

Barbara.

She examined her wrists by the window. In color and shape, the bruises resembled ink splotches.

"Gunther, we must speak about this."

"It's over, Barbara, it was an accident."

Her gaze drifted across the room, lighting at last upon her husband's back. Feet planted before the full-length mirror, he worked at managing a recalcitrant tie.

"What if it happens again?"

"When have I ever had another nightmare?"

His elbows continued to slice the air at precise angles.

"David has never been promoted before."

He made no retort. Barbara understood; the matter was to be dropped. Having given his tie its final smoothing, he took possession of the bathroom.

While making up the room, she analysed the nocturnal

assault. It happened because Ian Blakely moved down to New York to become vice-president of the Microscope Division. Because Gunther yearned to fill the vacancy created by his former boss, but was too proud to go after it. Because David wasn't.

Yesterday head office had put David on probation as acting branch manager, citing his newness to the company as reason for the trial. Except for a terse announcement of the promotion, Gunther remained silent all evening, shut up in his den. The tension which had been accumulating since Blakely's departure a month ago broke shortly past midnight.

It had been terrifying for her--to be seized by the wrists and jolted out of such deep slumber. "You scum, you bastard," he yelled over and over. "Usurper!" He meant David, of course.

Gunther hates her brother. For several reasons.

David's informality with clients has always disgusted him. Instead of Mr. Gavin, they call him Dave, Davey-boy, buddy or pal. Barbara shook her head. That he should be so ill at ease with North American customs despite his twenty years in the country. David once remarked that to Gunther a slap on the back equals a lashing with a barbed whip.

Naturally Gunther complains that little brother overworks his jaws with his incessant selling, declaiming, wheeling and dealing. But then, David has always had a busy mouth. Even as a child, Barbara remembered, he used to grind his teeth.

Yet these are picky things--trivia. What Gunther is

bothered by most, is David's talent for amassing superlatives-- the flashiest car, the sunniest office space, the highest sales commission, Francine. Tall, blond, ample Francine.

A choking sound emanated from behind the locked door. Barbara swallowed hard. She wished he wouldn't shove his toothbrush so far down his throat.

His bathroom business accomplished, she followed him down to the vestibule. There he proceeded to brush his coat. Three strokes down the right front, three down the left and six down the back. A seventh across the shoulders. Barbara knew all his moves.

Early in their relationship she had noticed that Gunther aspired to a system of changelessness. Two decades had not altered that system. Each week he draws up an hourly agenda covering the period between eight a.m. and ten p.m. And adheres to it as far as he is able. Worn out items, clothes, linen, furniture, whatever, he replaces with similar if not identical ones. This standardization extends beyond himself. Even she must prepare all meals from his mother's turn-of-the-century cookbook.

The two years they courted, she used to poke fun at his rituals. She liked the way he pouted when teased about them. Within the first week of married life they lost their entertainment value and Barbara was forced to accept them for what they were: a death sentence.

On impulse, she stepped between her husband and the door.

"How do I look, Gunther?"

"You look like always."

A valid appraisal. Externally, she had changed little since their first meeting. Her hair still reached midway down her back. Makeup never touched her skin. The printed shirtwaist was one of dozens that Gunther chose for her each year at the January sales. Even the knitted houseshoes that encased her feet she had made from an old pattern bequeathed to her by the late Frau Stiefelmayer.

From the bay window, she watched the beige Rabbit, his sixth Volks, head toward Montreal. She wondered, if maybe, as a young man, he had possibly been tantalized by a British or Italian sportscar.

It was difficult for her to imagine Gunther as having ever had a youth. He was already thirty when they met, a mere six years older than her own father. To a girl of sixteen, an older man, especially a foreigner, is an awesome human being. Even if he is habit bound.

Barbara massaged her forearms. What happened last night was the first event of any significance to intrude upon the monotony of the past fifteen years.

Gunther

Two years, four months and three days had passed since David invaded Amerop Scientific Industries. If pressed, Gunther could calculate the exact second his brother-in-law took up employ. How that outrageous scene in the branch manager's office persisted in his memory. He had witnessed it all.

"Blakely," Boy Wonder had boomed, "you've got yourself a new man."

"After what happened yesterday," Blakely had boomed back, "you've got some nerve barging in here."

The day before, Gunther and his boss had been entertaining an important client at the Château Gabriel in Old Montreal. Finally convinced that Amerop's electron microscope--EM 200, ninety-eight thousand dollars worth of precision optics--was the only one for his research project, the scientist had just requested a quotation. In marched David. He flashed his Orientoptic card, enunciated a suicidal price and whisked the customer away in his golden Firebird.

"Yesterday proves it," was Super Rep's reply to the taunt, "Amerop needs me."

A quick call to New York and Gunther had a new colleague.

Driving home that evening, he was so distracted he

missed his exit off highway thirteen. The five mile detour heightened his aggravation. His already deep loathing for his brother-in-law intensified. He also despised Blakely for letting David wheedle a job out of him. Even his best friend and former co-worker, Ted Schultz, became a target for his wrath. If Ted hadn't gone off creating that void, David wouldn't have been able to fill it.

As soon as he arrived home, he informed Barbara of her brother's latest treachery. She merely shrugged her shoulders and remarked, "he won't be there long."

Barbara's prediction of two years ago proved true. Right now, David was campaigning to move on. Or rather, up, into Blakely's vacated title and office.

Gunther regarded his working space of the last two decades. Everything about his niche exuded an aura of order and equilibrium. He took pleasure in the steel shelves on which his catalogues were arranged according to category--microscopes in blue binders, eye instruments in yellow, lasers in red and so on. He prized the five by seven index cards recording each customer's name, address, telephone number, needs and budget. He was proud of his cross-referenced filing system that made information retrieval quick and efficient. The wall map charting the growth of his territory with gaily colored pins gave him immense satisfaction. Still, there was no question; if David succeeded in obtaining the promotion, he would have to abandon his beloved corner.

But busy mouth wasn't boss yet; and might never be.

7

Gunther took up the letter he had typed out to head office in New York. There was no need to reread it, he knew it by heart. Three pages long, its core idea could be stated in fourteen words: Ted Schultz from Toronto would make an ideal branch manager for the French region.

Gunther did not relish the thought of working under Ted. But weeks of perusing company organization charts failed to turn up another candidate. Ted had experience and seniority. And he missed Montreal. With the threat of French separatism driving the business community out of the province, it was next to impossible to get people to come to Quebec.

At the postage machine, Gunther became aware of someone at his elbow.

"Do you always sneak up on people like that, David?"

"Only way I know to get ahead. What's that? A love note?"

"You might call it that."

"She's free tonight."

"Who?"

"Francine, of course."

Some minds had to turn everything into a dirty joke. For the umpteenth time, Gunther explained his sentiments.

"Francine and I are friends. Something she needs very badly considering how you string her along."

"Sure, Gunther. Just friends."

David walked off. Though he said no more, Gunther knew he was laughing on the inside. Barbara did that too.

It was one of the Gavin traits. They were all born with a smirk.

Let them smirk. Things would be different when New York came through. And he was pretty sure they would.

He figured he'd better mail his letter elsewhere. Outside, it was an icy thirty below, harsh weather even for the middle of January. Never a winter went by that he didn't long for the more moderate climate of his homeland.

The mailbox was frozen shut and Gunther had to struggle with it for several minutes. As he sent the fateful communication flying down its chute, the roar of a jet drew his gaze skyward. The tail markings revealed it to be a sunflight. He watched its deliberate movement east, until he became conscious of the cold stinging his ears.

Walking along St. Catherine, he passed several travel agencies. Bikini-clad girls beckoned to him from exotic beaches, droplets of water glistening on their thighs.

The cathedral clock chimed noon. Lunch break. He wondered if he should drop by the lab to visit Francine.

David

Gunther was the only man David knew who would not even admit to himself that he wanted to screw a girl. Which was just as well, since Francine could never get the hots for a balding middle-aged kraut. Or for anyone else but himself. At times, David wondered at his sister's having married such a jerk.

Barbara was a looker. Not stunning but desirable enough. Smart, too. She graduated from high school with highest honors. In his opinion, only one thing kept her from making something out of her life. She married too young. David knew better than to commit himself while his career was in its embryonic stage.

He liked to visualize his climb to the top in evolutionary terms. Becoming branch manager would be synonymous with birth. A vice-presidency or two would see him through adolescence. These phases might last fifteen to twenty years, after which a mature David Gavin would emerge as company president.

Not a believer in leaving destiny to chance, he helped it along whenever he could. For instance, the moment he set eyes on Francine Duceppe six years ago; he realized, by some instinct, she would make the perfect corporate wife. Appealing, elegant, warm, intelligent and loyal, she met all his specifications. Looking back, he was glad he latched

onto her. No likely candidates had turned up since; and he didn't have time to scout.

Chance did seem to favor him though. He had no hand at all in Blakely's move to New York, or Schultz's going off to Toronto. In fact, this opening for sales rep occurred at a time when Orientoptic had come to mean no more to him than a giant cul de sac.

Admittedly, it had been great not to have an immediate supervisor. He cherished fond memories of unlimited freedom and that generous but foolish expense account he and Marc Leduc had connived out of Vancouver. Accompanied by Francine, they made the town every Friday night. But, no boss, no place to go.

At first, he regretted Orient. Blakely, who received an override on the reps' commissions, drove them beyond their quotas. How often he had threatened to quit in those early months. And each time Blakely would sit real calm throughout the entire tirade. Then, when a stillness had settled in the room, he'd say in an even voice, with a touch of malice, "no, you won't, you're much more of an ambitious bastard than I ever was or will be."

And that lesser bastard was a V.I.P. at that very moment. David liked to think of Blakely as his forerunner.

A glance at his agenda reminded him that he wasn't in Blakely's office yet. 'Acting' meant he had a foot in the door. But that door could slam on that foot at the hint of the slightest reversal. So he decided he'd better go out and sell.

Dr. Hebert, chief of plastic surgery at the Morgan Memorial Clinic was contemplating the purchase of two lasers, one argon and one carbon dioxide. His needs were such that only Amerop could accommodate them. Hebert wasn't even investigating other products. Theoretically, an easy mark. Theoretically.

To deal with Dr. Hebert was to flounder in a sea of marshmallow. What should have been a straight sale had become bogged down by the doctor's inability to commit himself. It was rumored that his recently deceased wife used to handle his financial decisions; probably all his decisions, and that he was incapable of functioning without her. If it were a million dollar deal, David might consider hunting up a new spouse for him. For the eighty thousand the two instruments were worth, he'd simply make the best of it.

Dr. Hebert was on the phone when the receptionist ushered David in.

"No, I don't think so, Chantal, I'm not in favor of it in the least."

Realizing the personal nature of the call, David offered to leave. The doctor made a gesture that he interpreted as 'it's up to you'. So he stayed.

"No, darling, I don't feel very positive about this. Really. Well, if you absolutely must."

David wasn't sure he heard right. The doctor had actually given his consent.

Hebert hung up.

"My daughter. She's at the age where knowledge is infinite."

"Aren't we all?"

"I suppose so. But it seems to peak at fourteen and a half. So tell me, what have you got for me today?"

David threw himself into his presentation. Forty minutes later, Hebert knew all he needed to place an order. Which he didn't.

"Come and see me again in a couple of months, Dave. That's when my grant comes through. I'm certain we'll be able to talk dollars then."

Like hell. David shook the doctor's hand. It was like clutching a dead fish, the difference being the fish has the possibility to please.

By the time he got back to his car, ~~it~~ was eleven-forty. That gave him barely enough time to pick up his tennis racket at Francine's and keep his twelve o'clock date with the surgical nurse from the General. He hoped there'd be more play on the courts than in the bedroom. She definitely was not his type. Too much of a jock, like the girls who skate in roller derbys.

He checked his day-timer. The girl's name was Claude Leroux and her boss was in the market for an operation microscope with ceiling mount. In financial terms, this little affair could tally up to forty-eight thousand; which should help influence New York to drop the 'acting' from his newly acquired title.

Francine

Bending over microscopes made her neck sore and her back stiff. It was all so tiring, peering at lung and liver sections, whatever, hour after hour, day after day, forever. She hadn't meant to spend her life in the lab.

Her shoulders ached, too and she felt like thirty-five going on a hundred. She dared not use such expressions around David. He must never think of her as old. Often, she wished he were forty instead of thirty.

Wheeling her stool away from the chrome counter, she stood up and stretched. A feeling of well-being began to surge through her body.

"You're lovely when you yawn."

She let her arms drop to her sides. The intrusion seemed natural. Why shouldn't her yawn be as frustrated as the rest of her life?

"Oh. Gunther."

Would he never tire of showing up. Some members of the hospital staff actually believed he worked there.

"I just stopped by to see how you were. Maybe to ask you up to the house tonight."

"Some other time, maybe."

"Sure. Anytime. I merely thought that seeing as how David said you'd be free tonight you might enjoy the company."

Why did she have to find out this way? If David wanted to back out of their dinner date, he should do it himself.

"David was mistaken."

"I had the impression that he seemed to know what he was talking about."

"David is not God, Gunther. He doesn't know everything."

"Then suppose you tell me why you look so glum."

Did she have to? Yes. Or he might not go away. She fished around for a handy excuse and came up with a true one. For once.

"You know how I go to Miami every year with Betsy Drayson? Well, the trip is off."

"I guess that's a decent reason for moping."

To avoid lunch, she told him she'd already eaten.

As soon as she stepped into her apartment, she noticed the racket was missing. So David had been by. Probably on his way to another bed. Sometimes she had difficulty perceiving David and herself as a couple.

Most of their conversations, usually postponements or cancellations of dates in favor of business 'meetings' as he called them, took place over the phone. If at all. On the odd Sunday she would catch him at Barbara's when he picked up his laundry. But then he was almost sure to have an appointment with some nurse or purchasing agent and she would end up taking the train home. The one time she insisted on a ride into town, she found herself in the back

seat behind a comely head nurse from the Hospital for Sick Children.

I'm the one who's sick, she thought. Sick of the way he shows up to spend the night every ten or eleven days. Sick of his bed-hopping. Sick of him. Sick of me.

She poured herself a dry sherry. So he wasn't going to show tonight. Not if Gunther said she'd be free. The word made her laugh. She glanced about the apartment that had become her prison.

The flat was ugly. There was no other way to describe it. Yet she rarely left it, lest David try to reach her.

When she first took it twelve years ago, she hadn't expected to renew the lease. She now understood what a folly it had been to rent a furnished place. Everything in the rooms reeked of cheapness.

Stains and dyes and arborites replaced real wood. Gaudy colored prints she'd often seen in chain hardware stores substituted for the tapestries she craved. The sofa-bed, with its uneven springs and plastic covering added to her physical discomfort. Nothing revealed her personality--the homemaker within who longed for comfort, textured fabrics, mahogany and rosewood, silk carpets. All things she grew up with.

From the living room window, she looked toward Outremont. She had been happy with her parents. It seemed incredible she had left them for this. They were minutes away, yet she hadn't seen them in years. If things were different, she would get on a bus and go and visit them.

But the circumstances that forced her removal from the big house remained unchanged. The stained glass doors were closed to her, would never open as long as she insisted on sleeping with men outside of marriage.

Friday night revellers began to mill about on the streets below. She and David and Marc used to be among them. Now, she realized, she had taken those outings for granted.

Taking things for granted had always been one of her major faults. She remembered her disappointment, the sense of betrayal she felt, upon learning that David did not deem it necessary to marry her simply because he had taken her to bed. Or how sure she had been of becoming pregnant because she never practised birth control; and how depressed she would be at the beginning of each period. Then, too, she was taking it for granted that David would marry her should an 'accident' occur.

To pass the time, she prepared crêpes with a cheese and mushroom filling, a tossed salad, a fragrant herbal tea. As usual, no more than a few forkfuls went down.

She carried the plate to the kitchen sink. The garburator was such fun to feed. It gobbled the morsels up greedily and belched when the water swirled down the drain. It made her feel appreciated. Like Marc used to.

She had taken him for granted, too. It had been weeks since he'd been by. Probably, he wasn't sober enough to make his way over.

Marc

He summoned her and she came at once. As was her way, she was compliant without being genteel.

"What's the matter, Leduc, your glass leaking tonight?"

"Rosie, be a sweetheart and bring me two more of the same."

"It's your poison."

"Sure is."

He watched her wiggle her way to the bar. Rosie was a funny dame. She couldn't walk without communicating. A slight wiggle accompanied by a brisk gait meant 'Sorry fellows, I'm all booked up'. No wiggle and shuffling feet was a danger signal, 'Beware, I'm in a bitchy mood'. An exaggerated wiggle like tonight's conveyed the message 'Open for business'. He hoped her evening would be more lucrative than his day had been.

Lousy said it in a word. He had just come from the Neurological Institute where he learned Dr. Carolyn Hollinger has decided to order Amerop's operation microscope. And McGill University was presently checking into their electron microscope. He wouldn't be surprised if the government went Amerop too, for those telephoto lenses the defense department needs.

Marc couldn't do it. He couldn't begrudge David a sale. The guy was born with a spiel. Ever since he left

Orient, the firm had been declining steadily. That morning a telex arrived from Vancouver threatening to shut down the Montreal branch, unless something substantial came along. That meant Thompson was his only hope.

The elite eye clinic Thompson was setting up required merchandise worth one hundred and fifty grand. The problem was how to keep him from going over to Amerop. The thought of doing business with Thompson revolted him. Over the years the man had developed quite a reputation as a son-of-a-bitch. More to be dreaded though was the thought of Orient closing down. That irritable voice at the other end of Canada was all the family he had now that David had taken off and he himself had renounced Francine.

Up until two years ago, he had even felt middling secure. But with this sentence of doom he felt like a kid again--facing the imminence of another foster home and yet another rejection. He was too well known in this almost incestuous scientific community. Nobody, he was certain, would hire such a drunk.

"I don't mean to butt in, Leduc, but you're drowning in the stuff."

"I'm a big boy. I can look after myself."

Rosie set the tray down, then poured him a headless beer. She knew what he liked.

"Remember, Leduc, no one's forcing you to drink it all."

"But I will."

"Have it your way."

"I always do."

She gave him a wiggle of disgust as she made her way back to the bar. He didn't blame her. Somehow he had managed to increase his consumption in the process of weaning himself from Francine. He could honestly aver it to be less painful without her than with her. As long as he stayed tanked.

After David left Orient, he had continued to spend Friday evenings with her. But without David there, making his claims, he couldn't hack it. So he made a pact with himself. Stay clear of her. And he meant to keep it. Like the other pacts he'd made. That if David was ever out of the picture and he had the slightest chance, he'd give up drinking. That if he ever found his mother, not that he was looking for her, but if she ever turned up, he would strangle her for not having committed infanticide thirty-nine years ago.

"Hey, Leduc, shall we go for some air?"

"Is it that time already?"

Rosie nodded. He let her help him into his coat and lead him outside. The cold air made his head spin. He clung more tightly to her arm. She hailed a cab then cited the usual admonitions.

"Now you snuggle up in your nice warm bed when you get home. And don't fall asleep in your suit again. You come in here all crumpled up again and you won't get any service, ya hear?"

He nodded, rolling his eyeballs skyward. The taxi made

a u-turn and jerked to a stop before them. Rosie pulled open the door. Helped him into the back seat.

"See you tomorrow, Leduc."

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Yup."

"I can give it up if I want to."

"I know you can."

"I can."

As the car pulled away from the curb, he began to wave. They always waved till the car turned the block. Someday, he thought, that girl is going to make a great mother.

II

Barbara

David would be by any minute. For a minute. He was never one to stay in a spot too long. Barbara could still see the notes his grade school teachers used to send home. They all complained about his pacing up and down the aisles during class. She gazed at the overloaded laundry basket. Even his clothes bore testimony of this restlessness.

Each week brought at least one new garment. And everything in that basket was always the latest style. Even the socks and handkerchiefs. Nothing ever became old or worn. It had always been David's custom to discard belongings as soon as their novelty or purpose became obsolete. Unless they provided some ongoing essential service like herself. Or Francine.

An engine died out front, the signal for Gunther to retreat to his den.

"Hi sis, how's things?"

"How else?"

"What would I do without my riddle of the week?"

She watched him devour the piece of strudel she had set out on the counter. It seemed criminal for someone to derive so much pleasure from a mass of pastry and apples. She wanted to blunt his enjoyment.

"Francine dropped in earlier."

Her statement failed to interrupt his fork to mouth to plate rhythm.

"What did she want?"

"What do you think?"

He helped himself to a second portion, the last in the pan.

"My dear sister, hasn't anyone ever told you absence makes the heart grow fonder?"

"Only if you have one."

"You ought to talk to Gunther like that."

"I do."

"Too bad he doesn't listen when spoken to."

She motioned for him to hush, that Gunther was in the next room. He picked up his laundry and blew her a kiss.

"Thanks a heap, sis. You're the greatest."

"Sure."

"Bye Gunther, nice seeing you."

He couldn't resist. She tried to be peeved at his teasing, but failed. After all, it was childish of Gunther to hide whenever her brother came over.

Only when David's Firebird could no longer be heard did the door to the den open.

"Is he gone?"

"No, he's moving in."

"That's terrifically funny, Barbara."

"I'm glad you think so."

He took a Labbat from the fridge. Barbara glanced at the wall clock.

"You're late."

"For what?"

"Nine o'clock is beer time. It's nine-thirty now. Walk time."

"You're a real comedian tonight."

"Har. Har. Har."

He slipped into his down jacket and tied the hood string tight under his chin. Ne need to ask him where he was going, she knew the route by heart. Down the opposite side of the street to the river, along the river as far as the marina, then back again and up their side of the street.

A blast of cold air invaded the kitchen. Winter seemed to drag on forever this year. It was only mid-February. Tomorrow was the fourteenth.

But there would be no hearts for Barbara. Gunther has never believed in St. Valentine's day. According to him, it has nothing to do with saints. Rather, it is the product of American consumerism, just another gimmick to thin out the wallet. Besides, it really isn't celebrated in Germany.

She turned up the thermostat. Once warmed, she could

better appreciate the filigree frost pattern on the window over the sink. She closed the light to blot out the reflections of the spice-rack on the opposite wall.

Under the stars, the backyard loomed silvery and cratered. The neighborhood children had carted away a good deal of snow for their ice palaces leaving her this wasteland. It seemed that everyone was always taking things from her.

She had so little. No parents, no children, no pets. Even her features were not her own. How angry she used to get when the grown-ups said, "look, Barby has Davey's eyes, or nose, or mouth." They always said it like that. Not "Davey has his sister's forehead or chin." And yet she was the older of the two. By nearly three years.

One day she would claim what was rightfully hers. But not now. She was too tired.

Although Gunther's nightmare had not recurred, she expected it to. And with each passing day, her fear of it became more acute. She had taken to napping days and lying awake nights as long as possible. Watching. Waiting.

The kitchen door flew open. She switched on the light.

"Back already?"

"Do you know what they've gone and done?"

"No."

"They've changed it. Can you believe that?"

"Yes. What?"

"Our street. They've put up a new street sign with a different name on it."

"Oh. And where are we living now?"

She wondered if he realized how much his panic amused her. Probably not, or he would be scolding her.

"Oak Road. Think of all the address changes that will have to be made. The bother people will have to go through. It's insane."

"I think it's exciting. Why don't we pretend we've just moved to a new neighborhood? Or maybe another town. I've never really been anywhere."

"Barbara, lately I've begun to have the feeling that you're going crazy."

Is that what he thinks. Mustn't let him get the wrong impression.

"No, Gunther, just bored."

Bored with your grey suits and white shirts and black socks and four black and red striped ties all purchased from Wagner's. Bored with all your Volkswagens. Bored with your kraut and sausages. Bored with your television programs. Bored with you.

A gargling sound came from the upstairs bathroom. Bored with that too, she thought. Bored with everything.

Gunther

Schultz was in. Ted himself had just phoned with the news. An official memo would follow in a matter of days. Little did David suspect his impending demotion.

Gunther conjured up a picture of his brother-in-law. At that moment David was tending his booth at the International Eye Symposium at the Bonaventure Hotel. Trying very hard, no doubt, to push his baby--the Vision Diagnostics line.

Well, Ted's becoming branch manager would more than make up for David's monopolizing the eye-care division. Of course, Blakely gave him the go ahead on that last fall. Blakely'd been playing favorites from the moment David joined the company.

Gunther felt his rancor was justifiable. With two of the three instruments worth twenty-four thousand and forty-six thousand respectively, a quota could be easily filled. No wonder David was named top salesman at the International Reps' Convention last month. If he hadn't made that forty-six thousand dollar sale to the Memorial, he would have been twelve thousand two hundred dollars under his target sum and Gunther would have won the award. No matter, David would get his. Probably some time next week.

Knowledge of the fateful memo infused Gunther with energy. Happily, he tackled the tender before him. From

Provincial Utilities, it was pretty big stuff--half a million worth of fiber optics. Ten minutes before noon, he sent it off by special messenger.

At twelve he unwrapped the lunch Barbara had prepared for him. Two peanut butter sandwiches, a banana and an apple, his favorite bag-it meal for the past ten years.

But today the peanut butter stuck to his palate and the bottled mineral water seemed to be insipid. Somehow he craved an extraordinary meal to match this extraordinary day. He wanted to celebrate.

Twenty minutes later he persuaded Francine to have lunch with him by threatening, humorously of course, not to leave until she accepted his invitation. He took her to a small Italian restaurant in the north end of the city. Its name showed up often on David's expense accounts and Gunther cherished the hope that they would run into him, with some cute young thing clinging to his arm. This hope remained unfulfilled.

Inside, it took a few moments to grow accustomed to the dim lighting. While his eyes adjusted, his other senses went to work. His ears tingled to the sounds of violins and sizzling oil, his nostrils flared as he inhaled the aroma of garlic and ripe tomatoes, his fingertips prickled to the touch of the rough stucco walls. The place pleased him. No wonder David patronized it.

The maître d' beckoned them to a secluded niche away from the crowd of businessmen who occupied the main dining-room. Obviously he took them for lovers. Gunther gave

Francine's hand a little squeeze, he liked the feel of her skin.

The menu was ample. After perusing it for several minutes he decided on tossed salad, side dishes of pasta, veal birds and chianti. While waiting for their order, they sipped pernod and nibbled at garlic bread.

Gunther was happy. In the soft glow of the Tiffany lamp, her dusty aquamarine eyes deepened into a velvety hue. The shadows heightened her already prominent cheekbones. Once in a while her nostrils barely flexed as she breathed in the smells that filled the room. Delicious smells, he thought.

"Do you like it here?"

She nodded. He loved the way the colors of the stained glass played upon her silky blond hair.

"I must tell David about this place."

"He already knows it pretty well."

"I should have guessed."

Her brow furrowed. He let a moment pass for the sting to subside.

"He doesn't deserve you."

"Who deserves anyone?"

The waiter brought the salad. She seemed to eat it studiously.

"You still haven't told me why the special lunch today."

He couldn't confide to her that they were celebrating David's demise.

"Does it matter?"

"Not really. I hope Barbara won't mind."

"Why should Barbara mind if I dine with her brother's girlfriend on the odd occasion?" Mentally, he made a note to take Barbara out some time soon. "Do you think she is some kind of a jealous fiend?"

"No. But a woman."

Gunther shrugged off her reply. He did not care to argue with women. Especially about women.

After the semi-darkness of the restaurant, the sunlit snow blinded him. Squinting, Gunther did up the buttons of his coat. The temperature was falling. How he detested the cold.

On the way back to the lab, they passed one travel bureau after another. By the time they reached the hospital an idea had occurred to him. Why not take a sunflight? Wasn't Barbara complaining the other day that she had never been anywhere? And didn't Francine really miss this year's trip to Miami? He would ask her as he walked her back to the building.

David

Once the coffee and donuts were gone, the people stopped coming. Exhibitions were like that. They attracted the leeches of the scientific community.

Some came for the eats; others for the pamphlets. Still others to escape from the lab or the OR for a few hours. Yet, to be fair, he had to admit most of the guests he saw that week were both sincere and interested.

The Vision Charter line intrigued them. His demonstrations of the instruments were well attended. Valid questions were asked and suggestions offered as to how to adapt the equipment to various working schedules. One factor above all others squelched their enthusiasm. Price.

He had to continually remind them that you get what you pay for. He would point this out by showing them the least expensive instrument. The ten thousand dollar lensometer, sophisticated as it was, did the least.

The three instruments did add up to a whopping seventy-nine thousand seven hundred big ones. David knew that. But these items were technological marvels; time and energy savers. Sophisticated and functional, they were practice-builders as well as status symbols.

He looked at the electrovision scanner. It seemed little more than a two foot by two foot by two foot cube with a chinrest. But that glorified box could make

completely objective refractions. Aside from its use as a basis for diagnosis, it was great for illiterate, retarded or mute patients.

Using modulated infrared light, this amazing machine could take a series of ten measurements at fifteen degree intervals, reflect this light from the retina, measure it via a light sensing device, then further evaluate it by a microprocessor which in turn prints out the results on a heat sensitive computer card. And all this in less than two minutes.. If a client sees an average of thirty patients per day, that means a saving of one and a half hours. With the increase in clientele, the twenty-four thousand would be paid up in a short period of time.

David had lost track of how many times he'd given that spiel in the last five days. He knew all his presentations by heart. They were his nursery rhymes, his mantras.

Despite the high price drawback, David loved the equipment. It excited him and he enjoyed selling it, especially the Vision Charter with its ability to project phantom lenses in front of the patient's eyes.

For the one or two leads that might come of the show, the exhibit was costing Amerop a neat sum. At five hundred per day, the booth alone came to twenty-five hundred. There were other expenses, too. Like the tips to guys who helped with loading and unloading, the kids that got his lunch for him, not to mention his own time. There was still a chance to earn back the expenses though, if Gil Thompson were to show up.

Thompson was establishing a posh Eye-Care Clinic in one of the new high rise self-contained 'cities' going up all over downtown Montreal. Given the size of the operation, David figured he should be good for one electrovision scanner and three Vision Charters with lensometers--a grand total of close to two hundred thousand dollars.

But it was Friday afternoon. And already four forty-five. It didn't seem likely that Thompson would make an appearance. David couldn't say for sure, though, Thompson was such a bastard.

He envied the other reps. Most had flung their ties and jackets aside and were packing up. But not him. His booth would remain intact at least until five--the official closing time. David surveyed the hall. He wasn't the only one standing by.

Orientoptic, his former employer and chief competitor also hung in. David had no illusions about the superiority of Amerop's line. The products of the two companies were comparable, their service contracts identical, though Orient had Universal Scientific take care of that end of the business, and price lists mostly interchangeable. Sales personnel was the only concrete variable. And, as in other cases, the usual had happened. The Thompson deal had degenerated from eloquent scientific parlance to a frenzied contest between himself and Marc Leduc.

He had scarcely exchanged nods with Leduc when Thompson arrived at the Orient display. In his off-white trench coat, the bastard took on the appearance of a beluga whale. If

the optometrist proved an eyesore, at least the girl with him compensated for his deficiencies.

Not partial to brunettes, David made an exception for Fiona Mulvey. He couldn't precisely say why she appealed to him. Taken separately, each of her features was imperfect.

Her eyes, almost black, were too small and penetrating. Her long thin nose seemed ever to be investigating, sniffing out a good deal. Her mouth was wide with a sizeable gap between the upper front teeth. No figure, she was all bones. Then what the hell made her such a sexy bitch?

The Clinic's purchasing agent, he knew her casually. An ace businesswoman, she never wasted a moment in idle chatter with the innumerable reps who stalked her office, peddling everything from optical equipment to canned music and raintree forest murals.

He couldn't hear what was going on across the aisle, but he did see Leduc doing a lot of bowing and scraping. Like those buck-toothed Japanese mice in Saturday morning cartoons. On the whole, a disgusting and degrading performance. And he was next.

For the first time since he began cultivating Blakely's job, a detrimental notion took hold of him. He could not, would not, snivel before Thompson. With brusque movements, he began to drag cartons out from under his display table.

"Very impressive toys, my boy."

David offered his hand, first to Fiona, then to Thompson. But the latter reached beyond it to the Vision Charter's master switch. The power on David felt the man's

eyes narrowing in on the I.D. card pinned to his lapel.

"Acting Branch Manager Amerop Scientific Industries.

Any chance of that first word being dropped?"

Thompson was toying with him. Flaunting his own economic independence.

"I hear your clinic needs some equipment and you're checking out instruments like our Vision Charter."

"Among other things."

David braced himself for the extortion number.

"What kind of things did you have in mind?"

"Our friend over there," he meant Leduc of course, "is providing me with a marvelous pair of binoculars. Eight times magnification, hermetically sealed, rubberarmed. You know, deluxe merchandise, but not what I really need."

You mean want. David was ready to succumb. His hand was half-way to his daybook, a reflex in situations like this, when the image of Leduc's self-debasement flashed into his head.

"Look, Thompson, Amerop is not a charity organization. Our goods are for sale. All of them."

"Suit yourself."

"Company policy."

"Company policy never interfered with my dealings before."

"I guess times have changed."

"Unfortunately for you, I'm afraid."

He watched Thompson go off in a huff. Fiona Mulvey, who had been standing by the electrovision scanner and who

had been winking at him from time ot time came over and gave his hand a hearty shake.

"You were terrific, Gavin. Call me sometime."

Leduc came over as soon as they had gone.

"What happened to him?"

"The unthinkable. I gave him the word--no freebies."

"You're kidding. I didn't think Amerop was suicidal enough to make such a move."

"It isn't."

Leduc let out a whistle. For a moment, it was like old times again.

"Boy, have you got gut. This calls for a drink. How about it?"

"You're on."

"Why don't we pick up Francine? Have a reunion."

"She's going out this evening. Some other time maybe." He called for the men who were transporting the instruments while Leduc grabbed a free trolley. "Let's get rid of this garbage first."

"Some garbage."

"Nothing but the best."

That was all he had ever wanted. And he was going to get it no matter what.

Francine

The lobby was beginning to fill up. The crowd, composed mainly of couples, jostled her. Still, it was better than standing out in the cold.

She approached the glass doors of the movie house. On St. Catherine Street cars enveloped in puffy white clouds idled before the red light. Pedestrians defied traffic signals in their hurry to flee the icy air. If David were there, she could appreciate being inside.

An usher in a grey blazer with green lapels came up to her.

"Can I help you, Miss?"

"Thank you, I'm waiting for someone. He should be here any minute. Not that he will, but he should."

The boy slunk away from her. She regretted her rudeness; wished she had the courage to apologize. To explain that she wasn't always like this. In fact, she used to be pleasant and charming. Five years ago.

The wide doors of the screening room flung open. Within seconds the foyer became filled with a buzzing, milling multitude. Those going in stampeded each other for the most strategic seats. Those coming out wore solemn faces. Heads slightly bowed, they spoke reverently, in whispers. After all, in the end, the heroine remained a lonely, forgotten figure.

Francine had already seen the film twice. But she wanted David to see it. She wanted him to understand.

A hush invaded the lobby. Except for the usher and the two girls behind the refreshment counter, she stood alone. She watched the popcorn machine until all the kernels had exploded into puffy white balls. Then she counted the different brands of candies and how many packages of each stood single file on the metal display hooks.

Perhaps the exhibition ran till nine instead of five. Or maybe it ended at five and he was still packing up. It could be that he was exhausted from all the demonstrations and had forgotten about their date.

She made two quick calls. There was no answer at either of their apartments. He might be in the shower, she told herself. Or in bed.

She did not like to imagine David in bed, because in her mind's eye, he was never there alone. It was too easy to think of David with another woman. He didn't have to go after them. They came to him willingly, imploringly. And why shouldn't they. He was successful. More than that, he was beautiful.

Each of his features was alluring, cried for attention: his thick auburn hair, his iridescent green eyes, his turned up nose and generous mouth. His skin was olive and flawless, his muscles firm. Often, she wished he had Barbara's sensitivity; they shared so many other traits.

Always one to hope against hope, she waited a full hour before deciding he had stood her up again. Then, needing

the comfort of a familiar face, she sought out the usher she had earlier rebuffed.

"Can you get me a taxi, please?"

"Sure thing, miss. I'm sorry about your friend."

"Happens all the time."

"Shouldn't. Not with a nice lady like you."

"Tell that to my friend."

The driver never shut up. He had convinced himself she was a celebrity travelling incognito. It happened often. Probably it was the silver fox coat that got people going. She would have to get rid of it someday. But it was so warm.

"I'll bet it's the circus. Am I right, lady?"

"This whole stupid planet is nothing but a circus."

"Okay. How about this? You're a singer. Have I got it?"

He craned his neck to peer at her in the rearview mirror. She shook her head to oblige him. As they pulled up to the curb, he gave it another shot.

"Don't tell me. It's the movies."

Francine stared at his eager face. Why not humour him? Why should everyone be disappointed?

"I won't deny it."

"Wow, I knew it."

She handed him her tickets. They were limp from having been bent, folded and twisted during her anguished wait. But they were still good.

"Here, if you hurry you can still make the next feature."

"Gee thanks, lady. You're super."

Francine watched the cab disappear into the night. She was cold. Very cold. Gunther's proposition to fly south loomed before her--tantalizing and vengeful. She would go. And they wouldn't say a word about it to David. Make him wonder.

She had no illusions about his worrying whether she'd been in an accident, or run off with a new lover. No, he would miss her on a lower level. Between the thighs. Or a higher one. From the top rung of the corporate ladder.

Marc

He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper.

"David, see that guy over there?"

"What guy?"

"He's got his hand on the seat of the girl pouring out of her clothes."

He watched David focus in on the kid. That's all she was really. Couldn't be more than twenty. David let out a low whistle.

"Now that's what I call hot stuff."

Marc ignored the change of subject.

"Somewhere in Beaconsfield or Hudson, that guy probably has a wife and a houseful of kids waiting for him."

"No wonder he doesn't want to go home."

"Man, you are disgusting."

"Me? What about you? Drinking yourself into a stupor, night after night. Year after year. You know where you're going to end up, don't you?"

David was right. He was a mess. Thirty-nine going on fifty. His sandy hair was half grey, his skin covered with pink splotches. Permanent bruises had developed on his hands and face from all the spills and tumbles he'd taken over the last couple of decades. His eyes were more red than blue. No wonder most girls ran when they saw him coming.

"I don't see where it's any concern of yours."

"You're going to end up in intensive care--kidneys shot, liver bloated--the whole system broken down."

"Why don't you invent a new routine, one that will get a few laughs for a change?"

"Because it's no joke. You'll be hooked up to all kinds of machines..."

"I hope they're from Orient."

"Funny. Left with an angel in white checking the print-outs, taking your pulse..."

"Leduc don't need no Florence Nightingale, he's got me."

"You tell him, Rosie."

Good old Rosie to the rescue. Always there to bail him out. He doubled her tip. The air had cleared and he could move on to a new topic.

"What happened back there with you and Thompson? What made you do it?"

"Simple. Couldn't stand the grovelling."

"You're crazy."

"No. Just proud."

"David, we're talking about maybe two hundred thousand dollars."

"Take it. You need it more than I do."

"Why the hell do I put up with you?"

"Must be love."

"That's a strange word coming from you. Ever use it around Francine?"

"This is getting too heavy for me, pal. I'm calling it

a night."

Rosie came over as soon as David had gone. He knew from her walk that trouble was brewing.

"Hey Leduc, your friend's right, you know."

"Don't tell me you've gone turncoat on me, Rosie."

"You are killing yourself. Right before my eyes."

"Look, Rosie, I have this ethic. You can do anything you want, as long as you don't hurt anyone except yourself. You can become a drunk, a prostitute, anything."

"Thanks for the absolution."

Her tone told him he'd broken his code.

"Sorry, Rosie. Say, where did you learn a big word like 'absolution'?"

"I wasn't born in this crummy joint."

"Now that you mention it, me neither."

"Then tell me something, Leduc. Why are we here?"

"Who knows? Maybe someday we'll find something worthwhile in that cruel world out there and we'll leave this place forever."

"I hope so, but I doubt it."

"Me, too. Get me another round, will you?"

"You never learn, Leduc."

"Maybe I don't want to."

No. He didn't want to. Not as long as there was a Francine to forget. He caught the excuse. He'd started drinking long before he'd ever met her. Though he couldn't remember why. Maybe someone had insulted him. Maybe because the stuff was there. He supposed he could walk.

away from it if he deemed it necessary. In fact, he knew
he could.

III

Barbara

"Barbara, I'm so sorry, I thought you knew."

"It's all right, Francine."

"I really feel terrible now that I've gone and spoiled your surprise."

"I'm surprised. Believe me."

"I've got to run, I just dropped by to let you know I would be coming."

Gunther rarely told her anything in the way of deliberately passing on information, but this was ridiculous. Two weeks in Florida and not a word about it. The incident heightened her growing sense of isolation. Lately, she had come to conceive of herself as an appendage, a marginal being that occupied a miniscule space on the outskirts of humanity.

Everyone else lived in the city of Amerop or similar

places like Orientoptic, Siemens, Phillips, Zeiss. In them, intricate and expensive merchandise was being produced, bought and sold. The sales representatives, purchasing agents, doctors and technicians who peopled this world engaged in ceaseless warfare. Innocent bystanders, like herself and Francine, were often victims of friendly fire.

She had been wondering why Gunther was spending Saturday at the office. Now she knew. He was putting his affairs in order.

Light flooded the kitchen. Extinguished. Metal locked with metal.

"Is it cold out?"

"It's February, Barbara, what else could it be?"

"Hot. Very hot."

"Nonsense, Barbara."

"In Miami."

He stopped in the act of removing his overcoat. His face metamorphosed from disagreeable to red. Barbara enjoyed this disruption of his usual placid state.

"I see you have been speaking with Francine."

"Obviously she did most of the talking."

"Well, is she coming?"

"Why don't you call her back and follow up on your own invitation?"

"Don't be like that, Barbara. I think it's most ungrateful of you to go into one of your sulks. You should be looking forward to the trip."

She was. Now that the initial shock was over. It

should be exciting, she told herself, her first flight; her first time out of the country; her first taste of the ocean, she wondered if the salt would sting her skin; her first real vacation, new faces and situations. But the small joys she conjured up by pondering the 'shoulds' quickly evaporated as the 'wills' asserted themselves.

Francine will wear her string bikini. Gunther will insist on rubbing her down with lotion while Barbara herself will have to turn contortionist to protect her own back. Gunther will be full of praise for the purchases Francine will make while she won't be able to afford much more than a sunhat or beachbag. Gunther will hold the doors wide open for her brother's girlfriend while his dear wife rushes through before they slam on her. So let them shut her out.

As she struggled with the 'wills', a personage began to take shape. The woman who now emerged had been inside of her for some time, festering rather than growing. Barbara knew her well. This person was eager to partake of whatever her routine-glutted marriage had been depriving her of for the last decade and a half.

She went to Gunther. He was at his desk in the den drawing up a list of items to bring.

"I am looking forward to the trip. Very much."

"Now that's more like it."

"I'll start getting ready tomorrow."

"No, Barbara, I'll do the packing. It's better that way."

"But I want to do it, at least for myself."

"You have no experience in these things."

How little he knew.

"When my father was living, I used to make up all his suitcases when he went away on business."

"That may be Barbara, but he's been dead a very long time."

"He's not the only one."

The matter was settled. She felt the new woman shrinking into nothingness. Barbara let her go. Perhaps she would rediscover her lying in the shade of the palm trees or buried under the sand.

Despite her defeat, she remained determined to find some pleasure in the trip. At least she would spend two glorious weeks of having someone else clean up after her. She wondered if she would enjoy it as much as Gunther did. Of course, he'd never admit to taking pleasure, yet he never refused any of her services. Unless it is a question of competence--like packing a suitcase. Obviously, he never expects her to go anywhere without him.

Gunther

He thought Friday would never come. Tomorrow at 0900 hours they would be airborne. He inspected his corner with pride. His shelves were tidy and his desk clear. Also, he had prepared certain important clients for his two week absence.

This was to be the first time in twenty years that he was out of the office for more than five consecutive days. And even most of those sojourns had been business conferences in New York or exhibitions in other Canadian cities.

For once he was relieved that no big deals required his immediate and ongoing attention. The first two months of the year had so far been despairingly slow, but he expected business to pick up in March with the introduction of the new measuring instrument.

For once Amerop would have a unique instrument to offer. The new image analyser, to be used in conjunction with the electron microscope, Amerop's naturally, would sell for fifteen thousand eight hundred. Gunther already had thirty potential customers lined up.

New York had never been so good to him. Only this morning the memo announcing Ted's promotion arrived. He reread it lovingly. The fun part was that David hadn't seen it yet.

Memo to all employees:

Head office is pleased to announce that Ted Schultz, currently Assistant Manager of our Toronto Branch will assume duties as Branch Manager of our Montreal office the first of April of this year.

Signed: Gordon C. Hinely

President--Amerop Scientific Industries

New York was not the only harbinger of glad tidings. Through the grapevine came the news that Gil Thompson would most likely turn to Orientoptic for the vision analysing equipment. Gunther hadn't the least inkling of how the goings on in the hospitals and universities, wherever, leaked down to the reps; he only knew the source to be scandalously accurate.

He was no lover of Orient, besides which he couldn't abide Leduc. But this time, he had to admit, it was good to see David getting the knocks.

A wolf whistle pierced the early morning stillness. Gunther didn't bother checking it out. David was merely flattering the secretary, Mrs. Graham, a fifty year old woman with a face like a toad. David once claimed a whistle a week gets things done. Well, let Mr. Gavin try to whistle himself into Blakely's office.

"Well, Captain Stiefelmayer, all set for take off?"

"That's really funny, David."

"It's vacation, man, let yourself relax a bit."

"There are a couple of items that need discussing before my departure."

"Anything you say, mon capitaine."

Gunther withheld his reproaches. Might as well let him have a few laughs while he still can.

"If Georges Ranger of the Neurological Institute calls, he will be needing advice on what we have to offer in microsurgery; and if Michel Fizet should drop by, though I doubt whether he'll come down from Three Rivers until most of the snow is gone, there's a package for him in the stockroom."

"Why don't we ship it to him?"

"No one is to know he has it."

"Ah, such wheelings and dealings. Gunther, I never suspected you had it in you."

"You'll find out soon enough you don't have the monopoly on intrigues."

"Whatever that's supposed to mean."

"You'll find out, I guarantee it."

On the way to his appointment at the Loyola Campus on Sherbrooke street, Gunther stopped in at the General to check if Francine required any last minute assistance. But he couldn't find her in either the lab or the cafeteria. A colleague informed him she was sick for the day. He called her at once from the hospital gift shop.

"I heard you were sick."

"Yeah, sick of the lab. I need the day to pack."

"You should have been organized days ago."

"We can't all be perfect like you, Gunther. Don't worry, I'll be ready by eight."

He hung up relieved but disappointed. Surely this hockey playing was the result of proximity with David. In a way, he felt he was also to blame. It occurred to him that he should have offered to go over and help her pack earlier in the week. Women seemed to be totally devoid of a sense of space.

David

He stared at the memo blankly. It seemed incredible that Gunther of all people should have executed such an underhanded manoeuvre. That's probably what he was snickering about before he left the office. Of course, nothing in the announcement suggested Gunther's complicity. But it was there. David would have bet his all on it.

He remembered how thick Gunther and Schultz used to be. Schultz's transfer to Toronto came as a shock to Gunther, who tried to persuade him not to go. Rumor was the move had to do with Schultz's wife, Susan. David had seen her a few times at Barbara's--a flighty thing who lived on fads and movie magazines. Quite a flirt, too.

Hands clasped behind his neck, he tried to fathom the full meaning of his demise. It meant among other things, he would have to abandon all notions of taking over Blakely's office. That meant he would be doomed to go on facing his brother-in-law's rimless glasses and weak chin countless times a day. Worse, he would have to keep putting up with Gunther's patronizing advice.

No. He couldn't subject himself to that indefinitely. He wouldn't. He picked up the phone. Maybe Blakely could help him out.

"Ian, Dave Gavin here, how are things in the big apple?"

"Great. Couldn't be better. I've been expecting your call."

That meant at least he'd given some thought to the dilemma. David felt better.

"It was Gunther, wasn't it?"

"Yup."

"Damn son-of-a-bitch. Where do we go from here?"

"I checked it out this morning as soon as I got the organization chart update. I hate to tell you this, it's on the level and it's already gone through the computer."

"Damn."

What thou shalt bind with the computer shall be bound irrevocably.

"As I see it Dave, there's only one course you can take and that's talk Schultz out of wanting the job."

"And I bet he just can't wait to get up here."

"He's already got a buyer for his house. Overall it's a logical move for him you know."

"Don't remind me."

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, but you will. You always have in the past. Give my regards to Francine, you two still going steady?"

"Till death do us part."

"At the rate you're going, it probably will."

He was even more disturbed after the phone call. As if he could convince Schultz to relinquish the job. But

there had to be a way.

February was coming to an end. And he had all of March. Every fiber of his being must be summoned up and directed toward regaining this lost ground. He now regretted having thrown over the Thompson deal. One thing was certain. He would have to get it back even if it meant crawling on his stomach. If Orient or anyone else got it, head office would find cause for having made the right decision in dropping him for Schultz.

Wait until he got ahold of Gunther. Imagining his enemy lolling about in the sun for the next two weeks increased his ire. He wondered if he could catch him at home.

"Barb, it's Dave, would Gunther happen to be there?"

"No, he's out in the field somewhere."

"Typical Gunther, working till the end. I'll try again this evening."

"Okay. But you'd better make it around nine."

"He's not doing overtime, is he?"

"Not even Gunther is that far gone. He's going to pick up Francine. She's overniting with us since we have to leave for the airport quite early."

"I see. Talk to you later."

Gunther's conspiracy was much more far-reaching than he had supposed. The little twit was trying to take everything from him, his job, his girl. Well, let him try. And what about Francine? He was speaking to her a couple of days ago. Yet, not a word.

He looked at his watch. If he hurried, he could still make his appointment with Corey. Generally, he did not enjoy peddling to opticians. Their operations were so standardized. Considering the markup on frames, you'd think they would give the customer a little decor.

An image of Gunther's rimless glasses lodged itself in a corner of his brain. Already schemes were beginning to formulate themselves. Some were outlandish and brutal, others calculating and possible. Especially one concerning Francine. Yes, she and Gunther were about to learn a very simple lesson the hard way.

Francine

They were still damp. She had taken her clothes from the dryer too soon. Or overloaded the machine. Whichever. It was already seven. Gunther would be coming within the hour. A long discourse on preparedness was sure to ensue as soon as he saw the chaos around her.

Heaps of garments lay about the room unironed and unfolded. Though it didn't look like it, there actually was a pattern to this mess.

On the bed lay bikinis, negligées, a low-cut evening gown and sheer summer dresses. These she categorized as her vamp-type outfits.

In a corner by the door were heaps of peasant blouses, ruffled cotton print skirts, a one-piece bathing suit and two pairs of white jeans. These made up her sweet-innocent-me collection.

Strewn over the arms of the rocking-chair were pastel frocks of ankle length, a knitted shawl and cork-heeled sandals--nineteenth century romantic.

It was ridiculous. She was too old for these theatrical games. At this stage of her life, she should have children approaching adolescence, a home in the suburbs, friends of her own sex who would drop by for coffee or a chat.

Why had she promised to go? Gunther was such a bore

and looking at Barbara would only remind her how much she missed David.

The phone stood silent on the night-table. She stared hard at it, concentrating, repeating David's name over and over, first in her head, then out loud. But it did not ring. She picked up the receiver thinking she would call him, just to say good-bye, but remembering the many times he had stood her up, she put it down again.

She finally decided on a mixed wardrobe. When she got to Florida, she figured she'd know what to wear.

A key turned in the lock. It seemed an eternity before he penetrated the apartment. Yet, she would not let herself go to him. He had probably heard about the trip from someone at the lab and wanted a good screw for the road.

"Why did you come?"

"What's this pouting? I thought you'd be delighted to see me."

"I'm very busy right now."

"So I see."

He leafed through the travel pamphlets that lay on top of her bureau.

"No tickets?"

"Gunther has them."

"You're not going, Francine."

"That's what you think."

"It's what I know."

"That shows how ignorant you are."

"Marry me, Francine."

The proposal took her by surprise. She wanted to cry out her acceptance of it. But something inside bottled it up. She replied instead with a question.

"David, do you mean it, really?"

"No, I'm just trying to break off your love affair with Gunther, that's all."

A moment passed. It was filled with long wonderful seconds. At last, she thought, after six years, at last.

She called Barbara to tell her the good news. Fortunately Gunther hadn't left the house yet. David sent out for wine and lasagna and stayed with her till morning.

She had never been happier. Life, she had once decided, consisted of three momentous events--a romantic proposal, an elaborate wedding and the birth of her first child. The first had come to pass and she looked forward eagerly to the next two.

Marc

"On your feet Leduc, your guardian angel just flew in."

He raised himself off the cot and followed the officer. The policeman said nothing further. It wasn't necessary, both knew the routine so well.

Rosie too, waited unspeaking as he claimed his watch and wallet. He wondered that she never seemed to tire of these trips down to the station. She could be making money at that moment with guys who weren't too drunk to get it up.

As she helped him into his overcoat, he calculated the number of tricks she could turn in three hours. That was the approximate time it took her to bail him out, get him home, make coffee and listen to his woes. He wasn't sure how much she charged, but he figured he owed her something. Only trouble was, she refused to collect.

"This coffee is putrid, Rosie, what did you do to it?"

"Don't know. Maybe the water's bad. Mine seems alright."

"Then it must be me. I'm rotting from the inside."

"Leduc, why don't you do yourself a giant favor and have yourself locked up in one of those drying out places?"

It was a pretty strong remark coming from her and his first impulse was to put her in her place. But then he remembered he owed her. So he decided to go easy on her.

"I refuse to commit myself because being shut up would deprive me of my free agency."

"Your what?"

He smiled at the blankness in her face.

"Free agency, my dear, is the privilege of each individual to choose the path best suited to his way of life."

"From what I see seven nights a week at Lorenzo's, you got no choice, Leduc."

"That's where you're wrong. Here's a quiz for you-- ready?"

"Shoot."

"Lorenzo's is on the corner of the block, right?"

"Right."

"So far, so good. Now, for the grand prize of a second cup of coffee, including two drops of sweetener and a tablespoon of powdered whitener, what building is on the other end of that very same block?"

"Easy. A church."

"So you see? I choose my opiate."

She did not reply at once. Instead she did make up that second cup of coffee. He felt her pity enveloping him and resented her for it.

"The way I see it, Leduc, if you can't choose to choose, you ain't free."

"That right?"

"How do I know? It's how I see it."

After she had gone, he tried to eradicate her wisdom.

But the retort proved indelible. As he drank, he attempted to analyse the matter of his agency once again.

He was drinking, had been since ten a.m. The decision to get drunk had been made at nine-thirty right after he hung up with Vancouver. Though muddy, the gist of the call floated around in his head.

Head office was worried about his reputation. Head office suggested he conform to their reps' standards of being wholesome and cleancut. Head office was hearing unsavory rumors about this problem he has.

He drained his glass and poured another. What did it matter what Vancouver heard? Wasn't it what they saw that counted? As long as the sales kept coming in, they had no right to get nosey about his personal life. As long as he didn't hurt anyone but himself, they ought to leave him alone.

Before drifting into mindlessness, he decided to go and see Thompson and try to wrap up the deal for the eye-care instruments. He didn't want to take that very odd chance that David might humble himself and start pushing the Vision Charter/Vision Diagnostics line anew. It was the first time since joining the company that he felt an overwhelming insecurity. And he didn't like it one bit and meant to do something about it right away.

IV

Barbara

Barbara watched her brother stir up the fire.

"Why, David?"

"Why does anyone get married?"

"I'm not talking about anyone. I'm talking about David Gavin."

He did not answer at once, but replaced the screen before the fire. Even in the glow of the flames, his face remained matter-of-fact and unsoftened. She had never known him any other way.

"People only marry for love in fairytales, Barbara. Out here in the real world, they marry for money, or status, because she's pregnant, he's lonely or it's the thing to do."

"And which of these noble motives is prodding you to take that giant step with Francine?"

"Some brotherly advice, sis. Don't bother yourself

with what doesn't concern you."

But it did concern her. Under the cowl neck sweater which concealed a good portion of her body were the reasons for her concern.

Gunther had had another nightmare. Two, in fact, since Francine's call announcing the engagement.

David had scarcely driven off with his laundry when Gunther came in. Instead of merely retreating to the den during her brother's visits, he now made a point of leaving the property. She wouldn't have been surprised to learn he was watching the house from a distance.

"Did you have a nice drive?"

"Is it true?"

"Yes."

He turned and walked out again. This time he left the property on foot. Barbara was glad. Let him use up that hostile energy that erupts in his sleep.

Upstairs, she contemplated the suitcase in the corner of their bedroom. Of course, the trip was off. How could they consider a vacation without Francine along to liven up the trip and make it worthwhile? In a way, she was grateful they had cancelled it. She did not want to parade her bruises up and down the beach.

The sun set. Barbara did not turn on the lamp. She liked to sit in dusky rooms. Perhaps because she was comfortable with shadows, having lived in them for so long.

As a child she had trailed in David's shadow. In the

stillness, her mother's voice reverberated off the walls, took on substance and filled the room.

"Where is Davey's sissy? Will Davey's sissy help Davey with his shoe laces? Will Davey's sissy draw him a bath? Naughty Davey's sissy, why did you hide his tractor and truck?"

She was still Davey's sissy. Shadows were cumulative, for she now found herself to be Gunther's wife as well.

The suitcase flaunted itself. She opened it, took out a dress, a nightgown and a pair of slacks. Then returned them to the valise.

She would go somewhere. For a couple of days at least. To Francine or David, she didn't know anybody else. Not right now. But someday soon.

The light flashed on blinding her, forcing her lids shut.

"What are you doing in the dark?"

"Just thinking."

"About what?"

"About you, Gunther."

And David. And my father. How tiring it has been keeping house for you all at one time or another. How tiring it is always to be doing someone else's dirty work. How tiring it is to be cross-examined like this.

"How about thinking about supper?"

"I don't have to. Today is Sunday. Sunday means weiners, boiled potatoes, cucumber salad and one litre of beer--headless."

"Very funny, Barbara."

"No, Gunther. It isn't. Not at all."

Gunther

He needed something to pacify her, to restore the tranquility which seemed to be slipping away from him.

"May I help you, sir?"

"I would like a plant."

"Anything particular in mind?"

He did not appreciate the way the woman peered at him over her half-eye glasses. Older women, he had often observed, take on the mien of witches. The female sex, he had always believed, should self-destruct at the age of thirty.

"It's for my wife."

"Perhaps if you tell me the occasion, I can help you make a choice."

"There is no occasion."

"May I recommend a few carnations or some of these sweetheart roses? See how tiny and fragile they are."

He shook his head. The woman's suggestion of cut flowers was so typical of North American business practices. Their creed of pawning off merchandise with built-in obsolescence disgusted him.

"My wife prefers potted plants."

"Very good, sir."

He finally settled on an African violet. They were inexpensive and did not require too much care.

On the way back to the car he passed a bridal shop. He wondered how Francine could be so blind. Didn't she realize that all David wanted was a marriage of convenience. It was so obvious. To move up in big business, one must have a wife.

"How lovely, this flower here has practically the same shape as the bruise on my shoulder. The right one, that is."

He had been prepared for a cool reception, even an icy one, but not this.

"If you don't want it, I can always give it to someone who will appreciate it."

"You mean Francine? No, thank you. It'll do fine. Winter landscapes can be so wearying."

So that's what these moods were all about. Of course she didn't grasp that David's proposal indicated he was going to make a move for the manager's office; that he himself had to stick around to protect Ted's interests.

"We'll make the trip another time, when this promotion business is settled."

"No, we won't. It will be like before."

"Now what are you talking about?"

Lately, she had taken to speaking in riddles more often than ever. Probably to annoy him. As if he wasn't under enough stress at present.

"I'm talking about vacations--you and Ted never taking any, complaining you have to work all the time and never

admitting how much you enjoy it. Me and Susan shut up in that creaky old cabin off the back river, her four brats tearing the place up."

"I'm surprised at you, Barbara. You should be grateful Susan can drive you around. How far do you think you could get by yourself?"

She skulked out of the room. For an instant, he feared she would do something silly like lock herself in the bathroom for two or three hours. But the clatter of pots and plates and cutlery reassured him. Still, he decided he had better be firm with her lest these tantrums really became a regular occurrence.

✓

David

He gloated over the perfumed letter on his desk. "I think you've got a live one," Mrs. Graham had said when she brought it in. For formality's sake, he slit open the envelope. As surmised, the note came from Susan Schultz.

Dear D.

Of course I remember you. What girl wouldn't? The amazing thing is that you took notice of me at all.

You are right, I confess, all that flirting the night of the company dinner in New York was aimed at you. I felt quite foolish the day after, but not anymore.

Yes, I would love to dine with you in Toronto the second week of March. Call me during the day to let me know where and when. Till then,

love,

S.

He consulted his desk calendar. Only three days had passed since he posted the invitation. She must have replied as soon as she received it. If his plan worked, Blakely's office would once again be made accessible to him. At this moment, his future hinged on Susan's falling desperately in love with him.

With the quick and skilful movements that come of having had a fun-loving boyhood, he transformed the scented sheet into a sleek jet. The letter whizzed past Gunther diving nose down into the wastebasket.

"I see the acting Branch Manager is extremely busy this morning."

"That's right, Gunther, I'm going to overload that trash can with planes before I take one step out of the office."

David grabbed several pieces of direct mail and sent them floating across the space that separated him from his brother-in-law.

"I wish you'd put as much energy into the Thompson deal, I've been hearing some very disagreeable stories about it."

"Oh, what kind of fairytales are those gossips polluting the air with this time?"

"It's no joke. Apparently Orientoptic is walking away with the deal."

Not that Gunther really wanted him to get the sale. Gunther didn't want him to get anything.

"You know something, Gunther?"

"What?"

"Those rumors are one hundred and ninety-nine per cent true."

He loved the stunned fish expression that invaded Gunther's face whenever the unexpected struck.

"Well, aren't you doing something to get it back?"

In reply, he made up three more planes and shot them

one by one straight up so that they tumbled to the floor.

"It's only fair to warn you, David, Ted Schultz won't put up with this kind of nonsense."

"Let me tell you something, Gunther. Ted Schultz is the one who had better watch out. And to answer your question of way back when, I am doing something about the Thompson deal."

"Like what?"

"Like you'll find out when I'm ready to tell you."

Which will be when it's too late for you to sabotage the project. He smiled as his brother-in-law stomped off in a self-righteous huff. How on earth did his sister put up with such a person?

With Gunther out of the way, he settled down to his affairs. It had taken him a week to develop the scheme and now it was ready for launching. Basically, the optician's office he had visited on the way to Francine's had triggered his brainchild.

The primness of Corey's setup had stuck in his head like old peanut butter sticks to the palate. It was a sensation that demanded immediate relief. Why couldn't these places have more flair? Pizazz, even?

His musings germinated and one morning he woke up with the Vision Charter Boutique concept. Why push the instruments only? Why not sell the specs with them? Amerop was already grinding corrective lenses. In the beginning, they would have to buy designer frames, but eventually they could have their own line. What Amerop would offer was the

total eye-care program.

He would have to work swiftly and secretly. The less New York knew about it, the more impressed they would be. So that when Ted Schultz informs head office he won't be coming to Montreal, he would have to be ready--the logical choice for the job--daring, innovative and successful.

Much as he prided himself on making it alone, he acknowledged the need for assistance in this matter. He must have the expertise of someone in the field. Someone who knew the business and could persuade the frames people to go in with them. One person came to mind. He called the Eye-Care Clinic and asked for Fiona Mulvey.

Francine

The diamond glittered back at her across the layers of bullet-proof glass. Its price-tag lay face down. No matter, she had a fair idea of its value. She had been looking at diamonds for a long time.

In the beginning, when she and David had been dating only a few months, she used to seek out rings with a single tiny gem set in a heart or oval. They were inexpensive, but still diamonds. Which was fine for two people very much in love.

But as the years accumulated, so did the carats. By the fourth year, her attention had shifted to clusters. Combinations of different jewels also appealed to her. At that time, she was especially fond of a pear-shaped sapphire set in a circle of diamonds.

Now, it was the big time. The fifteen thousand dollar solitaire. She knew David could afford it. He was a scrupulous saver. Perhaps the only scruples he did have. As soon as it popped into her head, she regretted her sarcasm. She wanted to think only happy thoughts. That's what happy people do.

Possessing that fabulous ring would make her happy. She did not consider herself a gold-digger. If David were poor, she could settle for less. If circumstances were different, she could even be content with none at all.

A relationship that had dragged on as long as hers and David's took on a somewhat bitter perspective. Something was owing.

A young couple, arms entwined about each other's waists, stopped beside her. She stared at their reflection in the glass. They were little diamond people.

"Wistful shopping?"

She turned at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Marc, how good to see you. No. It's for real. David and I are engaged at last. Believe it or not."

Silence hung between them. He also had difficulties accepting the fact. Like her colleagues at the lab. Like herself.

"Congratulations, Francine, I wish you both every happiness."

His words seemed wooden, as if coming from far off. From this great distance where they had been stored away never expecting to be called into use.

"I wish you would say that like you mean it."

"I do mean it."

"I'm sorry, Marc. I guess the excitement is getting to me."

"David meeting you?"

"No. He's busy. As always."

"Take you to supper?"

"I really must go home. David might call."

The conversation struck her as redundant. One of many such dialogues they had exchanged in the past six years.

"Then how about if we pick up some Chinese food and eat it at your place?"

"Like old times."

"Like old times."

They ate until they were stuffed and related the tales of woe they had suffered in the three months they hadn't seen each other. And Marc finally passed out on Saki, though he did manage to stay sober a good part of the evening. And David didn't call. And she went to bed hoping to hear from him the next day. And she realized the engagement had changed nothing. It was just like old times. And old times were immutable.

Marc

In theory, Francine's engagement left him numb. In actuality, it enabled him to see her more often than ever before. The notion that she officially belonged to another set up effective barriers to the hurt that being with her caused.

He examined the calendar. In the two weeks since he had encountered her outside the jewellers, they had already met seven times. Mainly to shop.

The first time out they purchased her hope-chest. The following excursions, they filled it. Lingerie, bedclothes, linen, crystal, china, silverware; he helped her select them all. Unfailingly, she chose whatever pleased her, regardless of price.

At first her extravagance offended his budget-conscious mentality. But recalling the situation, he conceded she should enjoy. He had come to see her as a person stricken with some dreaded terminal disease. These shopping sprees represented a type of last supper in which he saw himself privileged to wait upon her.

He had no idea how long the malady might endure. Sunday they would go househunting. Once the dwelling was fixed, he figured they could spend considerable time furnishing it. The thought of what might happen when there was nothing left to buy was too horrible for him to ponder.

One thing was certain, though, a life of flitting from store to store with Francine was better than a life without her. Especially at this time.

Every few days, Vancouver reminded him by phone or mail that his quota was far from being met. They seemed to ignore the fact that his careful nursing of Gil Thompson, which he kept them scrupulously up to date on, showed promise of a quotation in the near future. From their pinnacle on the thirty-third floor, three thousand miles away, they regarded him as an unpredictable alcoholic who threatened their corporate survival.

He told them they needn't worry. Water, pure and invigorating, was all he imbibed nowadays. After the first few days of abstinence, which began the day they bought the hope-chest, he made a pact with himself. No matter what happened, he would never drink again.

He was strong. He could pass any test. To prove it he drove down to Lorenzo's. It felt good to be in control of a vehicle again.

"Son of a gun, Leduc, where've you been hiding?"

She had missed him. He pecked her on the cheek affectionately to make up for not thinking of her at all since his reformation.

"Nowhere, Rosie. As a matter of fact I've been more outside than in, the past couple of weeks."

"I'll bet she's beautiful."

"A real lady, just like you."

"Same old slick tongue. The usual poison?"

"No. Bring me an orange juice on the rocks."

"Now I know it's serious."

Her gait was a bit shakier than normal as she made her way to the bar. He wondered if she'd been working later or harder. Her movements were quick but uneven when she set his glass down.

"Easy, you'll wear yourself out."

"Tell me about her, Leduc."

"Not much to tell. She's engaged, to someone else."

"I should have known. Why the hell do you do these things to yourself?"

"I have free agency, remember?"

"Well, I say damn. Damn your free whatever you call it."

Another customer signalled for her. He gulped down his juice and tried to slip away. But she caught up with him at the door.

"Leduc, if you ever need me, call."

"You're a good woman, Rosie."

"I mean it."

It was reassuring to know that when the time comes that shoulder would be there. If he should want it.

Barbara

The twenty-first of March had always been one of her favorite days. Although Spring officially began long before the actual appearance of any green, the date still excited her. It was ominous--in a positive way. It meant new grass, new leaves, fresh flowers, bird and squirrel babies, the rushing of a river freed from its icy confines.

And she wanted to be part of it, get caught up in its magic. Like the plants and creatures around her, she wanted to grow, blossom out and reproduce.

Turning away from the window and the whiteness it framed, she massaged her right arm. Gunther's nightmares had been intensifying. Though no new bruises resulted from the last bout, something more horrifying than all the subconscious attacks taken together had occurred.

Barbara was not absolutely sure. But for a fraction of a second, it seemed to her, Gunther's eyes were open.

when he struck her.

The choking sound came from the bathroom. A signal to start breakfast. Six slices of lean bacon, three eggs easy over, four toasts sparsely buttered, with unsalted butter, two and a half cups of coffee, two tumblers of orange juice.

Through the kitchen curtains, the silhouette of the apple tree rose starkly before her. She wondered what they would harvest this fall--fruit or butterflies. Either would do.

"Gunther, let's have a child."

"What are you thinking of Barbara, you're almost forty."

"Thirty-three."

"We've discussed this before."

"It's getting late."

"Barbara, I don't see how anyone with a decent conscience could bring a child into a world as corrupt and anxiety-ridden as ours. Look at the papers--hostages in Iran, bombings in Belfast, the SALT treaties."

He tossed the Gazette to her. She laid it aside without glancing at the headlines.

"I don't see how anyone who is genuinely concerned with the quality of life can refuse to raise children who might be able to deal with these problems."

"I'm surprised a person of your age still believes in Santa Claus."

"Don't call me a person, Gunther; that's getting away from the issue."

"Which is?"

"I'm a woman, Gunther. Inside this body beats a warm maternal heart."

"I like the cliché. Did you dig it out of one of those books you're always carting home from the library?"

"You don't have to read a book to desire a child. The majority of the world's population is illiterate."

She saw that last word coming from the moment she started the sentence. But she couldn't hold it back. Her defeat on a rational level assured, she humbled her tone.

"In a country like Canada, what harm can one more little baby do?"

"Lenin was once a baby. And so was Hitler and Timothy Leary and Jim Jones."

"And you."

"I suppose you think that was witty and humorous."

"I'm sorry, Gunther, honestly. This is so important to me, I would appreciate if we could discuss it in earnest."

"Alright, let's be serious. Babies, as I have stated many times before, are troublesome. Gone would be the quiet life we now have and which I frankly enjoy and greatly value."

"What about me? I mean, there must be more to life than washing windows and scrubbing floors."

"Do you want to live in a pigsty?"

"Gunther, I know everybody has to do drudgey things, but when the chores are done, there has to be something else."

"Barbara, I like my peace."

"What about what I like?"

"There you go. Typical case of Gavin selfishness."

To emphasize his point, he walked away from the table.

She let him go. If he sat there forever, the real reason for their childless marriage would never come out. Gunther would never admit to her or anyone that he could not tolerate the emergence of another self-willed being in his house. Put that way, the matter was clear and simple and final. Beyond discussion. Like everything.

She was growing impatient with this silence. The woman she had glimpsed once before when they were supposed to fly south had returned to haunt her. And she knew there was only one way to exorcise this fantom. Like it or not, Gunther would have to talk it out with her. There was no other choice.

When? Barbara didn't know. But, soon.

Gunther

Perhaps she was going through early menopause. Or maybe she was watching too much TV. Whatever the cause of Barbara's scenes, one thing was sure. Settling in Canada had been one big mistake. He should have brought her home right in the beginning when his mother was still alive. His mother would have done a good job of training her up.

The phone rang.

"Amerop Scientific, good morning, Stiefelmayer speaking."

"Gunther, it's Ted."

"Ted, how are things? When can we expect you up here?"

"I'm afraid the move is off, Gunther."

"Nonsense, what are you saying?"

Ted blurted out plenty during the ten minute call, much of which he repeated over and over until Gunther almost lost patience with him. After they'd hung up, he tried to piece together the reasons for his friend's defection.

The kids would have trouble adjusting, Ted had said. Susan had plans for the garden. Their house in Willowdale was just about paid up. Susan was in the middle of a macramé course at a local high school. A trip to the homeland was in the planning so the money was especially tight. Susan would no longer feel comfortable in Montreal now that Quebec had gone francophone.

Susan. The name reverberated from the back of his head to the front, echoing louder and louder. Based on what he knew of her, Gunther could not believe Susan would pass up the opportunity for a move.

A notion began to take form. He remembered the rumors surrounding the Schultz's move to Toronto. Susan, he had heard via that infallible grapevine, was supposed to be having an affair with some professor who had once dropped by the house to pick up some pamphlets on lunar photography. The memory prodded him to glance over in David's direction.

David was arranging his briefcase. David was whistling. David seemed happy that morning. Very happy.

"You're very pleased with yourself this morning."

"Darn right I am."

"And why shouldn't you be? You've succeeded in getting Ted Schultz to relinquish his promotion."

"Gunther, I have to admit it, you're smarter than I gave you credit for."

"Pretty low, don't you think, undermining a marriage?"

"Before you extol the blessings of marital bliss, read these."

Gunther took the letters David handed him. Without examining them, he dropped them in the wastebasket.

"Does Francine know about this?"

"No. But I'm sure she'll find out. Really, Gunther, you're so transparent. Bad sales psychology on the part of the rep."

"Keep your lectures to yourself. You're not my boss."

"Yet. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got to get out there and sell."

"Ah, searching for more victims."

"The way your sales have plummeted since January, I'm surprised you don't hustle a bit more."

David whistled his way out to the elevator. Gunther retrieved the letters from the trash can. Francine would have to see these. He wondered if he should call Ted and try to convince him the affair was a scam. Then he remembered that Susan's response had been real.

He flipped through his customer file index. What David said was true, things were going real slow. If only he hadn't lost the fiber optics to that Brazilian firm. That half a million would have more than topped his quota of three hundred and fifty thousand.

He spent the morning mapping out a sales strategy. Mondays he would devote to pushing the electron microscope, Tuesdays to lasers, Wednesdays to the operation microscope, Thursdays to the image analyser and Fridays to whatever else needed doing. For a while anyway, he would do his paperwork on the weekends to give him maximum time in the field.

It was Tuesday all day. He knew the General was looking into lasers for the treatment of venereal diseases.

He also knew Orientoptic was after the deal. Gunther decided to go over there right away. By evening, he hoped, Marc Leduc would be edged out of the competition.

David

He had won the first battle. Schultz was out of the picture. He wasn't worried about the guy's wife, she would cool down after a few unanswered letters. Though he savored the triumph of the moment, David was too superstitious to gloat.

The stakes were high and he wasn't going to take any chances. If someone told him burying his fingernails in a graveyard at midnight would get the results he was after, he would do it. Caution had always been a key word in his life. Not only did he never count his chicks before they hatched, he only permitted himself to relax when they were full grown.

So Blakely's office was once again officially vacant. So what? What if New York was seeking a replacement for Schultz elsewhere? What if they've latched onto the notion that a branch manager has to be middle aged? Well, he wasn't going to peddle for the next fifteen years. He had become convinced there was only one way for him to achieve this stepping stone to future presidency.

His secret weapon: the Vision Charter Clinic/Boutique-- a uniting of the scientific with the aesthetic. Fiona's statistics confirmed his assumptions. Montrealers were ready for the glamour concept in eye-care.

After a brainstorming session which began Friday noon and ended three a.m. Saturday, they had agreed to the

following set-up. David could picture it vividly. The optician would have two front rooms curtained off from each other. On the clinic side, the customer would have his eyes and previous prescriptions examined by the electrovision scanner, Vision Charter and lensometer. Afterward, he would be ushered to the boutique side to select a designer frame.

They figured they could launch the project by the end of May. With April first three days away, the next two months would be tough, but exciting. Like the girl lying next to him.

Her ivory skin and ebony hair made him think of Snow White. But this Snow White had no truck with dwarves. She moved among giants of the professions and industries, a corporate courtesan destined for greatness.

He stroked her shoulder until she opened her eyes.

"Good afternoon, Snow White."

"Hi, Dopey."

"Is that any way to greet your business partner?"

"How about Grumpy?"

"I think I prefer Dopey."

"Me, too."

She was fun. Business or pleasure, he enjoyed being with her. Which was a good thing as they would be spending considerable time together from now on. A lifetime.

According to the scheme, if New York went for the project, Fiona would come into the company as assistant manager--eye products. If head office vetoed it, they would strike out on their own. He was sure he could get the

franchise for Orient's Vision Plotter line. Going back to his former employer was out of the question. The outfit was too small-minded to accommodate both him and his lady executive. Fiona did everything on a grand scale.

He gave her a squeeze.

"Tell me about your prince charming."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"I don't know much about his specifics, will a general outline do?"

"I'm easy to please."

"He's a Texan. Wealthy, of course. He has a ranch outside of Dallas and an apartment in New York. He's away a lot because of his oil dealings, but has a very handsome and agile chauffeur I can ride with when I'm not travelling with him."

"I like the pun."

"And a mistress or two to keep him in marital bliss."

He chucked her under the chin.

"You're something else, you know that? Any other woman would have described the man she's with."

"I'm not any other woman. Besides, I hear you're engaged, so what the hell are you doing here?"

"Going on a diet doesn't mean starving to death."

"Seriously, are you going to marry her?"

"One of these days. Maybe."

Monday morning they both called in sick. Then, after

a quick breakfast, they drove to the TopFlite ad agency on Dorchester. David was ecstatic about the campaign they proposed to him. In addition to the regular posters and slogans, there would be a slide show using the magic lantern technique he had once seen at Expo '67.

The slides would show the models in different settings-- the beach, an outdoor café, wind surfing on Lake St. Louis. Before each change of set, these models, accompanied by jazzy music, would seem to walk out of the screen onto the runway. Enter the live models--sporting the frames to be displayed in the boutique part of the set up. Of course, the client would only notice the girls from the neck down. But he would remember that this flesh had been presented to him courtesy of Vision Charter.

Next they stopped at the printers to order the invitations. Sepia ink on parchment--plain, but expensive looking, above all, tasteful. Eleven hundred would go out. The mailing list comprised Montreal and its surrounding area--as far north as Chicoutimi, as far west as Ottawa. They expected a turnout of about two hundred fifty opticians and optometrists.

At the Four Seasons, they reserved an elegant salon and ordered canapés and an open bar. In all, they calculated the show would cost them ten thousand dollars, everything billed to Amerop.

It was the biggest gamble he'd ever taken. Several consequences could spring from it, not all pleasant. He might be a brilliant success, or end up fired, even sued. Though

on edge, David pushed the thought of failure to the back of his head. He exchanged smiles with Fiona. Together they would make it work. They had to.

VI.

Barbara

This time she had no doubt. His eyes were open when he struck her. As to why he assaulted her, she supposed there were several reasons. Perhaps because Ted Schultz had been manipulated into giving up the promotion. Perhaps because she had found and destroyed Susan's love letters to her brother.

She paced the bedroom floor holding an icebag to her cheek. The cold seemed to sting more than the blow. It was the first time he hit her in such a visible place.

He had yet to apologize for any of his violent acts. She gazed across the room where he stood before the mirror knotting his tie. His movements were swift and sure, as if nothing had happened.

"We have to talk, Gunther."

"Go ahead, then."

"Look at me, Gunther, look at this."

"For pete's sake, Barbara, what do you want me to do? Stay awake all night so I don't have nightmares?"

"You were awake."

She let him finish his tie. It did not meet with his approval. He undid it and began again.

"I want you to do something for me, Gunther."

"What?"

"Except for last night, it seems to me, all your so-called nightmares have occurred because of Francine."

"I think you'd better stop right there, Barbara, you've said enough."

She knew he wouldn't want to listen.

"I see. Wives should be seen and not heard."

"Look. I don't know what's gotten into you these days, but I can tell you this, you'd better straighten yourself out."

It was always the other guy. Never him.

"Why don't you straighten your own self out? I know how you can get rid of your nightmares. Try sleeping with Francine."

Again, he yanked the tie from his neck. She was getting to him. It was about time.

"Are you crazy, Barbara? What kind of a thing is that to say?"

"It's the truth, Gunther."

"It's Gavin talk. That's what it is. You Gavins are all alike."

"At least we don't hide from ourselves."

For the third time, he tried to knot his tie.

"I like your version of honesty--turning a beautiful friendship into a dirty joke."

"Gunther, how can you be so blind? There is nothing between you and Francine. Francine doesn't need you. I don't think she even wants you anywhere near her."

Giving up on his tie, he stuffed it into his pocket. He grabbed his briefcase and left the house. Her whole body trembling, Barbara collapsed onto the bed.

Throughout the dialogue she had remained by the door, in case he would have raised his hand against her. But he hadn't. There was no need for her to have been so frightened.

The instant his fist made contact with her face last night, she knew she had had enough. No more would she serve as a barometer recording the rise and fall of Gunther's stress levels. No more would she consent to be her brother's whipping girl.

In the light of the morning's triumph, she could even admit Gunther was not solely responsible for his opinion of her. Hadn't she encouraged it by her timidity and compliance? Well, those days were over.

Of course, he will come home this evening acting as if this duel of egos had not taken place. He will lecture her on a wife's duties to her husband and try to carry on as if she were still the obedient eighteen year old girl he married.

After breakfast she took the train into town. There was a new complex on St. Catherine street she longed to visit. And besides, it was time for her to start coming out.

Gunther

He would deal with her later. Right now, he had important matters to attend to. The Royal Vic had asked Orient for a quotation on the lasers. He would have to go down to the hospital and talk them out of it. He needed the sale badly.

The six digit figure of his quota burned in his mind. Nearly half the year had passed and so far he had only seventy grand to his credit. These days, he often regretted his job at Fotolange in Munich where an abundance of customers sought his advice and expertise.

Those had been good times, working alongside Frau Riemer and Herr Zündel. He never should have let Ted talk him into emigrating. But Ted was his buddy and five years older and he idolized him. He even married a Canadian girl, just like Ted.

Catalogue under his arm, he was almost out of the office when David called him back. Of course, Gunther had to obey the summons. David was technically his superior.

"You have something to say to me?"

"Don't make such faces, Gunther, it's good news."

"They've found a new manager?"

"My, my, aren't we nasty this morning? No, better.

Francine and I have broken our engagement."

"I warned her you wouldn't see it through."

Hadn't he known from the very start nothing would come of that relationship? After his appointment at the Vic, he figured he'd drop by the lab to see her.

He made his way toward the exit, but again David called him back.

"What is it now?"

"I might as well set you straight about the affair seeing as how you probably intend to go over and offer her your condolences and who knows what else."

"I'm sure I know all I need to know."

"Not quite. You see, it was Francine who broke off with me. In fact, according to this letter she sent me with some stuff I'd left at her place, she has also broke her lease and her contract with the General."

"What?"

What would she do? Where would she go? How would she manage? He must go to her.

"No need to get flustered, Gunther, she's in good hands. She's living with our noble competitor, Marc Leduc."

"That drunk?"

He could feel David's smirk at his heels as he headed for the elevator. Bypassing the Vic, he drove directly to Orientoptic. It took him less than a minute to learn Leduc had quit.

He called the office. David came on the line.

"You didn't tell me Leduc left Orient."

"You didn't ask."

"You Gavins think you're so smart."

"We know it, Gunther. By the way, as long as you're in that end of the city, drop in on Dr. Hebert and see if he's any closer to ordering those lasers."

"Why should I visit your clients? I've barely enough time to see my own."

"You'd have ample time, Gunther, if you would concentrate on your job."

He needn't have fretted over it. Hebert couldn't see him anyway. His daughter had coaxed him into attending a fashion show with her.

He proceeded to the General. At the lab, they refused to give out Francine's new address. All they could do, they assured him, was take his number and pass it on to her.

Leaving the hospital, he tripped up a flight of stairs and tore his pants below the right knee. Out of respect for his graver concerns, he refused to let the incident upset him. Besides, he was just about due for a new pair.

She left no forwarding address at the apartment. He did not understand her. Why should she seek solace with someone who was practically a stranger when he was there? There could be only one reason.

It had to be Barbara. With David coming around to see his sister, Gunther understood his house would be the worst place for Francine to be. Those Gavins certainly had a way of disrupting one's life.

David

His own wedding couldn't have brought him more joy. His combination clinic/boutique was heralded by all present as a sound business concept.

In one corner of the salon, Mrs. Graham was taking objective eye measurements on the electrovision scanner. In the opposite corner, the clients were doing subjective refractions on each other with the Vision Charter and those who wore glasses eagerly submitted them to the lensometer for testing. In the middle of all this equipment, flanked by two full-length mirrors, stood the display of designer frames.

David surveyed the room. About three hundred opticians and optometrists milled about trying, examining, selling themselves on the set up. He was lucky the show met its end of May deadline. In another week or two, enough of these guys would have been on vacation to turn the project into a colossal flop.

In this regard, the break with Francine proved timely. Her running off took one problem off his hands. Gunther: the poor sap hadn't found her yet.

Fiona flitted from client to client, seductively clasping hands with the men and flattering the women. He couldn't have done it without her. They had both had a good laugh on Thompson when he discovered her part in the show. He didn't seem to mind though. Seeing Thompson coming his way,

David put on a comradely smile.

"I know when I'm licked, Gavin, the order is yours."

"You mean we finally beat out Orient?"

"Never was any question. I was just amusing myself with a little harrassment."

Son-of-a-bitch.

"Have I ever told you how much I admire your honesty?"

"Never mind the butter, Gavin, let's talk price."

He knew the figures by heart.

"One electrovision scanner, three Vision Charters and three lensometers give you a grand total of one hundred ninety-one thousand three hundred Canadian dollars."

"Surely you don't expect us to pay a sum like that without a hassle."

"Ten per cent is all I can take off."

"When can you deliver?"

Thompson left with his two colleagues. They were probably heading for one of the hotel's bars to talk shop. Nothing fires enthusiasm like a new toy.

Fiona sidled by. He reached out and pulled her to him.

"Find Tex yet?"

"You kidding? Strictly small time stuff here."

"That include me?"

"Especially you, Davey-darling."

"You mean you wouldn't consider making it with your visionary colleague tonight?"

"If no millionaire shows up before closing time, you've got yourself a date."

"I always love a sure thing."

At eight sharp the next morning, he was on the blower with New York giving them the entire story on project Vision Charter. Only after they fully understood the work and cost entailed did he tell them of Thompson's purchase.

Two days later, they asked him to take the show on the road. He was to hit the major Canadian cities--Toronto, Edmonton, Vancouver, the maritimes.

He fought the idea as best he could without causing a scene. His main argument evolved around the fact that June and July were the peak vacation months. August, too. October and November would be better.

But New York felt the concept was too hot to sit on. As soon as competitors got wind of it, it would be copied. They wanted him to publicize it now.

He sought out Gunther.

"Congratulations."

"What for? I had nothing to do with the show. And frankly, it strikes me as most unethical and unorthodox to get help from outside the office."

"If you mean Fiona, I had no choice. She knows the business better than I do. Anyway, relax, your moment of glory has arrived. You are now the acting acting branch manager of this here outfit."

"I suppose you find that humorous."

"Great chance to show New York what you can do while I'm on the road with the eye-care line."

"I don't have to prove myself to New York."

Of course not, Gunther. We all know you're perfect.

"As I expect head office to drop the acting when I return, you might put an ad in the papers. You'll be needing a new colleague."

"I don't think so."

"I'm glad we agree on that matter."

By June sixth, David was ready to hit the road, his portable exhibition set up in a demo-yan. He had Mrs. Graham send out advance notices to company branches throughout Canada advising them of the date Vision on Wheels expected to be in their respective cities. After a brief stop at Fiona's, he struck out for Toronto.

Francine .

She was on her way to the Botanical Gardens when the metallic gold Firebird cut in front of the bus. Narrowly, missing a pedestrian, it veered into the parking lot of the Hôtel Dieu hospital.

She got off the bus at the next stop. As she hurried toward the lot, a pain pierced her side forcing her to slow down. By the time Francine reached the car, the driver had disappeared into the building.

She approached the car hesitantly. Cupping her hands against the window, she peered inside. The upholstery was beige. It wasn't David's after all.

At the corner, she caught the next bus and continued on to the Gardens. Although a born and raised Montrealer, she had never been there. Standing before the wrought iron gates, the feeling of being a stranger in her own city intensified. It had been developing within her for weeks.

She first noticed it after the sudden break with her old world. So many changes suddenly engulfed her. She had abandoned the heart of the city for the suburbs of Beaconsfield. She had no contacts with anyone on a first name basis. She no longer worked anywhere, having decided to rest up and for once get a decent summer tan. And since Marc now worked at Wagner's Men's Clothing, she had no access to the grapevine.

The glaring sun drove her into the shade. It was already the beginning of July. Almost seven weeks had passed since she and Marc had started over. Of course, they had drifted into the same bed. It was inevitable and both had expected it despite stipulations to the contrary.

As she approached a secluded bench, a pair of familiar eyes greeted her.

"Barbara, hi. It's so great to see a face I know."

"I'm glad to see yours, too."

"Gunther off today?"

"No. I came alone."

"Well, it's good to see you getting out. How did you travel out here?"

"By train and bus."

"Me, too."

Barbara seemed different. Unbarbara, somehow, yet more like David than ever.

"How is David?"

"Busy as ever. He's on the road with the eye boutique."

"Is someone travelling with him?" The question shamed her. To regain dignity, she qualified it. "I mean, does he have a technician or salesman with him?"

Barbara shook her head. Francine's heart resumed its normal rhythm.

"Shall we have coffee?"

"I'd better start home, Gunther likes his meals on time."

"Maybe next week.. I'll call you."

"I'd like that."

She watched Barbara pass through the gates that separated the tranquil grounds from the clatter and confusion of the rest of the city. No, Barbara wasn't David. But she wasn't Barbara either.

She did not mention the incident of the Firebird to Marc. He would only torment himself with it.

As usual, they cycled to the Dairy Queen after supper.

"I shouldn't eat these strawberry sundaes, I'm putting on weight."

"Fat, excuse the pun, chance."

"No, Marc, it's true. I've gained three pounds since we moved out here."

"Good suburban living for you."

All the fancy cars that were shut away in the winter to protect them from the salt paraded up and down the street. A scarlet Firebird sped by.

"Francine, marry me."

"I can't."

She sought his hand. She was sorry she had come to live with him. "Sorry for him."

Marc

If the woman hadn't taken so long deciding whether to buy her husband yellow briefs or green ones, he could have got away in time. After all, his break was long overdue. Unable to choose, the customer finally returned both pairs to the rack and Marc found himself face to face with Gunther Stiefelmayer. He tried to keep his voice cordial.

"Long time no see, how goes it at Amerop?"

"Still the same."

"David not top dog yet?"

"Fortunately not."

He was wondering what to say next when Gunther took the initiative.

"We were wondering where you had vanished to."

"Who is we?"

He did not like Gunther. On the other hand, he felt indebted to him. If he hadn't literally persecuted Francine, she probably would have lacked sufficient motivation to move in with him. Gunther answered his question with a question.

"How is Francine?"

"Fine, as Barbara has more than likely told you, we are expecting."

Gunther's jaw dropped. Marc wondered at the things people keep from each other.

"No. It must have slipped her mind. Listen, I would

like to see Francine."

"Actually, she's not feeling up to company. You know how it is."

"Yes, of course."

Of course Gunther knows everything. He and Francine had had some good laughs over what Gunther is supposed to know.

"Tell you what, I'll have her give you a call when she's ready for a visit."

"It's urgent that I speak to her."

"I'll tell her that."

He was afraid Gunther would make a scene. Luckily, the woman returned and having made up her mind, bought both sets of underwear. On the pretense of checking the price, he took refuge under the counter until Gunther had gone.

At closing he yanked off his tie and slung his jacket over his shoulder. The door handle of his car burnt the tips of his fingers. Even for August, it was a record hot day.

The traffic was bumper to bumper until he reached the autoroute. He missed the privilege of choosing his own hours. While working for Orient, he had often avoided rush hour by leaving the office fifteen minutes earlier. There were other things he missed about his former employ. Like his generous salary plus commission. Now he was making a little more than a third of his previous earnings.

But it was worth it. Nothing had any value compared to the sure knowledge that Francine was there to go home to.

Despite her pregnancy, she refused to marry him. She said she wasn't ready, that she was still weaning herself from David.

The airconditioned room made the bumps rise on his arms. Francine sat in the rocker, her hair done up in a turn-of-the-century style. She was knitting something pale and yellow and fluffy.

"Have a nice day?"

"Pretty decent, except Gunther showed up at the store."

"You didn't tell him where I am?"

"No way. You think I'm looking for a squatter?"

He watched her knit for a while. Her lips parted slightly as she counted the stitches.

"Been home all day?"

"Only since three. Barbara and I went to Bouclairs. I picked up some material for the cradle."

"Considering our pact to break all ties with the so-called scientific community, you seem to spend quite a bit of time with David's sister."

"Why didn't you say Barbara? Or Gunther's wife? Marc, I need someone to talk to. We're not really close. I just can't stay alone."

What did she mean by alone? Did she think they were living on the moon?

"What about the neighbors?"

"I don't feel right with them."

"Then why don't you bloody well marry me so you don't

feel you have to hide from them?"

Her eyes clouded. He went to her at once.

"Forgive me, babe, it's my fault."

"No it's not. You're too good to me." She set aside her knitting and he helped her out of the chair. "I think I'll rest up before supper."

He let her go. The little bulge in her abdomen fascinated him, gave him hope. The baby was due in January. If they could only stick it out until the birth, he was confident everything would be alright.

VII

Barbara

She was watching an old movie from the prohibition era. A gun battle had erupted and the police were rushing to the scene. But they never arrived. Because Gunther stormed in and shut off the set.

Barbara stood up to protest. Before she could speak, he slapped her hard across the face. She reeled, then steadied herself by clutching the lean of the sofa.

"Why didn't you tell me Francine was pregnant?"

Though the slap had taken her by surprise, the question didn't.

"I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of what just happened."

She cringed; unnecessarily. He glanced at the offending hand and went out as abruptly as he had entered.

So Gunther's nightmares had finally spilled into his

waking hours. As long as they stayed confined to his subconscious or the dark, she could somehow overlook them. They were but minor breaches in the security he provided her. Now she could no longer ignore them.

His violence was not the only thing that begged facing up to. Since Ted Schultz's defection, Gunther spoke increasingly of going back to his old job in Munich.

Barbara did not want to live in Germany. She was just beginning to discover Montreal. To get to know its possibilities. Gunther's talk of leaving Canada had driven her to the classified ads. To her astonishment, she found jobs, mainly in factories and restaurants, that she could handle.

For several weeks, she had been packing a suitcase. The same bag she meant to bring to Miami last winter. Only its contents had radically altered. This time the valise was not packed according to the needs of a tourist, but of a refugee.

It was crammed with items she had accumulated on her outings either with Francine, or by herself; items of which she was the sole owner. Among them were clothes she had admired on other women, make-up prescribed by glamour magazines, government booklets on manpower offices and welfare services. In essence, a survival kit.

Showered and dressed, ready for departure, she sat down at Gunther's desk. She was glad everything belonged to Gunther. It made walking away easier. Her hand trembled as she wrote.

Dear Gunther,

I am tired of being punched around
because David wants to be a big wheel or
because some guy named Marc Leduc, whom I
have never met, has made Francine pregnant.

I am sick of your precious rituals and
especially of your omniscience.

If I ever have to iron another shirt
or boil another sausage or mop another floor
on your behalf, I am sure I will drop dead
on the spot.

So before that happens, I am getting
out.

Barbara

She reread the note several times, then ripped it to
shreds. Upstairs, she stowed the suitcase in the back of the
closet.

It had all been a fiction, a daydream that had
encroached on reality. Hadn't she known from the beginning
the plan would be aborted? In fact, she was amazed she had
come this far.

In the kitchen she put the kraut on to simmer.

Gunther

A week had passed since he followed Leduc home from work. In those seven days he'd done a lot of thinking, mainly on how to deal with Francine's problem. Clearly, she was not capable of following a rational course. Her choice of mates proved that a thousand times over. She needed someone to take her by the hand and lead her back to a sane existence.

When she opened the door, he walked right in.

"Gunther, what a surprise."

"I'm sure it is, considering the way you've been hiding out."

"I needed time to get my life together, that's all."

He sought out her abdomen. A small bulge asserted itself under her loose frock. There was still time.

"I hear you've been seeing a lot of Barbara."

"We enjoy each other's company."

"You never come out to the house."

"We prefer to meet halfway somewhere else. That way we both get out. You know how it is with us housebound women."

She always had an answer for everything. Probably picked that up from the Gavins.

"Does David know?"

"About the baby? Yes. I wrote to him in care of the Vancouver office."

"That's interesting. Now why should you tell David?"

He has nothing to do with it. It isn't any of his concern unless..."

"Unless?"

"You are hoping he will make it his concern. You still care for him, Francine. Admit it."

"I never denied it."

"Do you think you're being fair to Marc?"

"It was very nice of you to drop by, Gunther, but I think you'd better run along now. I need my rest."

So she thought she could get rid of him that easily. Well she was about to learn David wasn't the only one in the world with a little initiative.

"You musn't have that baby, Francine. It's not right."

"Look, just because you don't feel up to bringing children into this stress-ridden world, doesn't mean we all feel the same."

"It seems you and Barbara talk quite a bit."

"She would like very much to have a child, Gunther."

"At her age..."

"What do you mean her age? Aren't you aware that Barbara is three years younger than I am?"

This information momentarily stunned him. He had gotten into the habit of thinking of Barbara as the same age as himself. On the other hand, he did feel responsible for guiding her, as she was more than a dozen years his junior.

"Barbara is not the issue, Francine, you are."

"Gunther, for a long time now, you have made a point of bothering yourself with my affairs. I'd like to know why."

"Isn't it obvious? I care about you."

"Then let me be."

"As a friend, I cannot ignore the fact that you are having the baby of a man whom you don't even love."

"If you were a real friend you would accept my way of doing things even if you didn't approve. And besides, Marc and I respect each other."

He didn't like the way she was glowering at him. Barbara must have mentioned the nightmares.

"It's not my fault if I have a troubled sleep."

"What?"

"Nothing. I think we'd better get back to your problem."

"This is not a problem. It is a human being. My baby. Marc's baby. Not yours. It has nothing to do with you. I repeat, it does not concern you at all and I don't give a damn if it keeps you awake nights; it serves you right for meddling."

Her anger distressed him. His ability to help her depended on her conducting herself in a calm, mature fashion. He figured he'd better say what he came to before she went off into a frenzy or stomped off like Barbara.

"I've made an appointment for you at the Ville Royale Women's Clinic. I want you to go and see these people."

"I don't believe this, you've made arrangements to kill my child."

"Francine, be reasonable."

"Answer me something, Gunther. If this were your

child, would you be so anxious to get rid of it?"

"There'd be no need. I would marry you."

"Well, that's very noble. If I ever need a husband, I'll know whom to call. Now, if you'll please go, I'm very tired."

He had expected her to react this way. Women never do what's in their best interest. At least she knew he was there if she ever needed him. And with a drunk like Leduc, that need was bound to arise. All he had to do was exercise a little patience. Someday she would require his help. And he would give it freely.

David .

He had virtually nothing to show for his more than two months on the road. The sale of one lensometer for less than ten thousand dollars did not nearly compensate for the company's expense in the Vision on Wheels project.

He had warned them the show would flop. But they wouldn't listen. Even before leaving Montreal, he knew he would have to pad the attendance report at his portable exhibition; but how was he to account for the absence of leads and orders? What did it matter if New York were to acknowledge the fault wasn't his--it still looked bad on paper.

Idly he rummaged through his in-basket hoping to discover a memo announcing his promotion. Of course, he didn't expect to find it. And he didn't. Instead, a scented letter tumbled onto his desk. Susan.

The note constituted a plea. Or rather, several. The woman's use of hyperbole amused him. He laughed aloud.

"I suppose you think it's real smart and funny making trouble in a marriage."

"Don't tell me you've been 'sniffing' around my mail again, Gunther." He tossed the letter into the waste basket.

"Nothing serious, see?"

"Of course not. For some people marriage is never to be taken seriously."

"May I remind you, dear brother-in-law, it was Francine, and not I, who broke our engagement. I was the poor heartbroken soul in that affair."

Gunther put on his serious face. David had to struggle more than usual not to laugh on these occasions.

"You may fool others, David, but you don't fool me. Francine was just another rung up your so-called corporate ladder. When the promotion didn't come through, you caused the break."

He never realized. And it was so obvious. But he had been so obsessed with his vision of making it alone and unhampered by the demands of a wife and young children.

"Gunther, you are, really are, so much smarter than you look. Thanks."

He drove to Thompson's Clinic. Fiona was on her break. He tracked her down to the cafeteria.

"Well, Davey, back from your travels. How did it go?"

"Rotten. Like I predicted. Fiona, will you marry me?"

"Are you drunk?"

"No. Ambitious."

"Me too."

"Still waiting for Tex?"

"Yup."

"Can't blame a fellow for trying."

They had coffee and discussed the vision business for an hour. He renewed his promise to make her assistant manager. While in that part of town, he dropped by Dr. Hebert's office.

A young girl was with the doctor when he arrived. She straightened her posture as they were introduced.

"So this is Chantal?"

"The one and only." Dr. Hebert made no effort to conceal his pride in his offspring. "Chantal has dropped by because as usual she wants something."

Hebert scribbled out a check. David couldn't help noticing the amount. Eight hundred bucks for a kid.

"I need new shoes," she cooed at him.

"Too bad you don't need a laser."

"Try me."

He decided he would. As soon as the girl went out, he gave his pitch. The doctor listened with folded arms, nodding when appropriate.

"David, I'm not ready for the lasers yet. Why don't you try me next January?"

He made a note in his daytimer. On the way out, he stopped by the receptionist to make the appointment. Chantal, who had been chatting with some of the girls, followed him to the elevator.

"How about lunch?"

"Can I take a raincheck? I have some important business to attend to right now."

"You won't forget."

"No chance."

He took her number. Before getting on the autoroute, he stopped by a florist and picked up some roses--a dozen red and a dozen white. He couldn't remember which Francine

preferred.

Francine

They were to be married at city hall as soon as the arrangements could be made. Marc would understand. He would let her go. This was one break she was glad she would never have to make with Gunther.

Surely, Gunther would commit some crime of passion. Kill her. Or David. Or both of them. But not Marc. He would understand.

Wasn't this the reason she refused his countless proposals? They both knew this might happen. And they both knew what she must do.

She had never been Marc's anyway. Not in the romantic sense. They had shared amusements, board and bed--creature comforts, nothing more.

Naturally she would let him visit the baby. He would always be its Uncle Marc. David wouldn't object.

Before leaving the house, she wrote him a short note explaining the new direction her life was taking.

Marc

Something had gone wrong. Dreadfully wrong. Either the car or the pier he had driven off must have been defective.

Nothing worked anymore. His arms and legs might as well be attached to someone else's torso. He had no control over them. Not that his limbs were behaving in an unruly manner. They simply weren't behaving at all.

For once he was glad Rosie wasn't there. Firstly, she couldn't bail him out of this. And, secondly, she would probably rile him about his free agency.

No, she wouldn't. That wasn't her style. He made a pact not to think evil of the living.

While they were fixing tubes and cables and whatever to his body, he had heard the doctor mutter something like 'not more than eighteen or twenty hours'. He decided there wasn't much he could do but wait.

VIII

Barbara

She loved mid-October. The leaves were already turning and tomorrow was Thanksgiving. They had never celebrated it before but with the threat of a move to Germany constantly in the air, she felt compelled to assert her Canadianism.

She was stuffing the turkey when Gunther drove up.

"I'm glad you won't be spending all of Sunday in the office. Maybe we can go out a bit when I'm finished with this bird. Drive up to the Laurentians, see what Autumn in the mountains looks like."

"Francine is in the hospital."

Always Francine. Even though she is finally married to David, he still can't let go.

"But she isn't due till January."

"She was scrubbing the kitchen floor when she started to bleed. Naturally she was alone so she took a taxi to the hospital. Now the doctor decides he's keeping her there until

the baby comes."

"And how do you know all this?"

"She called the office hoping that brother of yours might be around. But David's doing 'business' with Miss Mulvey this morning, according to his agenda, that is."

"I hope you didn't tell her that."

"Of course, I did."

"You know something, Gunther, you're really something else."

"Don't start that Gavin sarcasm with me. Wash up, we're going."

"Where?"

"I told her we'd go over and finish the apartment. She had to leave everything the way it was."

Why Gunther, how generous. How helpful. Come and scrub up after my would-be mistress, dear wife, after all you're so good at that kind of thing.

"No."

"This is no time to argue, she needs help."

"You offered. You go."

"Alright, I will. Honestly, Barbara, I don't see how you can be so mean to your own sister-in-law."

"I don't see how you can be so mean to me."

"You're asking for it, Barbara."

"Thanks for the warning, Gunther. Really, it's just what I need."

Gunther

At first, he would not believe she had left him, especially over something as trivial as scrubbing a floor. For a couple of weeks, he managed to convince himself she had gone visiting. Only she didn't know anyone, except David.

When she didn't turn up there, he made the usual calls to police and hospitals. He was angry with her for not leaving a note. It was embarrassing to have to explain to people that he didn't know where his own wife was. Finally, toward the end of November, having accepted the fact that she seemed to have no intention of returning, he hired a detective.

It took the investigator less than a week to locate her. She had applied for a social insurance number under her maiden name. Gunther reread the report for the hundredth time.

Mrs. Stiefelmayer, alias Barbara Cheryl Gavin, is boarding with a family in the suburbs of Edmonton, is currently employed as an elementary school crossing guard and seems to be having an affair with a twenty-three year old law student.

What did he mean 'seems'? Wasn't she a Gavin? The detective refused to commit himself. I write what I see, he had said, they have coke and fries Wednesday afternoons at a deli, sometimes they go to the repertory cinema or other inexpensive places, that's it.

That's it. Fifteen years of proper living wiped out without the least warning. He supposed Ted Schultz would meet the same fate one of these days. Then, he'll regret having passed up this opportunity to return to the homeland.

Gunther checked his luggage. The airport limousine would arrive in a matter of minutes. He was grateful Fotolange took him back. At least, he would have the chance to start over again.

David

It had been a great New Year's Eve party. And an even greater year. Despite the late hour and the quantity he had drunk, he lay eyes wide open, contemplating the old year's successes.

David Gavin, Boy Wonder, had struck royally. His promotion to branch manager came through two weeks after his marriage. The Vision Charter Division, with Fiona at its head, had already exceeded its target quota by a factor of two. Gunther had quit, enabling him to recharge the sales force with fresh blood. Orient had folded after Leduc's suicide. Sometime within the next fifteen hours, he expected to become a family man--an event that would win him points with New York. And, Dr. Hebert, thanks to the prodding of his beloved daughter, finally ordered the two lasers day before yesterday.

David examined the sleeping girl beside him. Chantal Hebert was not pretty. Her features were unremarkable, her chest flat and her hips non-existent. The thinness of her arms and legs made her hands and feet appear enormous. When she ate rich foods her skin broke out and champagne made her eyes bulge and the tip of her nose turn deep red. An appendectomy scar ruined her for a string bikini.

Still sleeping, she rolled over onto her side and put her thumb in her mouth. He checked his examination of her. It didn't seem right to pass judgment on a fifteen year old.

She might grow into herself yet. Though he doubted it.

She opened her eyes, stretched and closed her arms about him.

"Do you love me, David?"

"Would I be here if I didn't?"

"What about your wife?"

"What about her?"

"Do you love her?"

"Almost as much as you."

Fifteen or sixty, they always came up with the same questions. And he, of course, provided them with his standard replies.

"Do you really mean that, David?"

"You ask too many questions."

"But I want to know."

"Sometimes, in fact, most times, it's better not to."

He could feel her eyes boring down on him, trying to get to the truth. It was all laid out right before her and she couldn't see it. He pulled her closer to him.

"Poor baby," he whispered, "born into such a nasty world."

Francine

Fumbling under the pillow, she pressed the buzzer.

"Yes, Mrs. Gavin."

"I'm cold."

"There's no point in my bringing you a third blanket, dearie, here comes the nurse now to prepare you for delivery."

The nurse handled her roughly and worked in silence, no doubt peeved at having been called in on a holiday. With brutal efficiency, she lathered and shaved the pubic area. Then donning a transparent glove, she thrust her fingers into Francine's vagina, wiggled them around, withdrew and made notes. The enema came next. The bedpan burned like ice against her flushed skin. Finally, after strapping her left arm to a board and inserting a needle into the vein of her wrist, the nurse left.

She felt more alone than she'd ever been in her entire life. Where was David? He should be with her. Marc would have come. In desperation, she even had the nurses call some of the women she knew he was sleeping with. No one answered. Didn't she realize, it was New Year's day?

Every few minutes a nurse returned to time the contractions. As the pains grew closer, she was moved to a high narrow cot. A machine someone called a fetal heart monitor was brought in and its straps fastened about her abdomen. The technician ordered her to stop massaging her