louise I remember." Yet not one month later another girl, shorter, slimmer, stood against the sun, and her profile was so much like Louise that I had to stop, frozen, my heart jumping.

When I first saw Louise she was sitting inside the Romany at the back, and I was serving tables at the front. Late in the evening the accordians stopped, and above the chatter of the customers I heard a voice speak in Quebec French. The ceiling light shone on the head and shoulders of a girl seated in a party of six, wearing a multi-colored cotton blouse with

the collar turned up at the back. The large points of the collar came out from her neck, and were golden and streaked with red and beige and black. As though sensing my eyes on her, she looked over to the bar and smiled, and I had the vision of a butterfly spreading its wings.

I went to her table. "You are from Quebec?"

"Yes, from Montreal, and you?"

"Yes, Montreal."

To my embarrassment she let out a cry and stood up, and I'm sure she would have hugged me had the table not been in the way. I must sit down, she said, and tell her where in Montreal, and what I was doing here, and for how long.

Her name was Louise. Yes, she understood I had work to do and could not stay more than a few minutes, but we must talk later. No, not tonight, tonight she had to leave early. Tomorrow night? Yes, I would be working here tomorrow night, and every night this week. We didn't talk for long that evening, but until she left, whenever I came to the bar for drinks, she would raise a hand and smile.

I remember going back to my lodgings the first night I met Louise, and lying in the dark, thinking of her. It was nice to meet someone from home; it was disturbing to meet someone who had become so quickly - what was the word I used that night - intimate - was that it? During the few minutes we had together, she had found some way to strip me of all the innate defences I always raised to strangers.

Next night the same party came to the Romany without her, and my disappointment was strangely bitter. But shortly be-

fore we closed, a hand touched my arm. "I promised," she said, and her voice had an unexpected fondness.

When the main bar closed we sat alone and talked. She was a few months younger than me, and was living as an au pair with a Belgian family before going back to the University of Montreal in September.

"To specialize in European literature?"

"Yes, I hope to teach, but not in a college, in a school. I love young children. Have you ever seen a child afraid to take your hand? They are so innocent, they open their heart to you." As she said this she looked away from me, as though my heart, unlike that of a child, could never be open to her, and I had a momentary feeling of jealousy for all those unborn children waiting to be loved by her. But then her eyes turned back to mine. "You let me talk and talk," she said, "of nothing but myself. Tell me about you. I want to know everything about you. From the beginning. Start when you were a child." And she smiled, and all the other children I'd been so jealous of, were lost.

My parents were dead; I had only one close relative, an aunt; I had come to Europe to help me be a writer. "I am going to be a writer," I told her. How did I know? I just knew. No, I hadn't written much, a few poems, introspective essays on life, short stories. No, nothing published, I'm not good enough for that. "Not yet," she said, "but you will be. I see it in you. A fierce determination burns behind those eyes." (I turned my eyes to the cold marble table). "There is a -" and she hesitated, discarded what she was about to say,

and sat silent, till I lifted my head to look at her. "You are blushing," she said, and put out her hand as if to touch me, but let it rest on the table by my fingers. We sat without a word, looking at each other, till Madame Lafarge, the owner, rang the bell for closing.

For the rest of that week, whenever I was free, I would sit with Louise and listen to her talk on all manner of things, sometimes questioning, drawing me out, making me open my mind to her. She would speak and look at me to see what her words had done, and from time to time her hands would reach out, confidentially, yet stop just short of touching me, and she would smile, and a soft noise of pleasure would come from her throat, and the full force of her would come to me with all the warmth of a summer breeze. Although time has dulled the edges of my memory, the happiness of those first few days with Louise has often come back to me, so clearly as to be a kind of torment.

"Would you like to come dancing with me tomorrow?" I asked, at the end of that week. "Tomorrow is Sunday, I have tonight and tomorrow off, and on Sundays there is dancing in the square St. Nicholas." I saw her hesitate. "There will be others - my friends - you'll like them - they're not quiet, like me - a few nurses, some boys from the university. I didn't mean dance with me." I laughed, trying to make light of it, fearing she would say No, and not wanting her to see how much her No would hurt me.

For a moment she said nothing, but waited till my laughter had gone, leaving quiet and tense the air between us; then she nodded and said softly, "I'd like to dance with you."

She spoke the words with great deliberateness, as though we had been discussing a matter of some importance, and there was something about the way she framed the words with her lips, in the way she looked at me, so earnest, unblinking, that made me catch my breath and have a sudden feeling of confusion, when I expected pleasure. On looking back, I see quite clearly now that Louise had recognized, long before me, the strength of feeling between us. Now, when I recall her words, I smile at the joy of their remembrance, but at the time... Oh God, yes, she must have known before that night, she must surely have known about us before she spoke those words to me. Yet I never asked her, when did she know. Why did I not ask? I suppose because the words she spoke were overtaken by events, and one does not question little things, the nuances, till much later, when it is too late. But I shall ask her, I shall ask her....

That night, the Saturday night, her friends were celebrating a birthday in the Romany.

"If you have tonight off why not join our party?" she said.

"I suppose I could - would they mind?"

"You are my friend, aren't you?" she said, as a statement, not a question. "What's more, after the party you will visit my country estate and stay the night. The family I work for have given me their summerhouse, and it has rooms to spare."

Come visit her estate! She spoke flippantly, but the invitation, I knew, was real, and all I could say was: "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, I'm very, very sure," she said, and before I could question her again, she was waving hello to a friend.

I had no chance to speak to Louise alone for what was left of that evening, but her laughter rang above the chatter of the crowd, and now and then we would look at each other, and lift our glasses in salute.

Around one in the morning, and just before the Romany closed, she came to me. "I think we'd better go. Today is Sunday, and I have to be up by the time the family gets back from Chapel."

We said goodnight to her friends and caught an all-night streetcar to Brackatt, the suburb where she lived.

The lodge, or summerhouse, stood well back from the main house, was single-storied with two bedrooms, a sittingroom, a bathroom and kitchen. Although Louise had talked of a spare room, we both accepted that I should sleep in the other bed in her room. She did not switch on the light ("I don't want them to know what time I come home") but she pulled aside the heavy European drapes, and we undressed by moonlight.

"You don't get enough sun," she said, when I removed my bra and my body stood out as white as my breasts. Her own skin was bronzed and dark in the moonlight.

"I'll make up for it this summer," I said.

We said goodnight and I turned, faced the wall, and shut my eyes. Sleep did not come easily - the wine was in my blood, and I could hear Louise breathing - and when it did come, it brought strange and erotic dreams.

These were broken by Louise sitting on my bed, gripping

my shoulder through the sheet.

"You've been having a nightmare, and crying out in your sleep."

I shuddered.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing," I said. "It must be the wine and the strange bed. You are right, I was having a nightmare."

"Come in beside me," she said. "There is plenty of room for two. That's what my father would do when I was a child. Bundling, he called it." She laughed, and I knew she was uncertain of herself.

I lay with my back to Louise, facing the window and the moon. She pulled the sheet over us - it was a warm night and there was no need for a blanket - and turned her body to my back so that an inch separated us.

"It must be the excitement of the evening," she said, and she patted me on the arm as though to soothe a child. The first touch of her skin on my skin sent a quiver through my body.

"Cold?"

"A little," I said, which was a lie.

She slowly eased her body close to mine, formed a chair with her knees, and put her hand on my arm, letting it rest there. We lay still, breathing in unison; both, I'm sure, knowing the other was awake, and both feeling a growing awareness of the other's body. To show she was not asleep, she moved her fingers lightly over the surface of my arm, barely touching the skin, brushing the fine hair.

I lay there, oblivious to time. She stirred, moved slightly, and let her arm fall carelessly over my body, around my naked waist. At the same time, her body tensed imperceptibly, and I was aware of the pressure of her breasts on my back, the touch of her hair on my shoulder, her breath on the back of my neck, the smooth skin of her legs against my thighs.

Then quite suddenly, but so naturally, as she moved her position again her hand slipped up my body. At first she made as though to move it, but stopped, letting it stay there, gently supporting my breast. We both lay still. Slowly, gently, she moved her fingers so that their tips, almost absentmindedly, caressed the underside of my breast, barely touching the surface and quivering slightly. The touch of her fingers was electrifying. My mouth went dry, and an intense excitement surged through me.

She shuddered, and I could feel her heartbeat as our bodies closed. With each caress, the tips of her fingers moved slowly upwards over my lower breast, touching more and more of my skin, feeling their way to my nipple. Then, of a sudden, she let the tip of one finger brush the point of my nipple. When I, too, quivered, she moved her fingers under the nipple and caressed it gently, feeling it harden under her touch.

As I put my hand behind me, to pull her closer, she let her lips brush the nape of my neck, and the tip of her tongue moved lightly over the skin at the top of my spine. Then, slowly, she raised her head and kissed me gently on my shoul-

der, on my neck, on the lobe of my ear.

I did not speak, but turned to face Louise, her eyes soft and warm to me in the moonlight. We lay there facing each other, hands clasped together on our breasts, committing ourselves to love. When we knew we were ready, we put our arms around each other and kissed, softly at first, on the lips....

The stewardess is speaking. Would I like some more champagne?

"Thank you."

The man in the next seat seems to be asleep, the main lights are dimmed, as passengers watch an old movie. The plane seems hardly to be moving against the moon, yet we are getting closer, Louise. Closer than we have been, my dear, since our four months together in the summerhouse in Braskatt. Four months out of a lifetime. Not much, perhaps, but then these months were my life, are still my life. Oh, yes! I see her so clearly when I shut my eyes, and I remember well the words we spoke, the plans we made, the clothes she wore, the touch of her skin, the feel of her arms around me. Our intimacy was strengthened by a common joy in many pleasures; in poetry (she would read aloud to me from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in a voice with innumerable shades of sadness, tears briefly in her eyes); in flowers ("this blue primula I give to thee," she said one day and pinned it to my dress); in bicycling in country lanes (one weekend as far

as Breskens, over the Dutch border, where we slept the night wrapped together on the hardwood bench of a seaside shelter); in old buildings ("Caxton lived here when translating Recueil des Histoires de Troy," she told me, and stood in awe. She was, to me, more beautiful than HÉLÈNE); in lying and talking in the shade of trees (except with Louise, I have always been withdrawn, introspective, and have spoken intimately only to the characters in my head).

That summer, we were friends, we were sisters, we were lovers, we were never conscious of any reservations, nor aware of any shyness; her love satisfied in me an inner hunger that no love has satisfied since. I loved her face, her throat, her eyes, her feet, her long slender fingers, the way she walked, the way she spoke, the bed she slept in, the clothes she wore, the comb she used on her hair. I loved her lips, her cheeks, her smile, her teeth, the scent of her body, the touch of her skin. My love for her filled every corner of my being. During our months together my mind and body were constantly in some exalted state of expectancy. These were days of sunshine and no shade.

As time came for her to leave, we lay in the field next to the summerhouse and planned our future together. She would go back to Montreal and university. I would stay in Europe till December and then, if I could save the money, go by ship to New York where, somehow, we would have a few weeks together during her Christmas vacation. I would come back to Bruges, and she would join me for the summer.

But, unknown to us, the world was collapsing around us. Early in August, Louise's parents started writing, then cabling, then phoning. There is going to be a war, they said, and she had better leave Europe and come home. A war? Yes, said Madame Lafarge of the Romany, it does not look good. The Boche is on the borders of France and Belgium.

I persuaded Louise she should leave, if only to stop her parents worrying. My only relative - my aunt - had remarried, and would not worry; she had other things on her mind.

It was agreed. Louise would go, I would stay in Bruges. Even if war did break out, we told each other - and war, to lovers, seems so improbable - even if war did break out, there would be plenty of time for me to leave.

"Women and children first," I said. "And I, after all, am both woman and child." Louise took my hand and put it to her cheek, and we sat in silence, thinking: Women and children, that is how the world saw us.

She was going back to Montreal by ship, from the port of London, and that meant crossing by ferry from Ostend to Dover. I went with her as far as Ostend. We took the bus from Bruges, and sat in the back seat, side by side, holding hands, not saying a word, but every so often turning to look at each other, forcing ourselves to smile. She had given me her grandmother's ring, and I can remember her twisting it round and round on my finger as the bus wound its way leisurely through the Belgian countryside.

At Ostend we sat holding hands across a café table, and shared our half-bottle of champagne.

"To our future," we said. Our future at that time seemed so immediate - it was the next hour, the next month, the next year. The thought of what lay beyond never troubled us, if we ever imagined it at all. I gave Louise a half-bottle of Moët et Chandon ("Not to be opened till we meet again") and she gave me a book by a new young Belgian poet. His name escapes me, but I remember feeling a fierce and astonishing jealousy, as she sat there and spoke of him. She opened the book on the table, and read me one of his poems, Death of a Butterfly, and my blood ran cold, and I held her to me protectively.

They would not allow me on the ferry without a ticket, and we decided I could not afford a ticket. We parted at the gangway, both stricken with silence. When Louise was half-way up I called her back, kissed her, and tried to say something, but couldn't.

Then, within a moment as it seemed, the ferry had pulled away, turned, and I could no longer see Louise. And, as suddenly, the world was empty. I sat on a bench at the waterfront at Ostend, and wept.

The man in the next seat starts to talk during dinner, having switched to a halting French, imagining perhaps, from my conversation with the stewardess, that I am a Parisienne. Have I visited Montreal often in the past?

I smile and reply in English: "I was born there, I'm a Quebecer." And I add, to make it clear: "I left Canada before the war." A statement which seems to interest him:

"You were in Europe during the war?"

"Yes, in Belgium."

I see him hesitate over the next question, and decide to help. "I was working there when the Germans invaded, and could not escape." Before he can pursue this, I ask the stewardess to take away my tray, saying I am tired and want to rest before we land.

How can you explain to anyone what life was like in the Belgian Resistance, in the early 1940's? I became a translator. I could speak English, French, enough Flemish to get by. I was invaluable, they said. For a few months, then they would smuggle me out, they said. But when the time came, I knew too much - their codes, their passwords, their headquarters. They would kill me, rather than let me try to leave Belgium and get caught.

How can you explain four years of sabotage, dynamiting bridges, mining canals, sniping convoys, days without sleep and food? And always, the fear.

There are those who will tell you that, after a time, a person in danger comes to terms with fear, comes to accept it and to live with it. I never came to terms with my fear. Fear dominated my life and ruined my health. The fear of being found, of being tortured, of being shot, never left me. Every morning became a birth, every day a new life, and every night a fear that I would not see the morning. My body became thin with fear, and fear gave me large hollows for eyes, brought sores to the skin of my face, and a raging eczema to my hands and legs.

And what of my love for Louise? They say it is only the separated who know the tragedy of love. For years I lived with that tragedy, and consumed myself with the loneliness of it. There was no way of letting her know I was still alive. They told me they had sent news of me to the Canadian Embassy in London, but this proved to be a lie.

I existed in this way for four years, and in that time lost my youth and what looks I had. I would stare at a face in the mirror, and ask myself what had happened to the hair, the fresh pink cheeks, the smiling eyes, and would weep with self-pity.

In the second year, Daniel made me his wife, and my code name became "Danielle," a name I kept after the war when I started to write again, and the name by which I am now best known. For over a year Daniel helped me sleep at night, looked after me, shared my fears and made me feel human. He was caught and executed in the winter of 1943.

As the war drew to an end, the thought of death terrified me. Few of my friends who had started with me in the Resistance, were still with us; some, we knew, had been killed; others had just disappeared. I wanted desperately to get a message to Louise, to let her know I was alive, to see her, to speak to her, to let her help me survive. But first I had to rest. Louise must not see me like this. I needed vitamins, good food, sunshine, and weeks of sleep and rest.

For me, the war ended in June 1944, shortly after D-day, when I was sent to the Canadian Embassy in London. On my

first day I wrote a note to Louise, and posted it. I had gone over a thousand times what to say in my first letter, but when the time came I could put few of my feelings on paper - only the fact that I was alive and hoped to see her in Canada, within months. The letter was posted to the only address I had, the University of Montreal.

I spent the next day in the library, reading the back issues of Canadian newspapers. Late in the afternoon I opened a Montreal paper only a few months old, and found myself looking at a photograph of Louise.

The shock of seeing her photograph, and of reading of her marriage to a member of parliament, Robert Boyd - all that, on top of my ill-health - was too much for me, and I collapsed. I spent six weeks in a British hospital, and three months in a sanatorium.

The stewardess touches my shoulder, to ask can she take away my glass and what's left of the champagne, now flat.

The pleasure of the wine has gone. In its place is an apprehension I cannot put words to. Of course, Louise will remember! Why should she have changed, any more than I have changed? Moments like these, unanswerable questions, flickers of doubt, have tried to insinuate themselves over the years, but I will have no part of them. Lisa, in my sixth and best novel, The Passionate Years, had many such moments of doubt, fearing she might be forgotten by an old lover. Yet, when they meet again, many years later - how did I put it? - "they

shed in one single second those barren years of spiritual loneliness..." and then something about a fire that was never quite extinguished. Ah, Lisa and her lover! Lisa was faithful to a memory, as I have been. And I know - don't ask me how, I just know - that Louise will have been faithful, too. That belief, always returning, gave me hope and strength and the will to live; to live through months of alcohol and drugs - times best forgotten; and hungry years, writing in London; years in Bruges, where memories defeated me in the end, and forced me to leave; more recently, lonely years in Paris. Louise will know what I have been through, and that I am out there, somewhere, waiting, loving, remembering. I believe that. I have that faith. Lisa had faith. Silly, romantic, Lisa, in my novel.... Louise will have read all my books. They sold well in Canada. She will have recognized herself in Miriam and Sarah and Samantha. How many times, I wonder, have I shut my eyes to see Louise, sitting by the fire at home, reading the chapter on Miriam in Bruges, nodding her head in recognition, smiling, wiping away tears, lifting her head to the window, to where she imagines I might be, her high cheek bones, the sweep of her hair, the arch of her throat.... The very words I used to describe Samantha in my first novel, Escape from Destiny. "Tinged with a secret sadness," the critics said of my first novel. Yes, Louise will have read them all. How, I wonder, does she remember me? By my own name, or as "Danielle?" Does she.... Oh God! there goes that voice again, inside me, taunting me: "So, you have no doubts! Then why did you not go to her when Robert Boyd died?"

I cannot answer that. The question has repeated itself a thousand times, but I still cannot answer it. Three wasted months, when all I had to do was take a plane for Montreal. To their house. To her house, now. Just before he died, there was a photograph in the press of Robert Boyd, Member of Parliament, at a reception in their home. Yes, I should have gone to her then, to comfort her. But all I could do was walk about the streets of Paris tormenting myself; restless, wondering, worrying, unable to work, writing a dozen letters to Louise, and tearing them all up. An excuse, that's what I was looking for, some excuse to go to Canada. Excuse to whom? To myself, I suppose.

Then someone, somewhere, whoever controls our destinies, must have heard my cry. The invitation came, to the writers' convention. All doubts forgotten, all faith restored, I booked my flight for Montreal, filled with all the excitement and expectancy of youth. And many half-forgotten memories of Louise came back to me, as fresh as though I had met her for the first time, yesterday....

Her home is on the hill overlooking the city. A maid meets me at the door. I explain that I am early, that the others will be along later. She takes my coat, shows me into a library which leads off a wide expanse of hall. I walk round the room, pick up a book, put it down, look out the window at the garden, examine the etchings, and stand looking at the portrait on the far wall with my back to the door.

"I sat for that portrait last year."

Oh my God! I know that voice!

Fighting the instinct to run and put my arms around her, I turn. A small, plump, motherly woman stands in the doorway, with a cat under each arm, and she looks at me over the top of her spectacles. She has about her a gentle and bewildered air, like that of a nun caught in the city traffic. Louise? Is this? - this cannot be...!

"How nice of you to come, Miss Danielle. You're the first to arrive. I'm so glad you got my note. I really didn't feel up to the convention dinner last night - you understand - since my husband's death - since Robert's death I've been rather a recluse. But I did so much want to meet all of our overseas writers, before you go back to Europe. Are the others coming?"

I look at her in a trance of stricken silence. When I fail to answer, she points her head at a chair by my side. "Do sit down." She seats herself on a large upholstered chair across the room.

"This is Roger and this is Raymond." She nods to the cats. "And this is Danielle," she says, addressing the cats and nodding to me. "Danielle is clever, and writes books. And she has come all the way from Europe, just to see us."

Louise? Is that really you, Louise? And don't you know me? Have I....

She looks up. "I hope you don't mind us calling you Danielle? Miss Danielle sounds so formal."

I sit down opposite Louise, take off my hat, shake out my hair. Look at me, look at me...!

She looks into my face. "Cat food is now so expensive," she says. She puts one cat on the carpet by her feet, and continues: "We are all so proud of our overseas Canadian writers - so proud of all our writers. When Robert was in Government he did his best to get grants for our young writers. And as you know, I've been their president for many years - of the Writers' Guild, that is."

She touches her thin, dry, cracked lips to the other cat's head, puts the cat down and watches it leave the room, its back arched. Her eyes stay on the door after the cat has gone, and her head starts to rock gently up and down, long strands of hair falling loosely over her face. My mouth is dry, and when she hears me take a breath and try to swallow, she turns back to me, conscious again of my presence.

"Yes, poor Robert did not have much time to read, other than wretched government briefs and business papers. You live in Rome, don't you?"

"Paris." I barely manage the word; all life has gone out of me.

"Of course, Paris. Now that must be exciting. Robert and I went to Paris in - now, let me see - 1962 I think it was. Such a beautiful city. Robert adored it." As she speaks she stands up, pulls twice on a tasseled bell-cord, then proceeds to brush her hands down over her black blouse and long black skirt, picking off the white hairs of the cats. She pushes back the strands of her own hair which still hang over her face. "We shan't wait for the others," she says.

The maid comes in with a tray, puts it down on the table

by Louise, and goes out without a word. Louise murmurs something to her as she leaves, then turns again to me.

"I should have asked if you preferred tea. Coffee will do? Good. Yes, Robert loved France. And Belgium. Cream? Sugar? I didn't go with him to Belgium. When children are growing up, you don't like to leave them for too long. Have you...?"

"No, no children." I take the cup, my hands numb.

"Huhuh," she says. She turns towards the door as another cat comes in, walks to her chair, and rubs its head against her leg. She lifts the cat into her lap.

"This is Pierre. Pierre was Robert's favourite. Poor old thing, you miss him so." She puts the cat's face to her cheek, and continues to speak to it softly, her eyes closed, her head rocking gently. I sit in silence. She opens her eyes.

"You must meet my daughter, Marie, before the others come. And you can tell us both about last night's dinner, and your exciting life in Rome." She goes to the door, taking the cat with her.

"Marie," I hear this woman say, "Marie, come and meet our visitor...."