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UNDER THE ELEPHANT'S TAIL.

John Aylen

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
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ABSTRACT

JOHN AYLEN

UNDER THE ELEPHANT'S TAIL

Under the Elephant's Tail is a work of fiction in the first person. It concerns a young man, Robert Seguin who is on a quest for a way to live with honour. On the advice of Maggi, the girl with whom he is living, he leaves school to seek his fortune as a script writer.

Robert Seguin's quest through life brings him into contact with a number of characters who border on the insane.

At the end of the book, Bob Seguin comes to the realization that his future lies with Maggi, not with the insane, foolish and pretentious characters he has met.

For Ellen

The portion of the poem on P. 133 is from  
"The Natural History of Elephants" in  
Milton Acorn, I've Tasted My Blood  
(Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), P. 130.

## Chapter 1

With her flair for the melodramatic, innate only in part, Maggi confronted me with it. "I was cleaning out the desk and I found this," she said. "I don't understand." She held it high, like a head on a stick.

"It's...a journal I keep," I said, looking for the right word. The stuff that dreams are made of, Sweetheart. "Like a diary. But more about thoughts than about days." My Maltese Falcon. I fidgeted, a prisoner in my own whopping body.

"I'm glad," she said, obviously disconcerted, "that we've been able to clear this whole thing up. It's a diary but not about days. That is what you said, isn't it?" I nodded insipidly. "What do you do on leap years?"

I stood there before her, waiting. She wanted me to explain. My thin dark-haired bed-mate wanted me to explain. "I know you're mad."

"Not mad," she said, "hurt is the word."

"I know you must be hurt but I think you're looking at this the wrong way." Be objective, I wanted to say. But what I really meant was: try to see it from my point of view--the right one. I moved toward her. "I didn't think it was the sort of thing you'd even be interested in. It was very personal; I didn't feel like broadcasting it." I let my hand rest on her hip. "It would be like broadcasting my farts by short wave."

Maggi drew away from my coarse oversize hand. "Telling me is broadcasting?"

"You know what I mean."

A faux-pas. In one stride I found myself with both feet in one mouth. "So telling me is broadcasting," Maggi said, her voice rising to the occasion and to its limit. "Me and the C.B.C. You know I am interested in the things you do. You think things of beauty don't interest me? I've got news." Maggi picked up the journal and began to thumb through it. "You think art doesn't interest me?" She held the notebook up once again.

I had trouble making the connection but finally it sank in. "You're joking. I hope."

"What I've seen here has real potential. A gold mine maybe." I pictured myself, a gargantuan gold miner, panning on all fours in the middle of nowhere. "It's hilarious," she continued. "You break me up like nobody else. Listen..."

"That's what I call broadcasting," I said too low for her to hear.

"I can start in the present or in the past or at any time I want. I can start where I please. But no matter where I do, it always comes to the same. Mike charges in, gets the girl and rides off with the horse like a weapon between his legs. This he leaves me---less memories than they are instructions: the girl's braided locks to climb, the fifteen feet to her balcony and Love which conquers all. He leaves it for me. For me who can't even chin myself." Maggi laughed. "It's great."

I said nothing.

"If you don't mind my saying so, with a few changes this could make a really super film script. I mean you are crazy about the movies, aren't you? If you can't write a good movie, nobody can. Oh, I know

there'd have to be a few changes: all this braided locks and love which conquers all shit would have to go. But I mean you've got the beginnings. Just put in all little pizzaz. You know, a little kinky sex or something. You could make the guy Mike black and then have both of you hump the girl with the long hair. And you need some kind of angle on the story..."

"I've got it," I said humouring her. "How 'bout having Mike bugger the horse. How 'bout a horse that's trained to give blow jobs. Mr. Ed with a difference: all action and no talk."

"Now you're talking. You see, I knew you could do it."

It wasn't exactly what I had in mind.

Maggi moved to the alcove that served as a kitchen and began to fix drinks, pretending that I couldn't see her from the livingroom. Returning with two cloudy old-fashioned glasses, she threw herself into the chair opposite and sipped loudly. It was Cinzano, her favourite. "I've got a proposition," she said.

Forgetting my capacity, I drained half the glass.

"What would happen if you did make this into a movie?"

I tried to point out the foolishness of even entertaining such thoughts. "We'd starve for one thing," I told her. "Secondly, nothing would ever come of it. And finally I'd never finish school."

I don't know if it was the alcohol or what, but her dreams began to take on a strange kind of reality. "What are you going to do with a god-damned degree in Organic Chemistry. And you know, I could get a job."

"Inorganic Chemistry," I corrected. "And I can't let you quit school now, you've put in a few years yourself."

"All water under the bridge," she said, quoting some film or another.

"Honestly," I said, "you can make everything seem so black and white. For you nothing's impossible, is it? Soon you'll be campaigning to make me the next Pope."

"It's easy for you to be sarcastic," she said with a calmness that reminded me of the eye of a storm, "but instead of playing the self-righteous son-of-a-bitch that seems to come to you naturally, maybe you should face facts for once in your life. I think you can write, yes. Oh I know you're going to say you've never mentioned being a writer and I won't be able to argue with that. But you've never mentioned being anything else either. You know that's the truth."

I sighed. What else could I do? To Maggi, I think I was the sleeping dog she was told to never let lie.

"If you fail," she continued, becoming more and more profound, "you fail. And if you don't give yourself a chance then what? We'll be sitting in an old folks' home somewhere and I'll have to listen to things like, 'If I'd only listened to you we might still be paying income tax and I could get those new false teeth I want so badly.' If I can get a job will you quit and try. At least."

Do you think I didn't try to reason with her? "Writing for me isn't what you think it is," I tried to tell her. "I'm not trying to create great art or anything. I keep, or kept, this journal because it's about the only private thing that I've got. I can look at things objectively. I'm not a public writer."

"Deep down you don't want to be famous? Praise, glory, The Johnny Carson Show?"

"No."

"Then you're more full of shit than I ever imagined," she told me.

It seemed to settle the question for good.

It didn't take more than a week for Maggi, the way she presented herself, the way she flaunted her body like a bribe, to get a job in an insurance company. University, for both of us became part of the past. Until her next brainwave.

I make no bones about it. From the beginning the writing career was a nightmare. The first day, Maggi set up the typewriter in the apartment's picture window and left me there, in her words, like a lion ready to pounce. I didn't argue; I waited for inspiration. When by noon there was no sign, I passed the time watching two men trying to start their pickup truck. It was of some consolation that they were having no more success than I was. But by two, they'd evidently fiddled with the right wires, pressed the right buttons and mouthed the right oaths, because it started. I wasn't so lucky. If all the old truck needed was a tune up, I needed a major overhaul; something along the old power-train had most assuredly seized.

The extent of my frustration is impossible to communicate. I was an elephant in lion's clothing (forced upon me) whose "raison d'être" had suddenly become a film-script I knew was impossible to write. In the journal I'd romanticized a trifle more than the starker medium of film was capable of handling. If I'd been able to reconcile the images of reality and illusion in my own mind, I was unable to do the same in my vision of the film.

How could I explain the demi-god I'd made of him. Certainly not by telling the objective truth. Was it Mike the "Bon diable" I'd loved:

As schoolboys, Mike and I had often been taken on school-organized expeditions to Sainte Anne's shrine at Beaupré. The priest-run school hired buses and transported us the few short miles there where we were expected to pray to Sainte Anne for salvation.

"You've got to be crazy to use the can up here," he'd always tell us. "You could catch leprosy or buck teeth. Pilgrims have to be the worst people to catch diseases from. Oozing ulcers. Athlete's foot. Or even worse--tennis balls."

He'd take the offertory envelopes and send them to the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall, checking the "bill me later" box.

On one such occasion Mike made his way up the steep stairs to the shrine limping and in obvious pain. On his exit he jumped into the air and thanked the good saint. He'd gladly give testimony, he said to all who'd listen. "I've suffered from crabs," he told everyone, "for as long as I can remember. And now I've been cured. I'm sure of it. Don't think I'm going to take this lightly," he continued. "As proof and testimony to my new faith, I'm sending all my pubic hair to be hung on the wall, along with a plaque to Sainte Anne herself."

Our keepers, the priests, were not impressed.

If all this made Mike a not uninteresting character, neither did it help to explain my idolatry.

At first, Maggi tried to rectify my problems on her own. She pushed,

cajoled, insulted, in short did everything in her power. But to no avail. She was sure of one thing: if help was called for, I was going to get all I needed. You see, Maggi existed only briefly on promises. It was results she lived for. And for Maggi, results were regarded not so much as the spoils of victory as they were necessities without which she could not be satisfied. Professional help was called for, she said.

It came in the form of an extension course in something called "Creativity", offered through a downtown university. Do I have to say I was skeptical?

"What harm can it do," she asked me. "It's only once a week." She waited for me to answer but what was the answer? "Look, if you don't think it's for you," she continued, "you don't have to stay. You can just walk out. No answer?" she asked impatiently, waiting for my feeble arguments.

"I'm not your little boy," I said, trying to make her see what she was doing to me. "I'm big enough to make my own decisions."

"Don't make me laugh, shithead. Size has nothing to do with it."

"I don't want to go," I told her cringing only slightly. "An that's final." I paused a while to let it sink in and when, after a moment, I saw no evidence in her face that it had, I said it again: "I'm sorry but I don't want to go."

"I used to think you were a big prick. But you know you're not. You're an ass-hole of the first order," she said calmly, as if she were commenting on my clothes. "You never want to do anything," Maggi said more contemptuously. "That's a fact you can't deny and you know it. You'd never do anything if you weren't pushed. Who knows what lingers

in you--a latent Hemingway, maybe even a Shakespeare. You may be dynamite but we both know I'm your detonator."

"I'm your detonator...isn't that the name of a song."

I began to sing but she cut me short. "We're not singing songs right now," she said curtly. "We're solving a problem. Your problem. You're the one with writer's block."

Writer's block? Didn't she see the only block was I wasn't a writer.

"You know what I say," she persisted, "I say get off that fat ass of yours." With that, she went into the kitchen to fix more Cinzano. Was I the cause of her drinking?

Left alone in the bedroom, I considered her words, her tirade, her drinking. I considered arguments that might counter hers. Could I find any? I looked at myself in the mirror. It was a big ass--huge even--but depending on the perspective might be considered "big" not "fat". I was slightly consoled: if nothing else, there was nothing insignificant about me. Like a hairy mammoth or some such beast, there is something prehistoric about me. It's not that there aren't other species that resemble me, it's that I seem to have some kind of advantage, if not in intelligence, then at least in stature. I stand more than six foot six and no domestic scales can judge my weight. I have the type of face people might say looked like stone. You know the type: strong and definite. People, I imagine, are most struck, though, by the nose and the hands. The face itself looks like it has been fortified with some kind of rock armour that has worn thin around the eyes and reveals that soft interior that's Maggi's advantage. But the nose. That is very large, definitely out of proportion and looks like it has been pock-

marked by glaciers. There are real craters on my nose, as big as small navels. The hands: suffice it to say that they are the hands of a Dutch farmer.

What else was there? I was dynamite, she'd said. Well that was a compliment. She was my detonator; but still I was dynamite. Dynamite Bob Seguin. It was my size--no argument there--I needed a detonator because there was just too much inertia for one man to overcome. Maggi was the cartoon scoundrel who applied the hat pin to my rear when the situation demanded it. It was the same principle used in the jet-assisted take-off.

I went into the livingroom to concede. After all, she was right. She always was. Even if it only slowed down the number of Cinzanos that poured from the bottle into her glass, it would be worth it. The damn stuff was getting expensive.

"I've decided to go," I told her.

"Yes," she said. "You really didn't think I'd stand idling while you wasted your time, did you?"

I was reminded of a sports car.

I didn't say a word. But you know, even then, I couldn't help but wonder why I'm always the one to take all the shit. It's as if I live under a great elephant's tail. Oh I know that's just not possible. As Maggi has pointed out countless times, there's just no way I'd ever fit.

Can you imagine going to night school to learn "Creativity"? What would these people, all searching for the key to "Creativity" be like? I could just see them. The teacher would be bright and young, I had no

doubt of that. Dressed like an artist, however that was - but you knew instinctively they were the clothes artists wore - he'd swear as a matter of course and in his speech there'd be the undertone and scent of several drinks. There'd be intellectual men and women, my peers, sitting like apostles around him. The men would smoke pipes, the women cigarillos. The women would have long dark hair, mysterious faces, and look as though their appearance were not the most important thing on their minds. At least one of the men would be bald and have a paunch larger even than Orson Welles! Another'd have the hands of a hairdresser. They'd all drink too much, reserve the mornings for sleep, and seldom brush their teeth. And it'd be rumoured that most suffered from some form of galloping venereal disease, likely anally contracted.

The exterior of the university's sole building did not augur well for the impending course in "Creativity". It looked like a giant hippopotamus fashioned by a man who was incapable of anything but right angles. I felt myself breaking into a cold sweat.

Chapter 2

As usual, I was early. I don't know what it is about me, but tardiness is a conceit I've never been able to allow myself. Not to look too conspicuous, hanging around the school like a vandal, I browsed through the building. These, I'm sorry to say, were not the hallowed halls which had marked my formative years: private schools pungent with mildew; schools with the initials of several generations carved into the benches. This was something different: a school where nobody's father had even gone.

After a long self-conscious tour of the building, I was still the first in the classroom; the first to take a seat. The room, though ominously large--full there'd have been an awful lot of intellect to reckon with--was nicely decorated with posters of Portugese tourist attractions pinned high, I suppose, to discourage destructive behaviour. Those posters really brought back memories. My youth had been a conspiracy to paint mustaches on anything that was without one. Animals, landscapes, nothing escaped my black marker. Some people have their "Kilroys", I had my mustaches. I remember waiting at the door for the latest edition of Time. And I remember the rush when I had Indira Gandhi or Golda Meir to work with. Their faces seemed to scream for it, that outward sign of masculinity I was all too anxious to add. It was then I did something I hadn't done in years. Choosing a Portugese girl in a red bikini, I scratched a handlebar on her face. At a glance she looked like Groucho Marx just come out of the sea in a red bikini.

As I was fashioning a goatee for her red crotch, what impressed me as a herd of women charged into the room. Actually, there were only two of

them, both wearing leather coats, one charcoal, one tan. Hairy-legged heifers chewing peppermint cud, they nodded shyly and took seats near the middle of the room, removing knitting needles from their handbags as they folded themselves into the desks.

After a century of silence one of them asked: "Are you the teacher?"

"Oh no," I said, "I'm just a student." After a pause I thought to add, "Like yourselves." That we should be kindred spirits seemed to please them to no end and they let nervous chuckles escape.

Motherhood. You know there's nothing like it; there's nothing quite so reassuring. Intellects easy to reckon with: varicose-veined housewives, their questionable good looks having deserted them, packing their good intentions, their pedestrian lives and their knitting needles and enrolling. All keen on "Creativity." For the first time in as long as I can remember I was beginning to feel something that approached self-assurance.

The two women spoke, making noises like the shrill kissing sound of alarmed chipmunks.

"You know that I've been writing for as long as I can remember. But up to now I've never really taken it seriously. Now that I've got more time on my hands, I'm going to set the world on fire. I'm not going to sit back till I've written my Forsyth Saga."

Her companion's features became animated. She was the type of woman you wouldn't've blamed a husband for leaving. "I don't even have to invent anything when I write," she began. "I could write a book about the things that have happened to me." She giggled. "I've got a million of them, as they say."

Like fish finally come to spawn, people trekked into the room. The minutes passed and I grew more impatient as they did. Waiting has always piqued me.

The moment he walked in, I knew he must be the teacher. In the face was written a personal meaning of life. It looked to mean disappointment. He had the countenance of a man who has been given a belt that is a size too small and is too proud to exchange it.

"Hello," he said, pausing to go to the blackboard where he began to write in big capital letters. "My name's Hark Jones," he told us, drawing quotation marks in the air, "as in the herald angels sing."

Hark went up to the front of his desk and hoisted his bulky frame onto the top. His short legs hung over the edge as though he were fishing from a pier. He beckoned us all forward in the room that turned out to be far oversize.

"C'mon. How 'bout moving up front a little. I'm not going to eat you."

If appearance were any yardstick, Hark looked as though he might have appetite enough to accommodate us all. To his friends, he might be portly; more objectively, on first sight, he was fat. I guessed his age at thirty: he was the type of man who gave the impression he was cultivating his physique as an excuse for rolling over and dying young.

"I'd like to welcome you all to creativity," Hark said somewhat in the manner of Saint Peter at the gates of heaven. "The theory of this course is an investigation into the artistic expression of self. It will be a practical course where you'll be able to find a forum for any of your

artistic endeavours, whether they be in the field of the graphic arts, the oral tradition of music or finally in the medium of the written word."

"This isn't the introduction to macramé, is it?" someone asked.

"I guess I've got the wrong class too. I was looking for "Dynamics of machines". I must say this does sound interesting. If I don't like it there, can I come back?"

"Yes...well...anyway...where was I?" Hark asked as the two made their way out.

"Something about the the artistic expression of self," called out an unattractive man of simian features.

"Yes that's right. So the next thing is to have you introduce yourselves. Tell us about your interests, your background, anything you want to tell us." Hark pointed at the aspiring Canadian Galsworthy, one of the leather coated women who had surprised me earlier. The woman rose and stood before her desk. She cleared her throat and placed both her hands behind her back. "My name is Irene Finster," she said. Needlessly Irene Finster paused to let her name sink in. "For me," she continued, "it's important that I learn to express myself properly in writing. The way I figure it is, that I have all these stories locked up in my head, like, and I want to share them with everybody. What I'm hoping, I guess, is that you can give me the key, Mr. Jones."

"Call me Hark."

As in the herald angels sing.

"It's my turn then?" asked the man next to Mrs. Finster. "My name's

George Blackburn," he said. "I'm an upholsterer full-time and a poet and writer part-time. I like to write poetry and I'd like to learn to write better poetry and get it published. Most of all I'd like to learn how to put symbolism into my poems." Blackburn hesitated a moment before deciding to continue. "I may as well tell you that I've also just started a book about the influence of organized crime on the tree surgery industry." He paused dramatically. "We're going to blow the whole thing wide open. We're going to name names."

Blackburn reminded me of a man who might play a gazoo professionally and who looked out of place in any circumstance that did not allow him to be playing one.

Why did I retain my place in this strange menagerie? Was it the girl next to Blackburn, the girl who nearly stole my breath when I chanced to gaze in her direction. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't. On the spot, I would've risked open heart surgery; I would've duelled to the death. You see, there was so much self-assurance in her demeanor--a kind of smugness that was in no way annoying--that I thought I might learn something from her. I wanted the right road and she looked as though she might be able to show it to me.

In a voice that approached a whisper she said, "My name's Julie and I'm here just for interest. I do a little bit of sculpture, a little bit of modelling, some painting. I've written maybe a million poems. I admit they're all terrible."

Perhaps it's my size, but I never feel anything in halves. I was in love with this Julie with no last name. I was an elephant in heat. And I knew that as long as I could find her, every week, in this same

classroom, then I'd be there too. After Maggi who was all cockiness, whose posture reminded me of a spitting cat's arched back, do I need to say she was refreshing? Do you remember Lauren Bacall in To Have and Have Not? That's who she reminded me of.

But my attention was not allowed to linger on her. And the possibilities...

Beside her was perhaps the ugliest man I have ever seen. He had a face that looked as though it was viciously trying to parody all that was hateful in the human race. An illustrated dictionary might have carried his picture to define a scapegoat. His name was Cedric Stevenson.

Cedric Stevenson rose to introduce himself. Holding himself in the attitude of one who is trying to suppress an almost impossible fart, he took several mimeographed pieces of paper, folded and stapled, from a handle-less briefcase. He held them high above his thin and greasy head of hair while he announced that he was the editor of a quarterly publication called Fair Shakes. "Fair Shakes," he said, "is a publication concerned with the emancipation of palsied people." Pausing to pass us all copies, he continued: "We're into our second year, here at Fair Shakes and we're anxious to continue the tradition of quality literature for, about, and by palsied people." Here he took on a more somber tone and began to shake slightly. "And that's why I'm asking for your help. Fair Shakes is looking for contributors. We're especially interested in palsied contributors but it's so hard to find talented ones these days that we'll accept contributions from other worthy writers, even static ones, so to speak. Just send your work to me and I'll give it every consideration. I'm not forgetting you other artists either. Photographs

of paintings and sculptures, reviews, we'll publish it all." Stevenson sat down, waving the magazine over his head. "Just keep Fair Shakes in mind."

If Hark was at a loss for words, at least he was not the next one to speak. That dubious pleasure went, of course, to me. Stevenson wasn't an easy act to follow. I imagined his magazine with such titles as "I Was A Wall-Flower At The St. Vitus Dance" and "I'm Not Half The Man I Used to Be--the candid account of life as a leper." But if Stevenson's guise was absurd, was my "jeu de théâtre" any more plausible? What could I say? How could I tell them I'd been forced into this whole sordid affair by a little woman who'd found a journal of mine and had shamed me into a writing career. Writing career! Sometimes reality and illusion meet.

I don't think I'm paranoid, it's just that everyone really is against me. Under the elephant's tail is the monkey house. And I had the feeling that the cage door had just been slammed behind me.

"I'm working on a film," I said, as disinterestedly as I was able. You see, I wanted to give them the impression I knew what I was doing. After all, isn't having the courage of your convictions the important thing? I didn't want them to think I was shy; I wanted them to see me as a keen observer, ingesting everything for the latest project. Grist for the mill. A man who didn't want to waste his energies talking. And I'm sure I impressed them. To them, I was that fresh new artist that they would soon read about in Macleans. Who wrote for Esquire. Who wore custom made leather jackets. An on-screen Marlon Brando: bigger than life. Author of an off-beat Broadway play.

"You're working on a film. What exactly does that mean?" Hark asked a trifle more sharply than I thought was necessary. "Do you mean you're writing a script or that you're actually filming."

"A script," I admitted.

"And what do you know exactly about films. From where do you get all this knowledge?"

"Well I..." How could I express it? Could I say I'd watched a lot of movies, especially old ones? Would it be a pretension to say I'd almost figured out "Rosebud" or that Citizen Kane was beginning to impress me less for its narrative than for its innovation in lighting and camera angles? Could I tell him I knew the story behind Bogart's lisp? What good would it do? If only he were French. There was a word for it there. I could have said: "I am an 'amateur' of the cinema."

"I just worry about some of you biting off more than you can chew."

What was I supposed to say after that? Here I was, locked in the monkey-house and the only one not allowed to perform. Wasn't he going to let me tell him about my brain-wave: a biography of Ralph Nader from the point of view of a Corvair. "I thought you might want to hear about my project," I admonished Hark. "Actually it's a human interest story about three people and a horse." Here Mrs. Finster formed a nearly horizontal smile with her mouth and nodded wisely to her friend. "You see, there is this white girl, this white man, this black man and this horse. They are very poor and they fall on this scheme to teach the horse to give blow jobs." Mrs. Finster raised her eyebrows to the point where they formed nearly perfect right angles with her mouth. "They charge for the privilege of having the horse perform his speciality and

subsequently become very rich. It's sort of a "Fellatio Alger" story." Though obviously revolted by the story line, Mrs. Finster glanced at her mate with a look that implied she thought it just might work.

"Do you really think that's believable?" Hark asked. "How are you going to get your readers to identify with the characters?"

"And how are you going to find the trained horse," asked the poet, Blackburn.

"Fair Shakes might just have room for an excerpt," cried out Stevenson.

Good god. What had I got myself into?

Hark called for a short break after which anyone who'd brought work would be able to present it. "I may as well tell you now," Hark warned, "that although you may present anything you want, you will have to expect a candid opinion from yours truly. Honestly, I consider myself quite a harsh critic--I don't even like Harold Robbins or James Joyce, for that matter. I'm going to tell you exactly how I feel. No ifs, ands or buts."

During the break, I wandered out of the room--just to get away from all that insanity--only to be pursued by Stevenson and his insidious, insipid face. "I think," he said, "that you're just the man we're looking for. I think that together we can put Fair Shakes in the forefront of the magazine publishing industry. We can lead each other to fame and wealth. Oh I know you don't have any physical problem (you're big but that's not a disease.) But," said Stevenson hesitating, "it's sometimes the mental diseases that are the most crippling. Why don't we start you off with a story about sodomy, maybe a story about a man who's overcome his homosexual love for a horse."

"Stevenson," I said, a trifle more rudely than I'm accustomed to,  
"I was only kidding. I'm not writing a movie about a horse who gives  
blow jobs. It was only a joke."

"That's too bad. You know you should write about what you know."

"But I don't know a damn thing about horses, let alone blow jobs."

Stevenson just gave me a knowing smile. "Think about it," he said,  
"my door is always open."

While I'd been speaking with Stevenson, George Blackburn had  
evidently made arrangements to read.

"Do you want me to go to the front?"

Hark told him he would probably be fine just where he was.

George Blackburn, part-time poet, looked nervous. "Ah...these poems  
aren't very good but I've really worked hard on them and I like them  
even though you might not. I guess there's some symbolism but that's  
supposed to be what you figure out; I'm not supposed to tell you what  
the symbols are. I brought two of my new poems tonight: this one is  
about racial discrimination. You know, about the problems of blacks  
and whites. I can't see why they don't get along, you know. I mean  
the colour of your skin. Anyway. Here's the poem." He tried to  
strike a dramatic pose and began:

Though my mistakes are great  
And my doings are few  
Could you not love me  
I've done nothing to you.

My colour's the question;  
That faint brown hue,  
It shouldn't matter  
Were I purple or blue.

Land of no mercy  
People of no trust  
Love me today  
Oh please, you must.

Though my mistakes were great  
And my doings were few  
Why couldn't you love me?  
I was just like you.

"That's it," said George.

"Thank you very much," Hark said. "That was a very sensitive poem. Maybe you could make copies and we could have a close look at it next week."

"You like it?" asked George.

"Yes, it's very interesting. Does anyone else have a comment about George's poem?"

"Do you think poetry should always rhyme," asked Mrs. Finster meekly.

"It depends," Hark answered. "That's something we'll discuss later in the term. Does anyone else want to make a creative presentation?"

"I'm here with Irene Finster," the other woman in the leather coat said. "You forgot me earlier. I'm a writer like Irene. I didn't bring any of my work tonight but if you like I could perform an Ecosaise dance. You know, like a jig. That's creative too, isn't it?"

"Perhaps we should wait until you have some of your written work with you," Hark advised.

"I'd be happy," announced Stevenson, "to read to you from the latest edition of Fair Shakes." Without hesitation he moved to the front of the room where he took a red bandana from his pocket and began to pick at his nose with it. Finally he seemed to dislodge whatever it was

had found its way there. "What do you prefer? In Fair Shakes there really is something for everyone."

"How 'bout something you yourself wrote," suggested Hark.

"Very well," said Stevenson hesitating a moment, "but I must warn you that this story is for the mature reader. Some might find it a little offensive."

No one knew quite what to say.

Stevenson began to read a story entitled "Pissed Off." The story concerned the plight of an unfortunate victim of Parkinson's disease who was unable to ever make love to a woman. Although his hands drove them wild, he was never able to consummate a relationship because every time he went to urinate, he ended up exciting himself to the extent that he came in his own hand. "A hard luck story," Stevenson called it.

Hark didn't even try asking for comment. "I think we'll call it a night," he said.

"A night," Cedric Stevenson repeated.

Have you ever felt that putting a shotgun to the heads of everyone you have ever met and then pulling the trigger would solve the problems of the world? That night, that's the way I felt.

Outside on the street I breathed the fall air deeply, just to make me feel there was something real left, that there was something I could be sure of.

"You look like you could use a drink," the girl who'd called herself Julie told me. "I happen to know a little place..."

I didn't hear the rest. I just followed her to that "little place",

wordlessly, a place that turned out to be her own.

Chapter 3

I was shaking like a man who, through a stroke of completely unexpected luck, has just won a substantial lottery and is waiting to answer an ingeniously paradoxical question to be eligible for the prize.

Julie sat me in an old lazy-boy which completely occupied one corner of the small apartment and skipped her way to the kitchen.

Her apartment, it seemed, was a memorial to all the things she believed. On the chair under me: a riding outfit complete with crop. Riding boots on the floor by my feet. On the floor: a rug she'd made. The walls were covered with posters of sad-eyed horses who looked as though they had divined their own futures and were already mourning the ends they were born to.

She emerged from the kitchen with a bottle of red wine and two tumblers. Apologizing, she said she had no wine glasses. As she placed herself on the floor beside me, I tried to suck my stomach flat.

"Well," I said, "this all seems very unreal. You don't even know my name. Why did you ask me here? Are you going to take advantage of me?"

She laughed, as though in jest, I'd almost guessed her designs. "I like to meet people," she said. "Don't you think human contact is just about the only thing people have going for themselves?"

"Of course," I said. "Live and learn, as they say."

"Yes."

"My being here seems very strange," I told her. "It's very hard to explain, but I feel as though I'm playing a film role in one of those

movies where two strangers meet, share something very personal and without any explanation or apparently thought leave each other. "The problem is that I'm trying to figure everything out. I want to know why."

"Maybe you're more sensitive than the fools who play "John and Mary" roles. Maybe you want something more than a last tango. I want more than a last tango," she said, crazy for it.

"Promise you won't laugh?" I asked, debating quickly how much to confide and when to make my move.

She smiled.

"I'm really looking for the way to live properly in the times we live in. Honour and all that. You want to know why I'm here?" I asked, only admitting to half the reason. "It's because you strike me as the kind of person who knows how to live. I expected you might by accident let some little pearl slip. You know," I joked, "like the practical aspects of being at one with the cosmos or even things like how to dispense with Jehovah's Witnesses and Insurance salesman without being forced to buy a Bible or a fifty year policy."

"I understand," she said, "and I don't think it's funny in the least. I guess that's actually the only proper reason for people to come together." She stopped talking; stopped breathing perhaps too and began to scrutinize my face, carefully, as if there were an imaginary distance between us which made it difficult for her to discern detail. "You feel that everything is leaving you behind, don't you? You think that you're alone against the insanity of the world because communication seems to have failed you. But have you ever thought that maybe it's not your

fault, that it's the world that might not be listening?" She rose slightly on her haunches and kissed my cheek. "What people need is to have other people to hold onto. Ever seen monkeys in a thunderstorm? They don't ask questions, they just hold on till it's over. I think you're just too sensitive, just too good."

I honestly don't pretend to understand the reasoning behind her thoughts. Perhaps it was just a role she's memorized without thinking, perhaps she had some motive I couldn't see for saying the things she said. But if I didn't grasp everything she said, I certainly held tightly to her contention that I was too good. Yes of course. That was it. I was too worried about other people's feelings, too worried about the human race. And I was the one to suffer in the end. Yes. I WAS TOO GOOD. AND THE WORLD DIDN'T DESERVE ME.

I was assured and self-satisfied and sank into my easy chair. Somehow there was no need for speech.

Sitting there beside me, she reminded me of a small child trying to overcome an irresistible urge to dance. There was so much energy locked inside that little body of hers and she was keeping it inside just so that we could stop a moment together and hold on. We understood one another. For her too, the world was at best a world of illusion, at worst a world of fools. And the only way to make any sense of it was to hang onto the good people, to ignore the fools, and to keep moving without regret to what was to come.

I am a fluid the way I seem to take on the shape of my context. There with Julie, I was sure I was experiencing the ultimate reality. Like the way it had once been with Mike. But then wasn't the real

reality with Maggi, the woman who'd made me believe that life was stress, that life was a street under heavy construction, a wrestling match where you're hopelessly outclassed, an exam to which there are no correct answers. With Maggi, this was the real. But then was the serenity of sitting in a darkened room, drinking warm wine with a woman who was a nearly complete stranger, any less real?

"Tell me," she said, "about this movie of yours."

"You know the trouble with women is they ask too many questions," I said mimicking Bogart. "They should spend more time being beautiful."

We were quiet after that and I took the time to memorize her body. In a thin embroidered kaftan I could see the curve of her back, the shape of her small upturned breasts, the dark nipples like jockeys riding high. My gums ached for her as they do for a particularly fine steak.

"If you want I'll talk about the film," I said retreating a little.

"I'd like that very much. The artist fascinates me."

Omitting the details as to how I'd embarked on the project, I explained that I was adapting a journal I'd written earlier for the medium of film.

"I have certain obsessions," I said, "and I'm trying to translate them into images. So you see it probably won't be a film that is dependent very much on a story or on a time sequence."

I don't think she was particularly impressed and I couldn't blame her: neither was I. After all, there were few good films that were that subjective. This was a film captured through the eye of one man and projected onto his retina alone, not a wide screen. It would take a very special kind of man to make that film of any interest. I thought

of Bunuel's Un chien andalou.

"You see, I'm obsessed with the thought of losing everything. Of losing everything I find beautiful. My journal was an attempt to get everything down--the whole of my experience--so that I could be sure it was real. I wanted to be able to touch it. Now, I want to be able to see it too."

"Really?" she asked with what seemed to be more than a spark of genuine interest.

Actually I'd just thought of it. Sometimes it's not what you feel but the way you express it that really forms your attitudes. By expressing them they are somehow changed and they become at once more simple and more complex. Perhaps expression is what separates thought from instinct.

Pouring more wine she asked, "And now does it seem more real?"

"In a way," I said, "it is. I can still see Mike. That's real. It's not so simple that I can easily explain it," I told her, trying to find thoughts and words that would please her. "You see my life has been a kind of search for the person or kind of person that I can follow--can emulate--so that life becomes an easy thing to live, a matter of just going through my lines. I'm looking for someone who knows his morality and sticks by it. Like Mike. Like Humphrey Bogart. To some extent the movies are father to us all. But you have to invent that person at least in part, as well. I'm looking for the script or at least the material that is right."

"I see," she said in a voice that trembled.

Maybe it was the wine or the darkened atmosphere of the room with the

ghosts of horses lingering just out of sight, I don't know, but I remembered one particular incident I'd chosen to set down in the journal. "I could tell you a story about Mike," I said, "if you want."

"Please," she said softly.

"The first time I ever rode a horse it was with Mike," I began to tell her. Her ears perked up and she seemed to listen carefully to the story I told.

It was a hot day in July and the sun was shining. With the horses in the field, huge bumblebees swarmed at will.

"Don't be stupid. You're wasting time," Mike said, reading my mind. "A few fucking bees never killed anybody."

Mounted on his horse, Mike cut a fine figure, at ease, tall--though not as tall as I--and muscular, especially in the biceps. He wore Western boots where I had only sneakers. And with sneakers, the stirrups hurt your ankles.

My horse balking as we followed Mike mounted on his, we made our way out into the field. But as I brought my old gelding about, he caught a glimpse of the barn, reversed his direction and began to make his way back at a full gallop. Walk, trot, canter, omigod. Jumping off was, as they say, out of the question. In ten seconds we reached the barn and the horse decided to enter. But I was about a foot too tall to clear the barn entrance, and we parted company there, the horse and its rider; the horse going inside and me--not through choice--remaining outside on the hard spelly earth where some horse had evidently just cleared his

bowels.

In kindness and in concern for their reputation the owners offered to bring the horse out once more. But I declined and waited for Mike.

"One thing for damn sure," he said, "you're not riding in my car with those stinking pants on." He could hardly contain himself. Slapping his leg he said, "You smell like you've been swimming in horse-shit. You might as well have climbed right up his asshole."

And so I was forced to remove my pants and put them in the trunk.

The drive home seemed to take forever. And it seemed every time we stopped at a light, a bus would pull up beside. Here I was on display to the whole world, in my underwear, smelling of horse manure.

"God damn it," I said.

Mike only laughed harder.

I finished my story and then we sat for a moment in silence. What was she going to say? I'd lost control of myself, had been hypnotized by my own words, by incidents in my own life and the few minutes of silence were to mourn the loss of my own objectivity. I was actually beginning to believe in this crazy project.

"I guess I got carried away," I said.

If you can tell a story on film as well as you can in words, then I think you're going to be in business. What do they call people like you? Full of sound and fury might be a good label.

I didn't want to continue the metaphor.

"Do me a favor," she said. "Don't ever be afraid to show how you feel. It's not good to lock in passion. A man so sensitive could explode."

She kissed me warmly on the lips, a kiss which I returned only politely. In turn, I kissed her cheek, rose from my easy chair and began to make my way into the street.

Chapter 4

Maggi was waiting for me at the door. "You want a drink?" she asked sipping Cinzano, "or can we skip the formalities and get down to it. How did it go?"

"Fine," I said. "I'm pretty sure I can get it now. I'm going to change things around a little bit so that the movie's mostly about Mike. I'll eliminate the narrator and make it objective, almost a documentary sort of thing."

"Sure. Sounds fine," said Maggi. "What about the others? Good?"

"Good and bad. People seem very nice. Somebody even offered me a job writing for a magazine. A kook. I turned him down."

Maggi slapped her forehead with the back of her bony hand. "A kook. Jesus Murphy. A kook and you turned him down. If he's a kook and has his own magazine, what does that make you? King Kong?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I told her. "I left it open in any event."

"I don't suppose you'd get paid for any of this writing, would you?"

"No idea," I told her.

"I see. Somebody offers you a job and you don't even have the spunk to ask for details. I suppose you want me to talk to him and arrange everything for you."

"I never said that. I told you I wasn't interested in the job."

"Sometimes I find you very hard to believe. I don't think your reality has anything to do with what's going on out there."

"It's a jungle out there," I said sarcastically.

"Yes. And you're the fumbling elephant who runs every time a monkey makes a face at you. The only reason you don't dig a hole and bury yourself is that it would take too big a hole and you can't be bothered to move your ass."

Understand then, that my motivation for remaining in Hark's "Creativity" class was not entirely academic: it offered me a free night out and an air-tight alibi. Everybody was happy. I had my evening with Julie and Maggi had the impression that the film was moving--under Hark's expert tutelage--toward a successful conclusion. I think in any relationship there can be such a thing as too much truth. The way things were, everyone was happy, believing the white lies that made life meaningful.

The weeks passed, the days alternating between two poles of insanity: Maggi's tyranny and Hark's surreal world of "Creativity" made all the more tyrannical and surreal by the idyllic atmosphere of Julie's apartment where I repaired every night after class.

From the apartment window I watched passively as the winter came to the city, the first snow intimidating even the taxi drivers. I'm not one of those people who has anything against the winter. It's just the opposite: the cold air and the slush of the street are just one more reminder that it's all real--not an illusion or a movie or anything else but pure reality. Pain is perhaps just a heightened awareness of your body. But better pain than numbness; better to wince and know that you

are real that to simply exist, a paralytic or catatonic. However, the winter also meant Christmas and the trip Maggi and I would have to make home. Maggi, for her part, had long since freed herself of a filial responsibility, having moved from her father's Hamilton home at the age of seventeen to live in a commune of artists, hippies and drug-distributors. So it left only my parents. And so much to explain.

Where was I going to start? What was I going to start with? Writing a film script. School was becoming too much of a distraction.

But I'd had opportunity knocking like a jackhammer, they'd tell me. Concrete. And I'd given that up for what?

The afternoon we were to leave, Christmas eve, Maggi was late coming home. Probably last minute shopping. But then maybe not. Maybe overcome by cold, lying somewhere in a snowbank waiting for death to claim her. Slowly freezing. And the traveller's cheques were all in her name. Would I be able to cash them in her stead? Or would the money be lost forever. It seemed like such a waste. Perhaps there had been some kind of accident. Maggi in the salt induced slush of the street, waiting for an ambulance while a bus still idles above her. A throng of office-party-merry citizens trying to free her from under the wheels. Too late. But before she expired would they have her endorse the traveller's cheques? Probably not a practical one in the bunch, they'd be searching the sidewalks for a priest, not a bank that had stayed open late.

They are pushing on the back of the bus. "One-two-three-heave," and even the woman in Simpson's doorway with the Salvation Army collection plate is doing her part, keeping time with her bells.

"It's too late. You did your best but she's gone," a policeman with

a brogue is telling them. "Better go home now folks and Merry Christmas." They flag down taxis and swig from mickey bottles. Something to tell the family.

All these things crossed my mind as I waited in the window for her. Callous? I don't really think so. My mind continued to wander.

Even if it were true, even then, would I be freed? Would I be allowed to give up the plans. The script. Would I let Maggi's subscription to The Writer lapse? So many things crossed my perverse little mind.

Would I sublet Maggi's apartment and move back to a room? Stick my head in the oven and end it all? Would I be able to stand the heat of the electric range before I finally succumbed? And then would I be able to stand the thought of my family's shame? A son who'd chosen death, not been called. "They lost their son," people would say. The euphemism amused me. "They lost their son." Like at a fairground: A case too tough even for the Boy Scouts. "We told him if we got separated, we'd meet at the Boy Scout tent and I just looked around at the handicrafts and he was gone. It just doesn't make sense: I'd just offered to buy him a hot-dog on a stick."

If the oven was more than I could stand, would I try hanging? I considered the various methods of strangulation and decided that hanging by my belt would be a bit obvious, a bit of a cliché. Besides, my belt was so long it made chickening out too easy. But what about hanging by a jockstrap. Though I didn't know in what way, it had to be symbolic of something. At least the jockstrap was subtle: the official cause of death would be a fractured skull--not asphyxiation--as my head banged like a yoyo against the ceiling. "I ask you, does an unhappy boy die of a fractured skull?" my friends and relatives would be able to

ask. "No. a thousand times no. What we think happened is that he hung it there from the ceiling to let it air overnight and in the morning when he went to put it on, he sniffed it, see, just to make sure it still smelled fresh. Somehow he got caught in it, panicked, and you know the rest."

Or would I continue writing? A memorial edition to Maggi. Images of Maggi, in death, more like Ali McGraw every day. A fallen hero like Mike. "For you it's reality a blue sick world, isn't it?" romantic Liz Scott-like characters ask me. Dead Reckoning. A tear in my eye every time they played "Our Song". A lock of her hair. Or perhaps I would clandestinely conceal the very fact of her passing and keep her decaying corpse with me forever. "A Rose for Miss Emily". Could I stand the smell? And how would I explain it should I want to bring another girl home?

But my reverie was cut short by a knock at the door. Maggi? Jehovah's Witnesses? The police with bad news?

I went to the door to find Cedric Stevenson, in a complete Santa Claus suit, leaning against the door-frame. Under one arm was his handle-less briefcase; in his free hand he held a bottle of Remy Martin by the neck.

"Cheers from Fair Shakes," he said handing me the bottle. "'Tis the season to be jolly."

"Yes," I said, "Merry Christmas."

"Fair Shakes always sends gifts at Christmas," he said. "This year it's part of our new public relations policy."

"Why me?" I asked, without inviting him in. There was something in that pitifully simian face and that emaciated scarred body of his that brought out anger, not sympathy.

"It's cold out here in the hall," answered Stevenson, "may I come in for a moment?"

I ceded the way and Stevenson, a very frail and shaky Santa Claus, made his way to the livingroom. He took a chair and said, "Get some glasses, okay, the Brandy's already too old for it's own good. Another minute and I couldn't have afforded it."

"That so." I said, unamused. I went to the kitchen, got some glasses and handed them to Stevenson who made quite a performance of cutting the bottle open with a pen-knife he'd concealed in the boot top of his suit. Discarding the metallic paper on the floor, he uncorked the bottle and poured liberally into the two tumblers I'd given him. "No snifter, eh?"

"No," I said impatiently, "I've never really felt the need for them."

"Pity."

We sat in silence for a time that was probably shorter than it seemed.

"I've got some pretty exciting news," said Stevenson. "I've sold subscriptions to our whole class but you. Fair Shakes is really rolling now. And I've also lined up a contributor I'm sure we'll be proud of. It's that girl in the class. Julie. I went over there and we sat for a while drinking wine and finally she convinced me that some of her poetry would be perfect for the rag."

"Wonderful," I said inhaling and sipping simultaneously.

"But the magazine just doesn't seem complete without something from you. Please do a piece for us. Have you got something against spastics? Don't you want us to enjoy the same privileges as you? Don't you want us to spread our wings and fly?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I do."

"It's settled then," said Stevenson. "Do you have anything in particular in mind?"

"I'll see what I can do," I told him, intending to forget about it.

"Good. If I may make a suggestion, something about the horse and the blow jobs would probably be perfect."

"I'll tell you what," I said. "I'll give you part of the script I'm working on now. You can do what you want with it."

"Wonderful," said Stevenson. "Can I look at it now?"

I sighed deeply. "Yes," and rose to fetch it.

"Just drink away," said Stevenson, removing his false beard, loosening his wide black belt and beginning to remove his boots. "I'll just read it here quietly while you do whatever you want. Just pretend I'm not here."

I tried to do as Stevenson asked, while he read the script.

FADE IN:

EXT.--NIGHT

1. LONG SHOT--PARKING LOT. From a relatively high and distant location,

camera tracks in on one of the several cars in the parking lot. It is raining hard.

(Over the sound of the rain are the voices of several people obviously involved in sexual activity)

Camera continues to track in to the point where, though heavily fogged, the gropings of four people can be made out.

INT.--NIGHT

2. MEDIUM CLOSE SHOT--INSIDE CAR. From the front seat, the stationary camera frames a young couple sitting quietly in the back seat. They appear to be uncomfortable in their present circumstances.

3. MEDIUM CLOSE SHOT--INSIDE CAR. From the back seat, the stationary camera frames a second young couple totally involved in one another.

(grunts and groans as the two participants become more and more intense. Sound of clothes being removed and rearranged to better accommodate the couple's action)

4. CLOSE SHOT--INSIDE CAR. Faces of the two adolescents in the back seat. The boy is biting his lip and looking worried. The girl appears to be slightly embarrassed.

5. MEDIUM CLOSE SHOT--COUPLE IN BACK SEAT. Boy begins to caress girl.

(Girl: Please don't.

Boy: C'mon, you don't mean that.)

6. MEDIUM CLOSE SHOT--COUPLE IN FRONT SEAT. They are having intense sexual relations.

(Girl screaming in ecstasy.

Second girl: I said no.

Sound of slapping.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT.--NIGHT

7. LONG SHOT--GYMNASIUM DANCE. Stationary camera is shooting from the ceiling of the gym. Camera tracks down and across the room to where two boys are talking. They are the same boys as in the previous sequence.

(Sound of dance in progress

First boy: Let me dance with yours. Give me three dances and...

8. CLOSE SHOT--OTHER BOY.

(First boy:...I'll have her out in the car.

In two minutes I'll have gotten farther than you would in two years.

9. CLOSE SHOT--FIRST BOY.

(Second boy: But Mike. She's my girl.

First boy: Don't be an ass. Cunts are like cats. You can't own them.

10. MEDIUM CLOSE SHOT--BOTH BOYS. Camera tracks away slowly, leaving the boys behind. The boys are joined by two girls.

(Mike: Let's change partners for the next dance.

Music fades in louder as...)

two couples begin to dance.

FADE OUT.

"Your themes, if I may say so," said Stevenson, "are universal. You are concerned with the man who is left out. The loser. And is that not what every spastic represents? If in your life, you felt that you

couldn't compete, think of how it must be for us spastics. Maybe you can have an inkling of the way it must have been and sometimes still is for us."

"Yes," I said.

"Look at me, for instance. As well as my other problem, I'm probably not the prettiest man in the world to look at. Don't look surprised. I know I'm no Humphrey Bogart."

I didn't argue that Bogart was in no way good looking.

"But I endure," he continued. "Take you for instance. You're probably going away for Christmas to have a great time with your family. But what about me? For me Christmas means nothing. Because I'm a spastic no one wants to have anything to do with me. It's going to be the loneliest day of the year."

For the first time, I was beginning to feel something approaching sympathy for him. I was wordless, however, unable to communicate anything of how I felt. I have Maggi to thank for extricating me from the tricky situation; all at once she was in the apartment.

As politely as I was able, I introduced them.

"You've probably heard of me," said Stevenson.

"Yes," Maggi said, noticing the costume scattered about the room. "Santa Claus."

"Oh that," said Stevenson, faltering and beginning to shake very slightly. "This is just a costume. I'm not really Santa Claus. Really I'm the editor of Fair Shakes."

"Yes," said Maggi coolly, "I think Bob has spoken of you. You go to

school together."

"We were just talking," said Stevenson, "about Christmas being a very lonely time. I suppose you're going somewhere nice for Christmas."

"Quebec," I said. "My parents live there."

"What a crazy coincidence," said Stevenson. "I'm going there myself." He looked at Maggi in the manner of one who is jealously looking over the property of another. "I couldn't bother you for a ride, could I?"

I hesitated for a moment. "Of course," said Maggi. "What trouble could it possibly be."

"If you drove me to my place," Stevenson said getting back into his boots and tightening up his wide black belt, "I'd get my things in no time. Merry Christmas."

"Yes," I said; "Merry Christmas."

As I piloted our small cramped Austin along the highway home, I shared the state of mind of one who is about to undergo a root canal. My arms and legs felt far away: alien and foreign and numb. I was cold; I drove more slowly than care necessitated. And despite Maggi's assertions to the contrary--"It really doesn't matter what they think. You've decided to write this script; you're going to write it"--I saw that even she was pressing imaginary brake pedals.

At first, Stevenson's presence in the car served to take my mind off the confrontation that was inevitably going to occur at home. And he was just strange enough, just enough of a curiosity that Maggi didn't

dare impose herself. But after a time, the situation became one from which I wanted desperately to escape. It was as if Stevenson had become an agent of claustrophobia, filling every available space to the point where it was physically and perhaps metaphorically impossible to breathe. Had I been at the hands of an interrogator who was using Stevenson as an ingeniously sadistic vehicle of torture, I would gladly have confessed to anything.

"I'd be very interested in meeting your parents," said Stevenson as we approached the city. "I'm sure they must be very proud of you and what you're doing. But I guess," he said hesitating, "that you must be embarrassed to have me meet them. I'm not pretty to look at and I'd probably make them think there was something the matter with you."

"Stevenson," I said, "you're cordially invited to spend Christmas-time with my family. I'm sure they won't mind."

"This is the most decent thing anyone has ever done for me," said Stevenson. "I'm going to give you a free subscription to the magazine. I want you to know that I appreciate it and, that by implication, all spastics appreciate it. The task of educating the public and emancipating the spastics is one that must begin with the individual."

"Yes," I said.

Once on the street of my family's Quebec home, though, I began to feel better. Although I was still carrying the same burdens that had weighed heavily on me in Montreal, I felt that--out of their contexts--they were forces more easily reckoned with.

My family lived in a neighbourhood that had inexplicably become fashionable. It was a district where there was no longer any tree

small enough to run over with a lawnmower but none, either, large enough to give shade. Or disturb the foundations.

I opened the door with the key I'd never returned and let Maggi and Stevenson pass. They walked through the door and then slowed to let me overtake them and make my way into the house first.

My mother was removing smoked oysters from a tin and wrapping them in strips of bacon. She looked up from her work and nursed an invisible cut on her index finger. Smiling a frail smile she said, "You've brought a friend. Your father's home. Maggi hello. Why don't we go into the livingroom."

Chapter 5

It was one of those occasions where, although everyone is feigning friendliness, they are in fact being something less than civil. Let me explain. My life, I think, has been a case of manipulation by different people at different times. Just imagine that suddenly all the manipulators find themselves in the same room and are in total disagreement as to what should be done. And each of the manipulators feels that only he has my wellbeing at heart.

After I'd introduced Stevenson as a friend I'd met at school, we sat in silence for a while, considering the tangent our small talk would take.

Stevenson, still wearing his Santa Claus suit minus the beard, hat and belt was in strange contrast to my parents who look as though they might just have walked off the pages of "The Masque of the Red Death". My father is a tall man who once was slender and bears a faint resemblance to Vincent Price. My mother, on the other hand, looks as though she has just gotten off the bus at the wrong stop and is not quite sure of where she is going. Broad in the beam, she has the countenance of one who is accustomed and suited to sitting.

"We've been getting ready for tonight," my mother said rather obviously, trying to break the ice. She meant they were preparing for the "réveillon" they hosted every year. "There really isn't that much to do but you get all excited before a party and things take longer."

Maggi took a moment too long before realizing it was for her to respond. "I know what you mean, I've always found that too."

"Yes, so have I," said Stevenson.

Things weren't getting any easier. We just sat there, on the hard heavily upholstered Victorian furniture, in silence, slurping our drinks insipidly. The daiquiris my father had served us in crystal glasses made every sip a blindness of refracted light but left me at the periphery peering in.

Finally my father picked up the paper and began to scan it. By its appearance and the speed with which he moved through the pages, then the sections, he'd already read it. He looked up at us and then turned to the crossword.

"And school?" my mother asked, pretending that this question flowed naturally from the wake of a previous one.

"And school," I repeated, looking first at Maggi, then at Stevenson who had found a loose thread on the cushion of his chair and was getting ready to pull it. "School. The thing is, we've decided to leave school for a little while."

My mother made no attempt to disguise her scowl while my father peered, swirking over the top of his newspaper.

"Why would you do such a thing?" asked my mother earnestly.

"Why," my father said, "does He do anything." He did his best to fix his eyes on Maggi.

Stevenson, too, looked at Maggi and then at me.

"We just decided," I began.

"We may as well tell them the whole story," Maggi interrupted.

"Yes," said Stevenson, "from the beginning if you don't mind."

"You see," Maggi began, "the one thing we four have in common is that we find ourselves in the presence of a great artist."

"Le père Noël?" asked my father looking at Stevenson skeptically.

"You flatter me," said Stevenson.

Maggi squeezed my arm and looked respectfully into my eyes.

"But I'm more an editor than an artist," Stevenson protested.

Maggi ignored Stevenson's remarks. "This great artist," she said, "Your son--my man--is right now in the middle of a 'Chef d'oeuvre'."

Maggi's pronunciation of the French word brought an ironic smile to my father's face. "In English, no doubt."

"A noble language," added Stevenson.

There followed a long uncomfortable interval where Maggi glared at my father and my father glared back. You see, language has always been a family bone of contention. My father feels that his culture is dying. And it is dying. The difference is that he cares. When I left the place of my birth for the English university in Montreal, needless to say, he was upset. He saw it as the first move toward my embrace of the English culture. And it was. Then, when I moved in with Maggi, he felt the transition was complete. The fact that Maggi had no family to speak of, was self-assured to the point of arrogance, and was sometimes arrogant nearly to the point of violence, did not serve to placate him. In a sense, I can see his objection, though I would never tell him so. I can understand he might have felt Maggi was running my life a little too overtly but then, really, she had done nothing but depose him in that role. And perhaps that alone was enough to alienate him: one of his vicarious

lives had been snuffed out.

"You've always known about my interest in films," I said a little piqued at the show of theatrics. "I don't know if this movie I'm doing will succeed but I do know I'm going to give it a go. If I don't I'll spend the rest of my life wishing that I had."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Maggi smiling victoriously at them. She rested her hand on my thigh.

"Bravo," said Stevenson. "I always say that you don't know what you can do till you try. I know it's been true in my own experience."

"Yes," my father said, pushing Stevenson's contribution aside, "but I think sometimes a calculated guess can save you a lot of work and a lot of trouble."

"What is your work exactly, Sir?" asked Stevenson, "You've got quite a spread here."

My father told him about his post in Laval's French department, curtly.

"A professor," said Stevenson. "Why that's something. I took you for an educated man the minute I walked in."

"Thank you," said my father. "And your work?" asked my father hoping to bring the conversation to its logical end.

"Publishing," said Stevenson, taking a folded copy of Fair Shakes from inside his boot. "With my compliments," he said handing it to my father. "Perhaps you'd like to subscribe."

"Yes," said my father. "Maybe you'd like to rest awhile before everyone arrives. I'll show you to your rooms".

My father rose and beckoning to Stevenson said: "If you come with me,

I'll show you where you can go." He flashed Maggi and me a glance and was gone with Stevenson.

Everyone thrives in a slightly different environment. Some people are the life of the party while others feel it is their vocation to take charge of funerals. Maggi, it's my impression, is one of those people who thrives on controversy and bitter argument. Her essence is that of a lobbyist, an essence without which she would become irrelevant. She is like a dragon who is genuinely thankful for dragon-slaying knights. Because without the contest they offered, life would be without meaning. But these are easy things to discern in retrospect. At the time I recall asking her to be a little more tactful with my parents and their sensibilities.

"Tactful? Christ I can't get much more tactful."

"No, but you've got to humour them," I tried to advise as gently as possible. "You see, they're not quite used to having someone else run my life."

"Now I run your life."

"Of course not," I told her. "I mean that you're an influence. My father doesn't have the same influence on me he once did and I guess he's just a little hurt I didn't ask him what he thought about this film thing."

"You knew what it'd be, didn't you?"

"I'm just saying that we're guests in their house. We should try not to say anything controversial."

"Just see things objectively," I said falling on familiar speech patterns. "Let's not make things worse than they are."

"Fuck your stupid parents," she said just loud enough for me to hear.

The rest of the festive season passed largely without significance. At the "réveillon", Maggi, Stevenson and I sat on the divan, outsiders as always. It was as though the behaviour-modifying drug of Christmas had been passed to everyone but us. The house was filled with friends and relatives who'd made their way from midnight mass in crowded steamy cars. They sat on chairs in the livingroom; stood in the kitchen; hovered in the front hall. The diningroom table was a cornucopia of food, drink and flowers where all the revellers paused for refreshment in prodigious quantities.

Where I'd once been able to join in the festivities, now I was a stranger. Maggi and Stevenson were a pane of glass that allowed me to see what was going on, but not participate. What about me, I wanted to cry out. But everyone was too busy in their own world--a world that had once been mine--to pay me any attention.

"Your father was telling me that he's writing a book about the poet Emile Nelligan," Stevenson told me. "It sounds really interesting. It's funny how everything seems to come to the same thing."

"Yes," I said, "it's very funny."

"Your father was saying that this Nelligan guy died in an asylum, that he hated his father because he was English and that he really felt like an outsider in the world he lived in. Isn't that what Fair Shakes is all about? Aren't we trying to give anyone and everyone, regardless

of their states, a feeling that they're important and that they have the same rights as anyone else?"

"Yes," I said, "you've got a point there."

"Don't we have feelings like anyone else. If you cut us do we not bleed?"

"Don't tell me you're Jewish too?" I asked, apparently putting Stevenson to thinking: he was quiet after that. Out of the corner of my eye, however, I noticed that his hand had slid down to his side and he was very gently brushing against the top of Maggi's thigh. Maggi noticed my glance, smiled, but said nothing.

Christmas morning, Maggi bounded down the stairs, beaming. Planting kisses on both parents, she handed them impressive looking parcels, elegantly wrapped. Next it was Stevenson's turn and he shook both my father's hands, kissed him on both cheeks and then moved to my mother whom he embraced rather more passionately than was his privilege. Taking Maggi by the waist, he drew her close to him and kissed her on the lips. And was that a tongue I saw trying to push it's way past her teeth? I wanted to object but in a second it was too late.

Conversation did not come easily that morning. I had the feeling of trying to express abstract thoughts in a language which is not very familiar. The right words--the words that would sustain the conversation--were missing from our vocabularies.

"Oh Maggi," said my mother, "You really shouldn't have."

"But I wanted to," she said aglow with Christmas spirit.

My parents placed their unopened parcels on the coffee table, still littered with dirty finger-printed glasses. Obeying a semaphore I didn't comprehend, my mother followed my father into the kitchen, closing the door behind her.

"Thank you for making this the Christmas of my life," said Stevenson, addressing his thanks, particularly to Maggi, I thought.

"It's nothing," I said.

My parents emerged from the kitchen, smiling in a manner that was not entirely genuine. "We have something for you also," my father said, handing Maggi an envelope."

"Thank you," said Maggi, thanklessly.

"And now let's see what could possibly be in these lovely packages," said my mother..

For my father she'd bought an impressively bound art book; for my mother, a single strand of cultured pearls.

"But Maggi," my mother said suitably nonplussed, "they're beautiful."

"It was much more than you could afford, I'm sure," said my father.

My mother retreated to the kitchen once more on the pretext of fixing breakfast. My father smiled up at us and then began to thumb self-consciously through the book Maggi'd given him.

Without warning, Maggi bounded upstairs, slamming a door behind her.

"I'll see what's the matter," said Stevenson, shaking more than a bit and starting up the stairs.

The morning we were to leave, I rose early and went to the livingroom where I knew I'd find my father. He sat in a blue wingchair, drinking coffee and making notes in a book which I knew to be the collected poetry of Emile Nelligan. A siamese cat with a face like a monkey lounged, comatose, on his lap.

"You're up early for you."

"Couldn't sleep," I told him. "We're leaving later. Maggi's working tomorrow."

It was not yet light and through the large livingroom windows, the sky was turning a dark blue, in anticipation of a sunny day. I sat there removing imaginary pieces of lint from the divan on which I was sitting.

"Are you serious about becoming a film-maker," my father asked me.

"Of course." What did you want me to say? It was getting a little late to admit the whole thing was a fraud.

"If I may ask you an indiscreet question, what makes you think you can write a good film script."

"It was Maggi's idea, really," I said, realizing at once he'd misunderstand. "What I mean is that Maggi made me see that it's a worthwhile project."

"You're not being pressured?"

"Pressured into it, migod," I said laughing at such a thought. "It would take a lot of pressure to get an elephant like me moving."

"Yes," said my father. "Perhaps I can help you. I know a film-maker you should talk to. He's old but he's been in it from year one. Simon Dudroit. Perhaps you've heard of him."

I admitted that the name meant nothing.

"The time for lassitude in the company of foolish friends is over," he said, evidently referring to his house-guest. "It takes more than talent. It takes money and for that it takes influence. It's a hard-world and Montreal is a hard city," my father said, taking a more philosophical tangent. "After all, even Houdini died in Montreal."

On the way home, Maggi decided to sit in the back seat with Stevenson, using the excuse that, with the passenger seat pushed all the way forward, it would be the most comfortable place for her. Was I losing something I'd felt perfectly sure of?

Chapter 6

Maggi was beautiful. Tall and slender with long dark hair; there was a sense of mystery about her, like a cat perhaps or maybe more like a chameleon, changing colour with the background. She had a tendency to be pale. All the way up, her long legs were about the same size. It was for this reason, I guess, she never wore a dress.

We met during my second year at university: it was a course on the history of the cinema.

Not really giving them much importance, Maggi had already formed and dissolved commitments to a whole backfield of men.

I remember the movie discussed that day was Wiene's Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, an early silent most memorable for its strange sets and its use of light and shadow which gave it an eerie, abstract, almost unreal atmosphere. But it is a film for aficionados and where I was nothing short of hypnotized, the girl next to me evidently did not share my enthusiasm. For the first half-hour she sighed audibly, sighs which I returned with angry glances that went largely unnoticed due to the darkness of the large screening room. Finally, as the movie was about midway through the second reel, she fell asleep: her head turned in my direction and her left temple just grazed my upper arm.

As time passed, her body seemed to draw closer to mine so that I was becoming nearly pinned under her upper torso. Nevertheless I managed to concentrate on the film. When the lights were finally turned up, she still lay there sleeping on my arm, a tranquil, nearly child-like expression on her face. Finally I touched her arm, gently, trying to wake her. She stretched languidly and yawned, unaware that she was not home in bed.

Then with a start she opened her eyes and saw that she had draped herself unconsciously over my husky frame.

"I'm so sorry," she said blushing, yet not quite embarrassed. "The movie must have put me to sleep."

"That's okay," I said as smooth as usual. "My name's Robert Seguin."

"Row bare Seguin," she said. "I'm going to buy you coffee. It's the least I can do for using you as my pillow."

Could I refuse?

We walked in silence for a time, neither of us knowing quite what to say. At least I didn't. In the cafeteria, Maggi sat me down and went herself for the coffee.

"So tell me about yourself, Row bare Seguin," she asked.

I told her that I was a science student and that the film course was my Arts elective. I said that I spent a lot of my spare time watching movies and that, like everyone else, I intended to do my essay on Humphrey Bogart.

"The Maltese Falcon?" she asked.

I nodded yes.

"What a coincidence," she said. "So am I." That was all she needed to arrange a study session, dinner party for two, at her apartment.

Before leaving for Maggi's, I was sure to brush my teeth thoroughly and apply the deodorant stick thickly. Just to be safe, I wore my best clean underwear, a pair of flame bikinis. She was not the type who would appreciate boxer shorts, I thought, regardless of the comfort factor.

The building in which Maggi lived was old and insignificant with the smell of moisture and dust under too many layers of linoleum. As if to separate each apartment from the dark and public hall, two steps, like a drawbridge stuck down, spanned the space between door and floor. I stood on the first step and knocked on the unpainted door that had two long thin windows in it behind which was a thin grey curtain that had one time been white.

Maggi opened the door. "Quelle surprise," she said flattening a cheek with either hand.

I smiled and walked in, tripping only slightly on the step.

"My den of iniquity," she said, drawing me further into the main room.

Her apartment was decorated not so much with thought or taste, but more in keeping with one who wants less to make it comfortable and pleasing to themselves as much as they want to make it striking to others. There was a bead curtain, only, separating the bedroom from the main one. Behind the curtain was a waterbed without sheets. Big orange fish were painted on the plastic. "I tried putting real ones in, but they died," she told me seeing that I was staring. On the wall over the bed there was a poster of a hippopotamus urinating. "It never rains but it pours," the caption read. On the wall opposite, I couldn't help notice a blow-up. Nude swimming: it was her, drying seductively in an unfortunately large towel. Friends in the background.

I handed her a bottle of wine in a paper bag.

"We'll save it for dinner," said Maggi. "For the present I have Cin or pinko lemonade." Smiling she repaired to the kitchenette.

"I'll have Cin," I said.

"Naughty boy," she said returning with two glasses, originally jars of peanut butter or cream cheese and seating herself on the floor beside me, her legs drawn up and secured by her linked arms.

The sweet red Cin was not exactly a pleasant surprise.

"I figured we'd have a little dinner and then..."

"The essay."

"Right, then the essay," she said.

Dinner was a spaghetti she'd simmered on the stove for days. A hot meaty sauce I felt guilty about not liking as much as I should have.

"Delicious," I said between mouthfuls.

"If you don't like it, don't pretend," Maggi admonished.

"I love it," I said lying through my teeth. "Really. I like things that take time."

"There are some things you just can't do quickly," she said meaningfully.

Not knowing exactly how to answer, I stayed mum.

Maggi rose to put on a record, a Joan Baez or a Judy Collins, and joined me again on the floor. "Here's looking at you, Kid," she said as our glasses clinked. "So why're you doing your essay on Bogey?"

I let a frail laugh escape nervously from the corner of my mouth.

"It's hard to explain," I began, telling her that Bogart was an image I could be sure of. In real life and on the screen he was practically the same person. I told her that I, too, was looking for the role I could be

comfortable with in any situation. And I told her how, there had been a time, Mike had reminded me of Bogart. The tough guy on top of the situation. But that it had only been an illusion.

"I have a confession about illusions," Maggi told me. "It's not something I'm particularly proud of. I hope you won't hate me for it?"

How could I hate her. I felt already that I'd known her for an eternity.

"You know that day at the film when I fell asleep on you?" she asked, "Well I wasn't asleep at all. It was just a good way to meet you and lure you here. I guess it makes me a devious little bitch."

It didn't make her a devious little bitch at all.

Maggi rose with a suddenness that surprised me. She walked over to a small lamp in the corner and switched it on. Only incense could have added to the effect: the lamp's red shade served to colour the room in a crimson that implied fire.

Maggi poured what remained of the wine into our glasses. Drawing me from my sitting position on the floor, she looped her arms with difficulty about my neck and began to dance to the quiet, mournful, undanceable music. The record over, she left to place another one on the turntable.

What was I to think? I was young and foolish.

We sat on the floor once more. Now stretched on the worn Turkish rug, my immobile hand just grazed her thigh, just touched the side of her leg. As if by accident.

Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" played on the portable.

Maggi, hunching her back like a cat, stretched out full length before me.

My hand fell very consciously to the centre of her back, the nape of her neck, the back of her head where the hairs were so soft and irregular, along her arm, the top of her hand: massaging. My touch seemed to me like some covert statement of possession or at least the desire to possess. I kissed her neck above her coral-coloured sweater.

Her neck had the smell of a woman, like the smell of a forest's pine floor after rain.

Muffled sighs.

I pulled the sweater out of her corduroys. The skin was whiter than milk: more white, even, than the blow-up on the wall had portrayed it.

Silence.

Gently my hand moved. Deliberately. Detached. Her side. Now to the underside of her small breast.

In my breathing there was a catch, making every breath two-fold: one breath to gather her in through all my senses, the other to sustain life. Neither more immediate nor important than the other.

I kissed the soft white flesh under her eye, her body pervading the room with the odour of our delicate wanting. There was no mistake.

Her clothes fell from her body like dying leaves, my body applying its special ministrations to them.

"Maggi..."

Poised above her, between her thighs, I felt an imaginary yet unbearable force weighing on my chest, the same feeling a man must feel when he envisions, then enacts his own death.

"It's okay."

"Maggi..."

Mated, I collapsed for an instant on her before rolling free, leaving a warm salt tear, like the liquid that precedes a scar, on her shoulder.

"The earth moved," said Maggi, soiling the union slightly with speech.

"Ummm," I sighed, wishing that I smoked. Somehow it seemed like the proper thing to do: Bogart would've. It was just activity enough to make speech unnecessary.

I lay there motionless on the floor for a time, listening to the Tchaikovsky which, left unattended, played over and over again.

That night was a series of cat-naps punctuated by furious, sometimes frantic lovemaking. And the night turned into the week-end; the week-end into a week of endless nights.

That Friday evening the movie was War and Peace. Because the TV had been moved into the bedroom, I never expected to see the part about peace.

Maggi had just washed her hair and it was tucked up in a flowered towel to dry. She didn't look unlike Audrey Hepburn. She looked pale, though, and there was a pimple on the soft flesh under her left eye. The pimple stood out like an old piece of bubble-gum stuck there. Getting on the bed, Maggi sat facing me, her knees straddling my torso, half sitting, with her buttocks straining my stomach muscles. It almost hurt. My hands found her slender waist and tried to lift her off. She wouldn't budge. In the manner of a daughter, younger and lighter, playing horse and rider on a father's back, she bounced on my stomach.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are blue," she sang unaware of the mistake in the lyrics. Giggling she continued to bounce. "We're going to be parents, Kid," she said. "I think you've put a bun in the old oven." She patted her belly.

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling the heavy weight on my chest once again. It was as if the weight were pushing directly on my heart, forcing the blood through my veins at a greater speed than I could stand.

"You are the father of my child," she said. "Me and you. Mother and Father. You make me the happiest person in the world."

"You. Pregnant?" I said, bewildered.

"Well I can't tell you for sure yet. But with luck, yes. I guess I should have told you before. I wanted a baby. You were my choice."

"You didn't take any precautions, nothing?"

"Why would I?" she asked almost proudly. "I wanted your baby. Is that so wrong?"

"But you hardly know me. You don't know me at all," I said, seizing her by the rump and rolling her from my stomach onto the bed. "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it." I lay on the bed motionless, the anger gradually building up inside me. "I'm not going to play the sap for you, damn it."

I tore at the belt of her jeans, then the fly but I had trouble getting the material over her hips.

White skin.

Napoleon held his sword high.

"Hey, this isn't your style," she said laughing. "Like they say, I like a man what takes his time."

I cuffed her across the cheek, bursting the flaming pimple. It released a little pus and after, blood.

"Hey."

I tore the buttons off her shirt but didn't bother removing it. Drawing out her breasts, I clamped a hand on either one.

"You're crazy."

Spreading her thighs, I buried my face in her muff. Finally, my nose penetrated.

"The earth moved," she said.

Did she really think we'd made love? "I'm leaving, I told her with a touch of the dramatic.

"What did I do now?" she asked self-righteously.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Then I'm leaving," I said again.

"You see chains?" she asked effecting a mask formed to be completely ruthless. If there was sentiment or emotion there I could not detect it.

"No," I said, picking up my few things and opening the door.

"See you in the movies," she called after me.

"I don't go to that kind of movies," I said calling over my shoulder.

Slamming the door, I forgot to anticipate the two steps outside the door and fell, full on my ass. The floor shuddered. My ankle twisted. But in a flash I was up. Had Maggi come to the door she would have seen my dusty backside as it shuffled like an old and weary elephant's toward the staircase that would take me outside.

"God damn it," I said, testing the way it sounded. "God damn it to eternal fucking hell," I cried silently to myself like a man who has only just realized the unfairness of his own imminent mortality.

If this were a film I could better communicate what next unfolded. In a movie you can dissolve from fantasy to reality, from past to present and you always seem to know where the framework is. The dissolves are a good separation. But how can I communicate how my mind was working. It was sick and insisted on bringing up the past to cure itself.

I was on the street below Maggi's apartment. Although the cold fall air numbed my face, it worked, also, as a reverse-anaesthetic, making my pain and my sickness all the worse. Here on the street I was alone with my problem and for the first time I felt the full weight of the injustice.

I was possessed with the pain--both physical and mental--that comes with an unjust flogging. The pain increases after the fact. And yet I also, strangely enough, felt guilt. As if the fault were somehow mine. As if somewhere, if I looked closely enough, there was fault in my own mind, my own logic, even my own character.

I walked and walked, unaware of my movement or my direction. I moved in gusts. After a time, I found myself on Saint Lawrence, the city's jugular. Walking: pausing at false-front windows, moving passed taverns,

derelicts waiting impatiently for their beer money. Each step was the beat of a muffled drum. My mind was a kind of mourning I was trying to walk off, to walk away from. I walked like an elephant pursued by his own tail.

Passing the taverns with their stenchy halls, I considered the winos that eyed me suspiciously. I considered their demeanor. Their mis-demeanor. Why, for instance, do winos always wear suitcoats, I wondered almost out loud. Was it a symbol of their failure to cope? A symbol of their fall from respectability? There was a wino uniform. Armies of them in old suitcoats. Convicts. Charcoal suits, sometimes with pin-stripes and baby blue cardigans without buttons in the fall. Was it only their drinking, I wondered, that has soured their dreams and imposed a reality so stark that it cast them from the living world? I pictured myself as a drunk in the gutter and strangely enough didn't feel so out of place. I pictured Bogart there with me. And Mike. Just take away the illusion of coping and everyone's at home in the gutter.

Mike, I remembered, had always been terrified of old drunks. Were they covertly telling him that failure was always within the realm of possibility? Were they saying, "Look! Do you think I expected to turn out this way? Do you think I never had hopes? That I never once wanted anything but this for myself?"

I recalled the time an old wino had come up to Mike on the street and asked him for money to buy a bottle. And Mike who was just sixteen said, "Share the wealth, eh," giving him--except for a bus ticket--everything he had in his pocket. Mike had even gone to the point of carrying pocket money for the winos. As if the money were some kind of shield he could hide behind.

"Why," I asked him one day, after I'd seen the scenario of giving and taking repeated countless times, "do you do it? Why are you such an easy mark for them?"

"You ever been to the can in the Rialto theatre?" he asked, referring to an infamous fourth-run movie house in our home town.

I admitted that I hadn't.

"Well it's way down in the cellar. That's where the old drunks and the fags go to drink and.... There's always an empty wine bottle in the corner and there's shit and puke on the walls. It smell's like hell's septic tank. I went down there alone, once. The can is at the end of a long corridor. It's in front of the door that the men hang out. Most of them wear old suits that smell of sweat and piss. I swear if you woke up down there, you'd think you were in New York. Anyway, I ignored the old men and went into the can. Somehow I took the leak I had to take and I walked out, trying to ignore them. But one of them--I'll never forget the way he smelled--put his arm around me and then everything happened sort of fast. He said, 'You got a dime for a coffee, son.' There was shit under his fingernails. He had his arm around me. I said I didn't (and I didn't). He said, 'Well son I guess you can't help me then.'

"That's when the others came closer or at least that's when I noticed them nearer. I could hardly breathe. One of them grabbed me by the balls. I could hardly understand what they were saying. Some guy was holding me by the prick and squeezing my balls in his fist. I fought and tried to get away but there was nothing I could do. They were all around me. I barfed. I really did. Finally one of them said, 'Leave the kid go,' and they did and I ran like hell till I was outside. And now everytime I see one I

want to be sick. I want to puke my guts out."

As always I'd had to separate the fact from the fiction. I don't think that even Mike knew exactly where the truth ended and the fantasy began nor do I think it made much difference. Everyone believes what they want.

I continued to walk. Passed a tattoo parlour, a pet shop, a fish market. I walked in a sort of limbo, distant from the realities of life that surrounded me.

I paused at the window of a small used book shop that specialized--if the window were any indication--in books on the three b's. Bondage, buggery and bestiality. How could I resist?

I walked in and was confronted by a huge coke machine I immediately saw as an alibi. Of course. The books and magazines were of no interest whatever. It was an ice cold Coca Cola I was after. Inserting my coin, I watched the bottle fall. As I pried off the cap, it made a farting noise, spraying the brown sugary liquid everywhere. I bet the owners of those shops shake the bottles before putting them in the machine, just so they can embarrass the customers and keep them browsing and buying till their pants dry. Have you ever felt that you're doing everything for a hidden movie camera and you're supposed to act as naturally as you can? Well that's the way I felt: as if a giant eye had focussed itself on me and was watching that I stayed normal.

"Things really do go better with Coke," Mike had confided more than once. "Once I met this girl and we couldn't fuck because I didn't have a safe. So you know what we did? We took the old faithful bottle of coke and used it as a deuche. I don't know if it keeps the girl from

getting knocked up, but man what a way to quench your thirst." It was one of those stories you took with a grain of salt. "I'm not sure if Diet Pepsi is okay if you're on a diet," he'd always add.

This bookstore was one of those places where without a hard-on you looked out of place. I walked cautiously down the aisles, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, considering the half-bottle of coke that was drying on my pants.

Mutant women with breasts like unmilked udders leered at me from the magazine covers on either side of the aisle. Most of them had stretch marks and appealed to me about as much as a pregnant yak in heat.

As I fingered through the pages of a magazine, I began to get an erection. My body began to warm and I felt I must be blushing. I dragged my eyes from the magazine over to a wall clock with an ad for Vitalis in the face. It was just past eleven. I wondered if these places ever closed.

The fleshy gartered buttocks in many of the pictures reminded me of something Mike had said, again many times over. "You know it's illegal to bum fuck and you can get life imprisonment for screwing a corpse." At the time these penalties didn't bother me a bit. I would no more have done those things than I would have washed my eyes with Drano. "It's quite a problem in the morgues and funeral homes," he would continue to tell me. "I think every once in a while they have a raid and anyone they catch with their pants down is just put away forever. It's too dirty to even have a trial. When the man's wife finds out, she never reports her husband missing because of what the neighbours might say." A frail smile came to my mouth as I remembered.

I continued through the magazine, my smile turning to a smirk as my attention was drawn to a letter to the editor:

I've got to say your last month's magazine is one of the best yet. All those beautiful girls just drive me crazy. Your story on Wanda was really great. It's nice to see a gal with such a beautiful body who wants to share it. Her jugs are what I like the best. I think she's got two of the biggest I've ever seen. When she is standing up they hang down really low which means they're really big and heavy. Now those are big jugs! I think her body should be one of the wonders of the world. She should be made into a National beauty site.

One thing that is really too bad though is that you don't show more of Wanda. I don't mean more pictures of Wanda, even though that would be okay too, but more of her body. You should show her whole body, it's so beautiful. Some of the other magazines are starting to show hair on their girls. How come you don't? I don't mean the ones where you see everything and the girls have their legs apart, don't get me wrong, I'm no pervert.

So I guess that's all I have to say for now except keep up with the good work and keep articles like the one on Wanda coming. And it would be better if you showed the whole beaver and the beaver hole.

All thought of Maggi had left me. My erection was getting too painful to let me think about anything else. What made my body react in this manner? They say that an executed man dies with a hard-on.

Regardless, it was getting too painful to ignore. The dampness from the spilled soft drink and the bulky denim that halted the natural position of my organ gave me the impression that my penis was slowly being forced through a narrow-holed cheese grater.

"God damn it," I said under my breath. "I'm losing my manhood inch by inch." I imagined chafing my pecker raw and then bleeding to death. Or unable to urinate, drowning in my own piss.

The situation called for action. I put the magazine down and moved to an innocuous looking old volume bound in red leather. I thumbed my way from the back of the book till I came to the first illustration: the

sight of a gangrenous foot almost made me retch. I could almost smell the pus I saw issuing from between the toes. The pages continued flicking past, regulated by the pressure my thumb exerted. In the next illustration a nurse was bandaging a man's upper arm, the lower half having been completely severed. Next there was a picture of a man without arms or legs who was sitting in a wheelchair, his torso propped upright with boards and pillows. He was smiling through a week-old beard and tobacco stained teeth. Even the roots were showing. Almost unconsciously the book dropped from my hand, the cover flapping shut as it landed. In gold embossed letters the title stood out. Amputation and the Care of Stumps.

Standing above the bulky volume I had to wonder about its previous owner. Maybe a leper. With no arms or legs. Reading it, turning the pages with his teeth, holding a big green snot in the back of his throat. And now I was touching that book. That same book. I was sharing the germs, perhaps sharing the very germs that had precipitated his condition. I imagined him painting Christmas cards with his teeth to pay rent. Helping to distribute these little license tags after the New Year. Picking his nose with the edge of the cover.

Somehow in my sickness--my heartbreak--my problems seemed small. For the first time I saw myself as the wretched self-pitying oaf that I was. I've never found it very difficult to feel sorry for myself: it's the story of my life. I wanted to go back. I wanted to forgive her. I considered returning and without a word beating her violently. Tearing her hands away from her face and slapping her cheeks till they glowed, blackening her eyes, breaking her nose. Then would she see me as a force to be reckoned with? Macho man, mouthing macho lines like, "You're going to fry, Sweetheart. You're going over for it, Precious."

Would that have had the desired effect? Probably not. Even if I'd taken a bullwhip and beaten her till her buttocks bled, it probably would have had no effect. She would have turned out to be a masochist and thanked me for it. Or I would have appeared more like a child throwing a tantrum rather than a man expressing his machismo. Sam Spade, would I have reminded her of the infantile hero of Citizen Kane? The scene where Kane systematically demolishes his wife's room after she's left him came to mind.

Murder. Poisoning: arsenic, drano, furniture polish. Overdose: sleeping pills or illicit drugs. Stabbing: knife or blunt instrument. Firearm: handgun, shotgun, elephant gun. Death by drowning. Death by fire. Death by misadventure. Death by strangulation, asphyxiation. Gas.

"You know," Mike had told me, "I've found the perfect way to do away with a broad. It's foolproof. Absolutely foolproof and fun, I read it in Time. You blow in her cunt. You blow and blow and finally the air gets into her bloodstream and she dies. Really. I read it in Time. Until the fatal moment it's supposed to feel beautiful. Then a little pain, then nothing. They don't know what you're up to. And then even if you admit how it happened, you can always say it was an accident. Who's going to know it was planned ahead?"

What was I going to do? I didn't know. Perhaps I was afraid to know. But I knew I was going back.

"Well Pops," said Maggi, answering the door, "this is a surprise. What brings you to these parts, Kid?"

"All evening I've been taken with an insatiable desire to perform cunnilingus," I told her, savouring the irony of my words. But I was beginning to feel a particularly genuine hollowness that was moving from my stomach to include my heart, my lungs and my brain as well as those organs that can only be said to exist in the abstract.

"Well Pardonner, you've come to the right place." Hugging me as best she could, she said, "It's good to have you back Pops." Her arms were calipers that could measure my diameter but not my circumference.

I held her closely too, patting her back with my peasant's hand. "I guess suffering's about the only thing makes me feel alive," I told her with a touch of cynicism that was lost on her.

For an instant, time stopped and we remained in that attitude, holding onto each other for our various, personal, opposite and diverse reasons.

Why, I wondered, had I returned? It was a delusion, now, to think it was for revenge, at least immediate revenge. Was it self-pity? I don't know still. Perhaps I was afraid of being left behind. Maggi was my bandwagon. Maybe I was afraid of someday seeing her face on the society pages and knowing I could have been there with her, had I played my part right. It might have been the fear of meeting her on the street in a mink coat, on the arm of a film-maker or a baseball player, for that matter. And me in high-cut espadrilles, recently resoled.

Joined at the hips, we looked into each others' dark unfathomable eyes, bitter-sweet smiles on our mouths.

"I'm famished," said Maggi, "let's eat till we're stuffed, Kid."

After a quick trip to the all-night delicatessen on the corner, we

supped on gargantuan sandwiches of spiced meat, washed down by beer in quarts which we drank directly from the bottle. We ate on the livingroom floor, clamped together tightly, passionately, as if we were the only two people left on earth and were afraid of misplacing one another.

Against Maggi's warm body, I rested and relaxed. The void that had plagued me earlier had been completely filled. I suppose it was being home (it was home now, I knew it) and the colossal sandwiches that did it. Funny how little it takes to change misery to contentment. If it takes the merest trifle to make us unhappy for a whole lifetime then there can be some consolation in the fact that it is also the merest trifle that sets the world right again. If we knew the recipe, maybe we could cure all the world's problems with a sandwich.

I must have fallen asleep because suddenly I found myself alone in the livingroom. For an instant it was as though my worst fears had been realized.

My senses returned quickly enough. She had no doubt gone into the bedroom. Quietly I rose to look. With her back to the bead-curtained door, Maggi stood naked before her full length mirror, unaware of my presence behind her. I stood motionless and quiet, watching her. Taking the hair that fell on both her shoulders, she brought it forward to the mirror and tested it like a farmer testing the ripeness of his wheat between thumb and forefinger. She let go of the hair and placed both palms on her forehead. Then after a second, she took a finger and traced it along the wrinkles that were almost imperceptively developing there. Sighing, she prodded at the spot where the big red pimple had been below her eye. The spot just looked like make-up applied too thick. Next she

probbed her mouth, again with her finger, as if she were checking out a horse for sale. Massaging her neck, she scrutinized the tip of her elbows in the mirror. And then moving to her breast, she first patted each one gently and then clamped her hands on them like a shopper sounding the ripeness of thick-skinned fruit. In this manner she covered her whole body. Lithe and cat-like she stood almost mesmerized by her own image in the mirror. Slowly she began to dance, using her body to express those things that can not otherwise be expressed. Her body moved with the grace that no training can instill. It was her very nature trying to get out, trying to shake itself clear of her body.

I watched her dance, feeling somehow that I was a voyeur, passively participating in something obscene, it was so human. It was a little like walking in on the queen and catching her frantically masturbating.

Naked and dancing before the mirror, there was something almost pitiful about her. She was almost too frail and vulnerable to live. I saw her vulnerable and frail and scared shitless like the rest of us.

How can I explain how I felt? It's like seeing Bogart's last movies and realizing that under that tough hide, that shirt and jacket, there was a body seething with cancer.

I tiptoed back to the livingroom floor where I pretended to sleep. I approached sleep, I think, just closely enough that when Maggi later came to shake me awake, I wasn't quite sure if what I'd witnessed was real or was part of a dream. If you've ever made love without waking, you know what I mean. You remember it as though it were imagined.

"I made you a drink," she said. "Cin."

Hot and lethargic as a hibernating bear who's slept through Spring, I

accepted the syrupy drink and slurped loudly, overflowing my mouth and letting a small trickle fall over my chin onto my chest.

"Oh damn," I said, unconcerned.

"You know what I feel like doing?" Maggi asked. I feel like climbing to the top of the city. I feel like I'm on top of the world so I want to be on the top of the world."

"At four in the morning?"

From the Sherbrooke Street apartment, now with Maggi, I walked to Pine Avenue, past St. Lawrence this time, then Park, past Mount Royal till finally we reached the Westmount streets. It was a cold and damp Fall night. A misty snow was just perceptively falling and made you feel the dampness in your clothes. Under foot it was uncertain with slush that was slowly freezing and being covered by wet snow.

As we climbed higher and higher on the winding streets that ascended the mountain, we held hands. Maggi wore mittens. Out of breath, we stopped to rest.

"Love me forever," Maggi said. "Love me or die."

It was the first time she'd ever mentioned that word. To tell you the truth, I don't really believe in it. Love. "Yes," I said, "of course."

"Forever and ever?"

"Longer. Yes."

"That makes me happy?"

"I'm glad," I said, "me too."

Again we began to make our way to the top of the city.

"Where'd you...go...to...night, any...way?" Maggi asked as we climbed.

"Why?"

"Just...curious...that's...all."

"I went," I said taking a very deep breath, "home. I went to my room. I had to think about things. Like about us. Where we're going."

"We're going up, aren't we?"

"I guess."

"You know...I'm not...going to...have...baby," she said getting more and more out of breath with every step. "I...just wanted to...see what you would...do...I thought it...might prove to...you...how I thought...about you. I wanted to show...you...how much I...wanted to be...part of you."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I came back, didn't I? Let's not talk about it."

Breathless, we walked in silence. As we walked, I imagined our love affair as a movie script. Ali McGraw and Ryan O'Neal playing the parts. But it needed a gimmick and leukemia had already been exhausted. Pity. I mean, can you think of a more romantic, if debilitating disease. With its marvelous remissions and then the end. It was too bad leukemia had already been used. I would have to make do with something like cancer of the colon? You can't very well have Ryan O'Neal kiss it better. That's always the way it's been with me. By the time my turn comes around, the good, ideas have already been used up.

Finally we reached the Summit lookout where, in their steamy cars, lovers were parked.

The city lay before us like fallen stars, an uncharted sea of stalled and coasting ships. I put my arm around her and together we looked out at the lights. I felt like Bogart, holding a gun on the world, daring the world to make a false move. "Okay world," I said, "you're going over for it. And don't try anything funny or I'll let you have it."

"Who, in God's name, is that supposed to be?" Maggi asked, laughing. "I know", she said, "It's just come to me. It's that man..."

"Yes," I said.

"W.C. Fields."

"Right," I said.

Chapter 7

Once reinstalled in our apartment after Christmas, the nagging suspense of Stevenson's and Maggi's possible "ménage" was killing me. Finally I asked her.

"Maggi," I said, hedging, "Is there anything between you and Stevenson?"

"Cedric," she corrected me, "you know his name is Cedric. He hates it when you call him by his last name. He feels that you don't like him."

"Yes," I said, "but is there anything between you?"

A coy smile came to Maggi's lips as she approached me. Putting her arms around me and grinding her hips against my thighs, she asked, "What if there is?"

"What if there is? It means everything. I mean, what about us?"

"He's really such a sweet man," said Maggi. "And so talented. Why did you know he started that magazine all by himself?"

"Big deal," I said. "It's a chicken shit magazine."

"Take a flying fuck at the moon, why don't you," Maggi said, nearly spitting with rage. "Chicken shit magazine," she repeated, letting go of me and throwing herself onto a chair. "Let's just remember one thing mister: it's his magazine and he's publishing you, not the other way around."

"Granted," I said, "but he's a creep."

"He's a very sensitive man," Maggi said. "Maybe you don't know him as well as I do. I think he's doing a very noble thing. Do you know that he could have been the Aluminum siding king of the world if he'd listened

to his father and taken over the business?"

"Okay, I'm impressed," I said. "But what about you? What about me? What about us?"

"What about Stevenson," she asked, "If you cut him does he not bleed?"

"He's not even Jewish."

"It comes to the same thing. He says that every handicapped man is a Jew. It's more than skin deep."

"You couldn't do this to me, could you?"

"Why," Maggi asked, opening her eyes wide, "not?"

It was then I decided I was going to pay Stevenson a visit. One way or another I was going to get to the bottom of this.

Stevenson came to the door wearing a green visor over his eyes and a pencil tucked behind his ear. On the floor behind him there were papers everywhere.

"Come in," said Stevenson, "I've always got time for a friend. Make yourself at home," he said. "Take the chair."

"I'm not going to stay long," I told him. "I just want to know one thing."

"Of course I had a good time," he said. "In fact I had the time of my life. You were very generous to me, taking me with you and all."

"Maybe too generous."

"There's no such thing," said Stevenson, shaking a little more than he

usually did, "People've got to stick together in this world. Ever seen monkeys in a thunder storm?"

Monkeys in a thunder storm? Was he following in my footsteps? "It's about Maggi," I said, "You seem to have hit it off very well together."

"Yes," Stevenson admitted, "It's something I've noticed myself. It's my chutzpah. My charisma. Something seems to click when I meet women."

"Yes," I said, "Well as far as Maggi goes, she's private. Keep your hands off."

"Don't you think that's for Maggi to decide?"

"Look," I said taking him by the shirt and nearly lifting him off the ground, "I mean it. Stay away or you'll be selling pencils instead of pushing them."

"It takes a small man to hit a cripple," said Stevenson, "but of course I'll stay away. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. Even if it broke my heart. I'd do anything for a friend like you."

"I appreciate it," I said a little bit ashamed of my show of strength. "We'll see you at the 'Creativity' class."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," said Stevenson.

"I hope you are all busy creating," said Hark calling our meeting to order. "If you don't work then there's nothing to talk about."

"I'm thinking of writing an opera," said Mrs. Finster's friend, "but I can't write music. Is there some kind of a handbook I could get somewhere?"

Hark told her he would look into it. "Has anyone else got an iron of any kind in the fire?" There was a generally quizzical atmosphere in the room. Irons in the fire? "I mean, are any of you involved with anything interesting?"

"The next edition of Fair Shakes should be on the street by next week," said Stevenson. "I'm happy to announce, with two new contributors. We're publishing part of a film script--we've got high hopes for it too and hope to raise the money to produce it ourselves. It'll be our first production. And we've also got a 'How-to' article by our very pretty classmate, Julie. It's a step-by-step exposition on how to hang wallpaper with one hand, a particularly helpful thing for our unfortunate one-handed brothers."

"Very noble," said Hark.

Julie blew me a kiss and then did the same to Stevenson.

"Tonight," said Hark, taking notes from his brief case, "is a very special night. Tonight George Blackburn is going to read to us from his novel about the influence of the Mafia on Tree Surgery."

"The first draft," said Blackburn.

"And after," Hark continued, "Irene Finster has offered to show us slides of her family, photographs--I'm told--which are very creative and artistic."

Blackburn rose to his feet and fumbled with his few pages. He began to read:

Heroes. What makes them? Is it the man who saves your child from the burning building; the man who wins your wars or yet again, the one who wins your hearts on the silver screen? Perhaps we look further than we need for our heroes! Look around you. What do you see? I'll tell you what you see. You see well-kept

lawns, you see nicely trimmed bushes and you see highways kept free and clear of tall trees that have been felled by thunder and wind.

Yes, I'm talking about the tree surgeon. Where would America be without him?

Those noble adventurers who first came to this vast, nearly deserted continent several centuries ago, now, saw a dream. Their dream was to keep nature in check: to use it and not in turn be used. Today the tree surgeon keeps on the tradition.

"Cutting down a tree, why that's child's play," you probably say to yourself when you see a tree surgeon at work. But is it? Is there more to it than meets the eye? You bet there is. How do you know which way the tree will fall? How do you know what to prune and when? These complex questions are ones that the average tree surgeon has to deal with every day, weather permitting. A heavy burden, you say. You bet it is. And one that the tree surgeon shoulders gladly.

If nature and the elements were the only concerns of the tree surgeon, then his burden might only be one reserved for the superhuman or near superhuman. But alas, in recent years the tree surgery industry has been largely controlled by a small minority of "Business-men" who stop at nothing for the almighty dollar. To stay independent today, it doesn't take a superman, it takes a god.

"Very promising," said Hark, "you had my attention right from the beginning."

"I presume," said Stevenson, "that you're going to have some characters in this story."

Blackburn said yes.

"Well I'm pleased to say that if you make your main character into a paraplegic, there might just be a place for this book in Fair Shakes. We'll serialize it."

As usual I went to Julie's after class. She sat me in the easy-chair she seemed to reserve for me and went to get the wine. "I've got to be the luckiest girl in the whole world," she called to me. "There's art all around me. I'm surrounded by talent and by great men. Writers and editors, teachers, film-makers. I'm under the influence of art and I know I just couldn't live without it."

"I'm glad you're so happy with your life," I said. "It makes one of us."

"You forget that you're a great man. You're not supposed to be happy. You're supposed to suffer, to be...tormented."

It was of no consolation: why be miserable when I knew there was nothing great about me. I knew that the whole thing was a sham.

"A lot of great artists, just to make the world bearable, have to either drink or carouse or take drugs. H.G. Wells had to have it at least a couple of times a day. He was notorious. I'm a little like him," I told her.

"Had to have what?"

"A woman," I told her, calculating. "You see it releases the energies so the artist can be free to practice his art without a lot of tension building up inside him."

"I understand," she said. "It must be very hard for you. You must be going through hell."

"Yes, a living hell," I told her, pulling her onto my knee and cuddling her. "All this tension."

"It's only natural," she said, wide eyed. "You have more to think about so you have to get your mind off it more."

"Exactly," I said, "you understand the artist perfectly." Under her peasant's blouse, I cupped her breast, paying special attention to her long and hard pointed nipple which pushed between my index and middle finger.

"I think this could be the beginning of something beautiful," she said, arching her back.

Monkeys should thank God for thunder storms, I thought to myself.

Chapter 8

"A man called," said Maggi as I came in the door. "He wants you to call back." She gave me the number. "He didn't leave a name."

I dialed the exchange and introduced myself to the voice at the other end. "Hark Jones," said the voice, introducing itself. As in the herald angels sing. "I was wondering if I could meet privately with you?"

"About what," I asked.

"It's personal and I'd rather not talk over the phone. Could I meet you tomorrow around cocktail hour at my place."

"Of course," I said, jotting down the address and ringing off.

"That was my 'Creativity' teacher," I told Maggi. "He wants to talk to me tomorrow night. I wonder what he could want?"

"Maybe," said Maggi acidly, "he's on the nominating committee for the twit of the year contest."

When Hark Jones greeted me at the door of his not quite dingy yet not quite respectable flat, I had to completely reassess my opinion of him. Looking not so portly as well-fed, he hurried me out of the cold and into the flat that, although it looked to be in a state of renovation, was warm and nicely furnished.

Perhaps I'd been unfair. If I'd previously thought of him as an early middle-aged man who was cultivating his physique as an excuse for dying young, now in his element, he struck me as one who was living life to the limit. It was not sloth so much as a robust good health that characterized

his countenance.

Looking nothing short of spiffy in an ascot and a smoking jacket, he removed some books off a straight-backed chair, kicked some old paint covered newspapers away and said, "I think we can help each other; this seemed like a good time to get acquainted."

"I guess so," I said, intimidated, "but how can I help you?"

"You're making a film with Stevenson, right?"

"That remains to be seen."

"Exactly. I think we can help each other so that someday it will be seen."

"Before you get the wrong impression," I said, wishing to be honest for the first time in a while, "things are really very much in the planning stages. Stevenson, as you must know, is always talking through his hat."

"Don't underestimate the man. He is a legitimate publisher despite his debilitating problems."

"Stevenson is a fart."

"Exactly," said Hark, altering his stand, "so why do we need him? We'll split everything two ways. With my contacts and experience and your ideas we'll set the world on fire."

"But what about Stevenson, don't we owe him something?"

"As you said," Hark said, sitting down for the first time and crossing his pudgy legs, "Stevenson is a fart. You don't need him: you have me. I have experience; I have equipment; I have contacts and I'm an actor."

"So? Everyone's an actor."

"No, I mean I'm an actor," he said rising and patting his crotch. "I've got credits. You've no doubt heard of 'Come Like the Wind' the story of the girl who was a breeze."

"Maybe indirectly," I said, not wanting to seem ignorant of contemporary cinema.

"It's the honest to God truth," said Hark earnestly. "I was the brains and the driving force behind that film. People laugh," he said, imagining that we were now allies. "They think that porno is a joke. They think that it's only made by people out for a fast buck. But they never really see that it's the best way for the guy just starting out to get experience and make his name. Besides: it is creative. And creativity is all that separates us from the lower animals."

"I suppose you're right."

"Of course I'm right," he said, "old Harky would never steer you wrong. But here I've got to make a confession." He put his hands in the attitude of one who is about to start praying and blushed coyly. "I've actually never got it on with a horse before." He winked at me and elbowed the air beside him.

"Would you cut it out," I said looking away. "I get the picture".

"I've never got it on with a horse," he continued, "but I've had some experiences that come pretty close. Would you believe a friend once rigged up this machine with an old lawnmower engine..."

"The story isn't really about a horse that gives blow jobs. It was only a joke. We're working on something different now."

"Sure. Sure. Of course. Refining it is the name of the game. Nothing is firm yet. That's the way it should be."

"We don't even have the equipment."

"I told you," said Hark perhaps a trifle impatiently, "that you were in good hands. Take my word for it. Don't worry about a thing. I've got everything but a tripod." Getting out of his chair, he went to a small cupboard from which he took a cardboard box. He presented me with a super-eight movie camera that had seen better days. "I've got a tape recorder too," he said. "We could do the sound after and synchronize it."

"We'll see."

"Yes," he said. "We should talk it over dinner tomorrow night. Here. I insist. Bring a friend if you want."

"This is a serious venture," I said, "I'll have to think about it."

"Time is of the essence," said Hark. "There is nothing more serious than creativity. Nothing."

It was then that the illusion of being a writer and film-maker took on a renewed and revitalized importance. It was the illusion I needed to give my life meaning. I would join Stevenson, join Hark, join Julie (yes) in the crazy world of illusions. I would use Mike and I would use him well. Sure my life would be a lie. But it might just be fun and it might just work. If you can't fool all of the people all of the time, then the corollary to that is that some can indeed be fooled. Knowing some of these as I did, I realized it fell well within the realm of possibility.

When I got home, Maggi was waiting for me at the door. "What was it?" she asked bluntly.

"Nothing much," I said.

"Nothing much," said Maggi throwing her arms into the air. "He's your fucking teacher."

Truer words were never spoken. "We talked about a lot of things," I told her. We talked about art in general."

"He didn't say anything about financing it or selling it. He didn't say anything important?"

"He's not that type of person. We talked about things in general. Don't worry, everything's under control."

"Shithead, oh Shithead, don't you think you could've talked about things in general with me and saved the gas?"

"You know I've got this theory about women," I said, imitating Bogart as best I could. "A woman should be small enough to fit in a man's pocket. That way when he's in the mood to see her he could put her in the palm of his hand, let her dance and smile--maybe even speak sometimes--and then when she goes too far, he can throw her back into his pocket."

"Do me a favour," Maggi said, walking away. "go take a flying fuck at the moon."

"Look," I said, following her, "what I mean is that this script is my business. If I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it alone."

"Kiss this," said Maggi patting her butt.

"If you know so much about it," I asked, genuinely angry, "then why

don't you do it?"

"A good question," said Maggi, "a very good question. Let's remember that I never said I was a writer. I never said I was writing a dumb film script about some ass-hole I knew when I was a kid. Mike. Christ. You're both ass-holes. And if you ask me, you're as much a fraud as he was. You're a phoney, if you ask me. There's no script now and there's never going to be a script. You're trying to fool the world and it's not working. You can't fool all of the people."

"You're wrong," I said clenching my teeth, "you're dead wrong." I stared into her eyes for what seemed like several minutes before I realized I was squeezing her arm. Finally I released her.

"If you want to kill me," she said, holding the injured limb, "you could choose a more painless way. It's just like you to break every bone in my body."

Maggi ignored me till I left the room. Taking my coat, I left the apartment.

Since it was too cold outside for a long walk, I made my way to the usual retreat. Julie's.

Julie was just the kind of girl Mike would've approved of. "There should be laws about cunts like that," Mike would've said. "You look at her sideways and you've got a hard-on, fact-to-face and you're off. You know you're going over there so you tie your cock to your leg. Just thinking about her, you're doing the goose-step and everyone thinks you're a Nazi."

I smiled to myself as I rang her buzzer. I climbed the few small stairs to her apartment to find her appealing as always in a sensuously sheer silk robe. "Oh," she said, "It wasn't expecting you. I've got company."

"I don't need to stay," I said more disappointed than she could have imagined.

"But of course," she said, "I'd love to have you visit."

I entered to find Stevenson, sitting in the lazy-boy, reading an illustrated copy of the Kama Sutra. In my lazy-boy.

"Surprise," said Stevenson, hopping out of the chair like a jack-in-the-box.

"Yes," I said, "it certainly is."

Julie went to get me a glass of wine which I chugged down as quickly as I could. I couldn't stand the thought of Stevenson and Julie together. ~~Jerk-off~~ son-of-a-bitch.

And besides, I thought, the best thing would be to let her get him out of her system. It wouldn't take her long, would it, to see that he was a miserable ass-licking fool? And a shaking, fumbling, palsied one at that.

Chapter 9

Outside Julie's, I began to have second thoughts about my plan of action, plan of inaction. Certainly it wasn't the way Mike would've handled it. He was never the one to be bullied, never the one at a loss as how to treat a woman. If nothing else, he asserted himself.

In my memory, reality and illusion meet: the same images recur so many times that they are finally believed. It's like repeating the same lies on so many occasions that, at least subjectively, they become the truth.

I remember Mike that Summer, not as the cocky bronzed teenaged athlete that he was, but as a synthesis of Sam Spade, Duke Mantee, Mad-dog Earl and Casablanca's Rick. Although the performance was superficially good, I see now, however, that Mike was only acting. He saw the externals of the characters but knew nothing of their hearts nor of their motives. They were tough because they were tough. It had nothing to do with class; nothing to do with right or wrong.

Despite myself, I see Sidney Greenstreet superimposed on my character and physique.

In the scenario, I cast two others:

Joel. Peter Lorre perhaps. His future as a professor already mapped out by too much squinting on his chubby cherub face.

And Liz Scott. The name is simply a coincidence. She is the girl every sixteen year old boy dreams of meeting: an only child of working parents,

with a swimming pool and a chest that's inordinately large.

That summer the pool in Liz' back yard is a movie set on which the players wander on and off, the action often conveniently staged off-camera.

There, off the set, Mike has lectured more than once: "If you guys wait around for her to put out, you're going to be whacking off for the rest of your lives. Don't you see she's a ballcutter, a cockteaser from the word go. God damn her, we've got to show her who's got the balls around here and who's going to keep them. Don't you see."

We didn't really.

Immersed in the blue pool water to cool and swim, his glasses left behind, Joel sees nothing. With Mike, I've gone for cokes. Liz makes her exit upstairs to her bedroom picture window overlooking the pool.

"I think I'm going to stop wearing the stupid top of this bathing suit. After all, what's the point. I mean do you think I look indecent like this?" she asks standing in the window.

Squinting for all he's worth, Joel can only make out shadows, like a swimmer underwater: everything is bright yet indistinct.

"Of course," she says, savouring the implications, "maybe without your glasses you can't say. I know it's asking a lot but do you think you could do me a favour and come up here before the others get back. I trust your opinion."

Stumbling, Joel tears up the stairs only to find her sitting on the bed, in a t-shirt, winding the bottom edge around her finger.

"You knew didn't you. Did you really think I'd taken off my top?"

"Who me? Of course not," Joel says trying to laugh, trying to pretend they had both authored the little joke. "Anyway what difference would it make to me?"

"I know it wouldn't make any difference to you. It was just a joke," she says. She forms a small "O" with her mouth so that it matches her eyes. "But then why did you come up?" she asks.

"Idiots," Mike tells us after, "you're all fucking retarded idiots. She wants your balls for a key chain when her old man gets her that car she's always talking about. She wants our balls. The difference between you and me is that she's not going to get mine. Yours, you're offering on a silver platter."

July 16, 1969 we watch the launching of the rocket. On television we hear the American president proclaim the twentieth a holiday for our southern neighbours.

While we're swimming we move the T.V. onto the patio where we can watch it from the pool. It is fine for everyone but Joel who must retrieve his glasses and wear them in the water. When he remembers to, Mike splashes him as best he can. Joel endures in silence.

Mesmerized we watch the images and voices of Cronkite, Nixon, and others: Scientists, astronauts and wives of astronauts.

"The moment where man first sets foot on a body other than earth,"

says the American president, "will stand through the centuries as one supreme in human experience and profound in its meaning for generations to come. In past ages, exploration was a lonely enterprise. But today with the miracles of space communication even across the vast lunar distance, television brings the moment of discovery into our homes and makes us all participants."

Gratuitously, one of us says, "Amazing when you think of it."

"Who wants to think about it," Mike scolds more than asks. "Who really gives a shit if they walk on the moon or the water, or if they can shoot off their knobs with no hands."

"As the astronauts go where man has never gone, as they attempt what man has never tried, we on earth want as one people, to be both with them in spirit to share the glory and wonder and to support them with prayers that all will go well."

"Don't fucking hold your breath, Dickey Boy," says Mike.

"Can you believe there are six hundred million watching this?" Joel asks. "Six hundred million people!"

"Six hundred million minus one," Mike tells him, swimming off to the pool's deep end.

"You know, I think slowly Liz is trying to kill us," Mike says.

"Jeezus if she bends down one more time to pick up a towel the way she does, I swear I'm going to let her have it from behind, right there. Like the other day sitting on the patio. As if she didn't realize. Her legs were

spread so wide that every time she opened her mouth, between her legs it was like looking at the light at the end of the tunnel."

July 20, 1969 falls in the middle of the summer's most sweltering heat wave. By nightfall the heat has not abated and the patio is still too hot for bare feet. Overhead there is no wind, not even a breeze between the water and the stars that frame the nearly full moon. There, on the moon, all eyes are--at least metaphorically--fixed.

The television is set to be watched from the pool. Around us in the blackness, the water circulates, giving us the sensation of brotherhood, all four of us floating in the same illuminated and gently jogging womb.

The television flashes simulations of the moon walk and films of previous missions.

History, like an unfurling flag of stars and stripes moves to a climax before us.

"You know," Mike says from the water, "I don't know how anyone could save me if I started to drown. I'm sure I'd drag them down with me. It's the kind of thing I have rotten nights over."

I imagine Liz saying something like, "Anytime you need me just whistle. You know how to whistle don't you? You just put your lips together--and blow."

In time to some imaginary music, Mike paddles his way to the pool's deeper water. He thrashes in the water to the same beat. Water ripples away from him as though a fish has jumped more than once in the same spot.

Arms extended skyward, turning spirals over his head, he calls out for aid. "Hey Help." His head goes under and he surfaces coughing. Once again he sinks below.

Swimming to a quicker melody than Mike's, Liz makes her way to his side. She laughs at his nearly comic contortions.

"Take it easy, Precious," she says, mocking Mike's manner. "Help is on the way. Two can play at this game."

Mike half spurts, half spits a jet of water into her face, blinding her for an instant. He goes down for the traditional third.

As Mike surfaces, Liz lunges at him from behind. But he sinks into deeper water and eludes her embrace. On the bottom he thrusts hard and rises quickly, butting her in the chest.

"That hurt."

"Sorry," he says taking a minute out from play. "It was an accident."

Mike floats face down now, his legs flaying wildly, surfacing only when his lungs demand it. As if by accident, his foot grazes Liz' crotch.

"Fig."

Mike sinks again to the bottom, pushes off and comes up behind her. He grabs onto her shoulders and holds on tight.

"Are you going to do something wild and unpredictable," she asks him sarcastically.

In the instant between breathing and diving Mike tells her: "I won't play the sap for you, Precious." He drags her under as she tries to break free. Mike's left hand slips off her shoulder and cups her breast.

Too preoccupied with his hand, Liz fails to notice the strap has fallen from her other shoulder. Mike's hand catches the strap and pulls down. A hard pubescent nipple slips unnoticed from behind the suit. Mike squeezes it hard enough with his other hand that she begins to fight in earnest. Kicking and elbowing as best she can, she tries to remove him from her back. But she is in a weaker position and has already taken too much water through the nose. Everything fails.

She notices her breast poking out of her bathing suit like a small child peeking from behind her mother's not quite full enough skirt. "Now you've had your little joke, tell me about it."

"You tell me. I thought I was going to get saved."

"Eat shit."

Again they go down.

Mike has developed an erection and pushes it against her backside.

"Feel my funny bone," he says.

"Pig."

Freely, Mike fondles both her breasts, meaning business. "Feel my funny bone."

With the palm of his hand Mike caresses her crotch and then slips his hand inside the pants.

"What are you trying to prove. You're hurting me." She tries to spit in his face.

"Is it my funny bone?"

"You're a bastard."

"I'll have some rotten nights but I'll get over it."

He is pressed as hard as he can into her butt. They have drifted and pushed their way into the shallower water now and stand on the bottom. Mike hangs onto her, piggy back fashion. Finally he allows her to free a hand and put the top of her suit in place.

"You want to make it two out of three?"

She weeps and tries to spit at him but lacks the breath.

"You're good, you know," Mike tells her, "you're very good. Sister you're a good man."

Man has landed on the moon. Soon the astronauts will take their first steps. We swim. Mike practices swimming between our legs underwater, his path too shallow by an inch to negotiate Liz's crotch without grazing it slightly.

Our elbows propping us up on the pool side, we watch the T.V. on the patio. No one dares even to splash Joel's glasses.

Joel tells us that the six hundred million people who are watching make up almost a fifth of all the people in the world.

Mike says they should get it over with because they've been talking about it for what seems to be a hundred years and they've been sitting on the moon now for six hours without any action that anyone can see. He says, "I mean would you go to a movie where nothing happened for six hours."

The water is relaxing as it moves through the filter caressing our bodies.

Neil Armstrong finally emerges from the Eagle. Slowly he begins to

descend moonward. It is nearly eleven o'clock and he is about to step on the surface of the moon.

"He's going to walk on the moon," says Joel.

"I've got eyes," Mike tells him.

"I'm going to step off the LM," Armstrong tells us. "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

Joel applauds.

"Shit," says Mike, "I wonder if he rehearsed that line."

We watch as Armstrong begins to collect samples of moon rock.

"Look," says Mike, "Can you beat that. He's using a butterfly net. You'd think with all the money they've spent on this they could give him something better than a butterfly net."

From Armstrong's camera we watch Aldrin descend the ladder. With small hops and jumps they move across the moonscape. The horizon seems unnaturally close.

"I wonder how you pick your nose wearing a suit like that," Mike asks.

But we are too concerned with the drama unfolding before us to pay him any attention.

One elbow on the edge of the pool, Mike has hardly glanced at the television set. Instead he stares into Liz' eyes, when she does not avert them, and probes the ample contours of her buttocks with his free hand. She grits her teeth but says nothing.

"Are you going to do something wild and unpredictable?" Mike whispers into her ear. He smiles and laughs a very small, almost inaudible, laugh.

"No I guess you're not. No you're not." He pats her thigh under the water. "Sister, you're a good man."

Chapter 10

Worried about how Stevenson would do with Julie, I was quite low when I arrived at the apartment. Ashen, Maggi met me at the entrance, on all fours, dragging her back-end theatrically like an injured cat.

"Surprised to see me alive," she asked, weak yet full of vitriol.

"How did you do it? You know I wasn't serious when I said you should find a kinder way to kill me."

"I don't understand any of this," I said, truthfully.

"You're going to deny trying to poison me? You're going to say it was a coincidence you weren't here for dinner tonight, that I ate alone and I've been dying ever since."

"You don't really think I..."

"You big sonofabitch, nothing would surprise me anymore."

I went to the cupboard where we kept the Cinzano and poured myself a big one, neat. "I hope you'll be better by tomorrow."

"A lot you care."

"Because tomorrow," I said speaking loudly, "I'm going to eat dinner at my teacher's. And you're invited."

"Eat shit. I'm not going."

"As you like," I said, "it's your loss. Hark is an actor and a filmmaker. He'll probably be famous someday. He's got what you might call animal vitality," I said, spreading it on a little thick. But I knew it would make her come; a cat's curiosity inevitably prevails.

Soon it was time for Hark's dinner. Dressed in a blouse and a long corduroy skirt that concealed her legs, Maggi sat next to me in our small rusting Austin and sulked.

"Please tell me what's the matter," I asked knowing full well what it was. Was she serious about this poisoning business?

"The matter," she said finally, "why should anything be the matter?"

"You're sure?"

"Of course," she answered, "what could possibly be the problem?"

The problem? Communication is a myth, I wanted to tell her. The problem is that no two people see anything the same way and that communication is one of those words invented to describe something impossible. You see, if one of us had only had the courage to give our problems a name, then we could have gone about the business of solving our differences. Diagnosis, I guess, is about ninety percent of any cure.

I lifted my large clumsy hand to touch her with it. Sometimes skin communicates better than words, but she shrank from it like a cat that's been mistreated.

"I'm sorry," she said, pretending to realize I meant her no harm, "but I'm really afraid of what you might do to me. There seems to be so much violence inside you."

"Don't be silly," I said, only half aware this was only a game meant to injure me, "you know I wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Do I?"

If you have to answer for your own self control then that in itself is answer enough. There was a long interval of silence as we drove to Hark's flat.

"What am I supposed to say to the old fart?" Maggi asked as we reached Jones' neighbourhood.

"Have you ever been at a loss for words?"

"Do me a favour and eat shit, would you."

"It's a diet I'm getting very used to."

"Well at least I never tried to poison you."

"Maggi, please don't be ridiculous," I said. "You know I never tried to poison you. It was indigestion. You know that."

"Tell me about it," said Maggi.

As Hark opened his door, there was a metamorphosis in Maggi that amazed me. The great masters of disguise don't have to change their clothes. Although they conceal knives, in order to drive them home, they wear smiles.

"Well hello," said Hark leering a little at Maggi. "I'm glad you could come. I was just designing some furniture. I want to make something functional yet pleasing to the eye. Necessity is the mother of invention you know," he said motioning to the livingroom/workroom which looked as though someone was just getting ready to decorate it.

I introduced Maggi.

"Enchanté mademoiselle," said Hark affectedly, taking her hand and kissing it. "You are the woman behind this greatness."

"I guess," said Maggi.

Hark directed us to straight-backed chairs in the livingroom and went

to the back. "I've made a punch," he said, "it's really a bit of an experiment. I'm not sure," he called out, "if it's better with a pineapple or a grapefruit base. It's got rum in it."

"The wall looks nice," I said when he returned with glasses of punch. I got up and examined a magazine collage he'd done: a monstrosity of pasted magazine clippings shellacked to the wall.

"I'm actually quite pleased with it myself," said Hark. "Quite creative. I'm thinking of doing one with wine labels in the kitchen."

"Should be nice."

"Man's artistry is what separates him from the lesser animals."

"Yes," I said. "I know."

Maggi remained silent. What was it? Anger still. Or was it intimidation. Was she impressed? Honestly, I couldn't divine her thoughts.

"Your punch is very good," said Maggi, matter-of-factly. "So you're Row Bare's teacher. You'd think he would've talked about you more."

"I think you'll find that many artists are closed people. It's the artistic temperament. Talking is not always a creative activity."

"Sure," said Maggi, "that explains everything."

"You must understand that the artist expends most of his energy on his art. And Bob is in the middle of something very important right now."

"You really think it has a chance?" Maggi asked, not containing her surprise. "You mean all this time he hasn't only been picking his nose."

"Good god no," said Hark, "why the reason I asked Bob here tonight is to talk about casting."

"You're kidding?"

"Of course not. There are certain difficulties involved in finding a specially trained horse but other than that I see nothing but clear sailing."

"I've underestimated you both," said Maggi, rising out of her chair and walking about the room. "I owe you both an apology." She looked as though she was going to approach me but at the last minute she turned away and went over to Hark. Kissing him on the cheek, she said, "I admire nothing more than a creative person. You wouldn't think they'd be so hard to find."

"You're kidding," said Hark. "Are you in luck. It's all around you. Wait till I show you some of my work. Why wait till you taste dinner. It's a masterpiece, if I do say so myself." Hark got up and started for the kitchen once more. "If you'll give me a hand, Bob, we'll set up the table in the front-room and we can eat there." Hark took a beat-up card table from behind the kitchen door and gave it to me. He handed me a tablecloth too. "Set it up and I'll be ready in a jiffy."

"Pour us all some more punch Bobbie," Hark called out, "a couple of fingers each."

Two fingers up yours, I thought as I placed the glasses on the card table.

Hark returned with a small plate on which there were six crackers and a chunk of what looked like dog food. "Take and eat," he said, "my special recipe for paté."

Hark had forgotten a knife so we scraped at the paté with our crackers.

"Delicious," we echoed with our mouths full of what reminded me of spicy sawdust.

"It's my own creation," Hark told us. "As a matter of fact there isn't a scrap of meat in the thing. I'm a vegetarian and so it's simply a mixture of soy bean meal, spices and bread crumbs. It's amazing. I defy anyone to tell the difference."

No wonder it tasted like spicy sawdust. It was spicy sawdust. "Uncanny," I said nearly choking. "Can I have a bit more punch?"

"Yes but I'd watch it if I were you," Hark told me. "You know that every sip of alcohol kills brain cells. It could just affect your creativity some day."

"A glass of water then."

"Lots in the tap," he said, "help yourself."

"Get me some too," said Maggi, "please."

After the paté, Hark brought out a clay casserole dish along with matching plates. On each was painted a design of copulating stick-people in blue and red, describing different positions. "You like it," asked Hark, "my latest creation:"

"How clever," said Maggi, apparently impressed.

"And I did the research for every position myself."

"Tough going," I said, "you have to keep a clear head, I imagine."

"You do what you have to do," he said ladling from the casserole, "for art." He handed us the not quite round plates that looked thinner at one end than at the other. "What I'm giving you now is a Greek dish called

Moussaka. It calls for eggplant and different kinds of ground meat among other things. I've substituted soy beans, bread crumbs and carrots and have created something entirely different and just as good, I think."

In our different ways, we told Hark how much we enjoyed the soy bean Moussaka.

"Creativity is what makes us different from the other animals," he explained.

"You are so right," said Maggi seriously. I'd never seen her quite like that.

For dessert Hark served us an original concoction (could we have expected less) of washed sauerkraut and raisins in a butterscotch syrup.

"It's by trying the unusual that progress is made. By questioning everything we come to the answers."

Maggi looked up at Hark, if only figuratively. "I admire a man who'll take a chance," she said.

Hark placed his hand on her forearm and left it there. "It means so much to an artist when he is understood even by one person in his own lifetime." He moved his hand from her arm to the nape of her neck.

Maggi looked as though the perfect lover had just touched her clitoris in the ideal way. "To me," she said almost panting, "art is what separates us from the rest of the animals."

"Succinctly put," said Hark, touching her neck more.

And I had been left out completely. I had the sense of one who is overhearing a conversation like a devious eavesdropper, disguised as a

houseplant.

I watched and thought, getting more and more angry as I did. I watched Maggi making a fool of herself; I watched as Hark performed. It was like watching two worms mating: they are bisexual and it is impossible to tell who is the seducer, who the seduced.

Watching and angry, I considered the fact that I was in the unfortunate circumstance of being in love with a girl I couldn't stand.

"We're going to have tea now," said Hark. "I'm going to blend it and steep it for you."

"Do you ever stop, Harkie," asked Maggi, suddenly playing the vamp. Harkie? Together more than a year and I was still Row Bare. Harkie in a night.

"You both can," said Hark. "You can watch. The tree which falls in a deserted forest makes no noise nor leaves a mark."

"Yes," said Maggi, "there is no art in a vacuum."

"Although I once had a vacuum cleaner that was an art in itself," said Hark alluding no doubt to it's ability to pull him to new heights of awareness.

"Stop that," said Maggi, elbowing him. "You're terrible."

"Only kidding," said Hark, opening up several cannisters of tea leaves and taking a pinch from one, a spoonful from another until he'd satisfied himself by smelling the mixture that the blend was right. He took an earthen-ware tea pot off the counter and began to scald it with water that had been boiling on the stove. "Tea," he said. "To most people it's a mystery they never investigate. But not to the creator. Life's

mysteries are only opened to those who knock."

Maggi rapped her knuckles on the counter.

"Creativity means devoting your life to questioning everything. Above all else it's Socratic."

"Yes," said Maggi. "It's marvellous to finally meet someone who lives his life with the right spirit."

If once I'd felt proud of my relation with Maggi, now I felt only soiled and degraded. This is what she admires, I thought, looking at Hark. And she admires me. It was like being satisfied and happy because she would sleep with me and then discovering that she slept with anyone.

"I presume we are all broadminded adults here," said Hark, "because I have something to show you. Consider it my screen-test, Bob." Hark went again to the closet where he'd gotten the movie camera and took down a projector. Setting it up on the card table, he focused it on the only white wall and threaded the leader of a small reel of film. Lights out. "The man who is truly concerned with creativity should stop at nothing to express his 'self'."

The short film was a variation on the theme of the seduced delivery boy. The climax came where both Hark and his mate ran around the room with cucumbers sticking from their anuses. It signified, I suppose, man's attempt to commune with nature.

"You've no idea how many times we had to shoot that scene," said Hark, "to get it right."

Lights on. Hark cleared his throat. "I think we should seal this night and our agreement to work together with something very special."

said Hark. "I've invented a game called 'cum-by-chance'. Any number can play and it promotes friendship and the development of relationships. You have to be broadminded and free of communicable diseases."

"I'm getting a little tired, Hark" I told him.

"Ah, c'mon," said Maggi. "It'll be fun."

"I'd really rather not," I said. "I think we should go, Maggi."

"I'll be okay for the film, though?"

"I was impressed."

"Me too," said Maggi.

"It's a deal then?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, "we'll talk about it again, I'm sure."

"Well the old fart didn't keep you speechless," I said in the car.

"He's fascinating. Someday I hope he'll be recognized. He says it's the tragedy of men like him," Maggi told me. "I could have stayed all night."

"I didn't notice," was all I said.

Chapter 11

There are certain periods in everyone's life that are an embarrassment. The present's subjective point of view differs greatly from the objective one filtered through the distance of years. I suppose the purely subjective is the younger, the more animal of the perspectives. For animals, fools, and Mark Jones there is no such thing as self-consciousness, no fear that their behaviour might be thought foolish by others more qualified to judge. My behaviour, that next little while, strikes me as that kind. What a colossal ass I was.

My film script was the illusion, the lie that gave my life meaning: I had a role to play and I played it well. I was a writer; film-maker; artist. A real Renaissance man. At one point I honestly contemplated buying a riding crop and boots, just like Von Sternberg. I practiced a German accent and went to the point of buying a polka-dotted foulard from Holt Renfrew's.

In oversized dark glasses, I swaggered through the seedier Montreal streets searching for locations and snapping photographs at length. My greatest innovation--my trademark I might say as I look back on these photographs--was an extremely short depth of field where both the foreground and background are out of focus and are set off by the shadow of a thumb or a camera case in the extreme foreground.

I no longer read the popular fiction I'd once enjoyed. I scanned pocket book "properties" with a vengeance. In non-fiction I limited myself to Variety and, for balance, old copies of Cahiers du Cinema which I'd bravely smuggled from the McGill University library.

If Maggi saw through all this, she never said. If anything she seemed

impressed, seemed to treat me somehow more respectfully. When she got home from work I was always there in my uniform ready to talk to her about "German expressionism" or "Italian Neo-realism" punctuated with terms like "montage" and "mise-en-scene" or names like Fritz Lang and Roberto Rossellini.

"I wish I were one of those people who could improvise," I told her once. "But unfortunately I work like Hitchcock. I have to plan everything out, right to the last shot, the last camera angle."

Even the advertisements on T.V. didn't escape my attention. "Did you notice the use of asynchronized sound that time," I'd ask every time a particular "Tide" commercial was aired.

Occasionally--usually in the late afternoon just before Maggi came home--I'd even work on my "property", trying to remember important details about Mike. What kind of clothes did he wear? Did he wear leather shoes or canvas ones. After all, I wanted a round character, didn't I? And of course, like Hitchcock, the whole thing had to be intricately planned.

My style had changed drastically: there was no mention now, of Love which conquered all, no mention of golden locks, no young man, no steed between his muscled thighs.

It started, if I remember, something like this:

FADE IN QUICKLY:

INT.--LIVING ROOM.

1. MEDIUM SHOT--SILHOUETTE OF ADOLESCENT BOY. Camera is shooting from a high angle behind him. CAMERA TRACKS IN, PASSING HIM AND STOPPING at a small darkened movie screen, the kind used to show individual adult movies.

(Sound of coins being inserted into the  
mechanism and of gears turning)

2. MEDIUM SHOT--DARKENED MOVIE SCREEN. An image is suddenly projected on the screen: a girl sitting on a grass green sofa. Arborite tables sit on either side of the sofa, with identical lamps on each. Above her, there is a cheap print of Paris in the rain. CAMERA CLOSES IN. The girl is reading Life magazine. She is dressed in a red clinging blouse, a short green suede skirt with snaps up the front and dark nylon stockings. The girl is lounging, her feet up on the chesterfield. CAMERA MOVES IN VERY CLOSE. CAMERA MOVES UP AND DOWN HER BODY, STOPPING AT HER FACE, HER NECK, HER BREASTS, AND MOVES VERY SLOWLY DOWN HER LEGS.

3. LONG SHOT--THE ROOM. The camera is shooting from behind the girl. The room is painted white. To the far end is a door, slightly ajar. The door is pushed open part way and a german shepherd walks in, not the kind who wears leather pants and tends sheep, but the kind that walks on four legs. He is beautiful: perfect colours, broad shoulders, white teeth, and looks as though he eats raw steak directly from the cow.

4. CLOSE SHOT--DOG. CAMERA STAYS STATIONARY BUT PANS SO AS TO FOLLOW THE DOG OVER TO THE SOFA. The dog jumps onto the chesterfield and sits on its haunches, panting slightly.

5. MEDIUM SHOT--GIRL AND DOG. The girl seems very restless and pulls the blouse out of her skirt. CAMERA CLOSES IN AND FOLLOWS HER FINGERS as she undoes the buttons. She removes the blouse. She is now wearing her skirt and a black bra, underwired needlessly.

6. CLOSE SHOT--GIRL. CAMERA MOVES UP AND DOWN THE GIRL'S BODY ONCE AGAIN, PAUSING AT HER SKIRT AND MOVING PAST HER BREASTS TO HER FACE. She licks

her lips. Her teeth and mouth glisten with the saliva. THE CAMERA MOVES BACK TO HER BREASTS, still concealed in corsetry. THE CAMERA IS FOCUSED ON HER CHEST FOR SEVERAL SECONDS.

7. MEDIUM SHOT--GIRL ON SOFA. She is fondling herself now, rubbing her hands up and down her body. Her eyes and mouth look longing into the camera, her lower lip pursed, beckoning the lucky one-man audience behind the camera. The girl gazes absentmindedly at her feet where the shepherd is sitting, noticing her, we are led to believe, for the first time. She smiles and then looks coyly into the camera, an impish smile broadening on her face. Affectionately she begins to stroke the dog. She cuddles it and looks into the camera. The audience now begins to realize that the girl is in all probability not a practicing Catholic.

SCREEN FADES TO BLACK.

8. MEDIUM SHOT--BOY. From the movie screen we are shown the boy at a slight up angle. He is tall, slightly pimply and looks as though in some vague way he might be dangerous. It's Mike. (....)

One afternoon as I was judiciously analysing the soap operas for examples of camera angles, lighting and method acting, the phone rang. But when I answered there was no response on the other end of the line. Only silence. At the time I thought nothing of it and went back to studying the infamous early afternoon "genre". Shortly after, however, just at the climax of the previous seven weeks, there was a knock on the door. For the past two episodes I'd watched the good guy dig his own grave, shovelful by shovelful. And now I was going to miss the "denouement"

because of a Jehovah's witness or an Avon lady. I was almost livid as I opened the door.

"Stevenson, what do you want?"

"I need your help," he said, "I need a writer." He walked into the apartment and stood just inside the door leaning on the wall. Although we were separated by a few feet of air, I still became aware of his pungent bad breath. It smelled like he'd just eaten a family-sized can of a particularly poor dog food.

"I'm very busy, Stevenson. Did you phone a few minutes ago?"

"I never do business over the phone," he said, "I don't trust it.

Fair Shakes is starting a series of interviews and profiles of influential spastics and I want you to do the first one. I'd do it myself but it's impossible."

"What makes you think I'll say yes?"

"How can you refuse. The experience is just what you need. Besides I've made all the arrangements. Lunch at the Ritz tomorrow and then you start the little talk."

"Who?" I asked.

"A surprise."

"C'mon Stevenson. You can't expect me to interview somebody without knowing who it is before hand?"

"Call me Cedric. And don't worry about a thing. I've prepared the questions myself. Besides you probably know the person. You won't have trouble. Fair Shakes is depending on you, Bob. Remember: twelve-thirty

at the Ritz. The table's reserved in your name. I have to go now. Very tight schedule." Stevenson opened the door himself. "Oh and remember to dress up tomorrow. Bye now."

"See you in the movies," I called after him.

Stevenson, the twit. About the only thing you could say in his favour was that he wasn't predictable. Where, I wondered, do people like Stevenson come from? Are they born like the rest of us or are they formed and placed on this world by a God that is testing the sanity of his own creation? It's a contest. If the world can pick out the nitwits, God is thinking, then maybe there's hope for the world yet. The trouble is, when the world fails to recognize God's plants, he figures that by adding a couple more, the universe can't help but recognize them. Gradually the world is being over-run by Stevensons.

Typically, Stevenson had forgotten to leave the questions he'd prepared for me. So as I made my way along Sherbrooke street to the Ritz it was with a certain skepticism and doubt over the mysterious rendez-vous.

In the lobby of the Ritz there was the smell of quiet money in large denominations. It was the kind of place where anyone without a vest watch-pocket was out of place.

On giving my name to the head-waiter, he directed me to the rear of the dining-room where a man in a blue velvet suit was sitting, reading a manuscript, his back to me.

"This is your table, Mr. Seguin," said the head-waiter.

The gentleman turned around.

"Stevenson! What are you doing here?"

"Sit down," said Stevenson, "I don't have that much time."

"But where's the man I'm supposed to interview?"

"You're looking at him," said Stevenson. He was wearing a bright red shirt and a large winged bow tie.

"Where in God's name did you get that outfit," I asked him. I noticed he was wearing patent leather shoes, as well.

"Rented," he said, lifting his wine glass and drinking. I noticed the half empty bottle. Pully Fussé, 1962.

"Stevenson, this is costing you a fortune."

"Don't be crazy. Fair Shakes is paying."

I didn't bother arguing that Stevenson himself was Fair Shakes.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Stevenson asked, pouring into the glass that had been put before me. "What would you like to eat? I recommend everything."

I began to examine the heavy menu.

"Don't be afraid to order à la carte."

I ordered from the table d'hote, selecting a beef consommé and a shrimp creole. Stevenson, on the other hand, took his own advice and ordered à la carte. He chose a vinaigrette of artichoke hearts and "Cerveilles de veau Madeira" substituting French Fries for the bed of wild rice.

"If I can be so bold, Stevenson, you shouldn't have ordered the

artichoke hearts. They'll ruin the bouquet of your wine."

"You eat yours and I'll eat mine," said Stevenson. "What did I order anyway? I'm not as used to this life as I look."

"Calves' brains," I told him. "They taste a little like sweetbreads."

"Trade you your lunch for mine."

"Don't be silly, you'll probably love it."

"Brains? Are you kidding. You think I'm nuts?" Stevenson said, breaking into a frantic whisper.

"Don't make a fuss," I said. "If you don't like it, I'll trade."

"Phew," said Stevenson.

There was very little said while we waited for the appetizers.

"Nice place, eh?" said Stevenson gratuitously. "Have trouble finding it?"

"Of course not. Stevenson, it would take a lot of effort not to be able to find the Ritz."

"You take the bus or a taxi to get here?"

"The bus. What's the difference?"

"Makes a better impression if you get out of a taxi at the front door."

"Next time I'll take a taxi, okay?"

The waiter arrived with our meals. With aplomb he set the plates down.

"Cats' brains," said Stevenson, "How can people eat that sort of thing."

"Calves' brains. You know, like baby moo-cows."

"Calves, cats, it's all the same to me. Oh well here goes," said Stevenson taking hold on his nose with the thumb and index of his right hand and putting a piece of meat into his mouth. "Hey, this tastes okay," he said, still holding his nose."

"Of course it does. Now see what a baby you've been."

"All's well that ends well," he said philosophically.

I devoured my lunch like the carnivorous animal that I am, while Stevenson picked at his like a scavenger testing the flavour of slightly tainted carrion.

After we'd finished our lunch and were sipping strong black coffees, Stevenson took a tape recorder from the chair beside him and put it on the table. He took the script he'd been reading when I arrived and placed it in front of me. "Okay, shoot. I'm ready when you are."

"Stevenson don't you think this is a little ridiculous. Do you really think you should have an interview of yourself in your own magazine?"

"My own magazine? Who do you think I am? This isn't my magazine. It's every handicapped person's magazine. And besides didn't Hefner get interviewed in Playboy?"

"Maybe he did," I allowed, not knowing if Stevenson was right or not. "But isn't this a bit crazy. I mean it comes to the same thing as interviewing yourself."

"Don't be silly. If I was interviewing myself I wouldn't need you, would I?"

How could I argue with that kind of logic. "Okay let's get it over with then."

"I think we're going to start the whole thing off with a little bit of a profile. Maybe you should read it before we start." He handed me a couple of sheets.

"He's not your stereotypical publishing executive, this unprepossessing, almost dour fellow with a Durante-like nose and a Clark Gable mustache. Cedric Stevenson is something different: he's probably the best, the most dedicated publisher the business has ever had. Stevenson, of course, is the editor, publisher, in short, the driving force behind that unpretentious little periodical Fair Shakes, the only independent journal for, by, and about palsied people.

"Stevenson's background is diverse. At thirty-three, he has been an inventor, carpet salesman, mechanic, disc jockey and finally a writer and editor.

"Interviewing Stevenson proved to be no easy task. Stevenson adheres to a very strict schedule that has him rising at six every morning, jogging a mile or so and then getting on with the day's business. Rarely working less than eighteen hours a day, Stevenson still has time for his many friends, some palsied, some not. 'He's never too busy to give you a hand if you need it,' one of his writers told us.

"Fair Shakes gave the monumental task of interviewing Stevenson to Robert Seguin, a writer who is new to these pages and one who was discovered by Stevenson himself. Seguin sends this report: 'It's easy to see why Stevenson has been called 'Mr. Dynamism' by his fellow workers. His is a hectic schedule that, even after a morning, left me metaphorically and sometimes even physically breathless. The day of the taping, we met for lunch at the Ritz, beginning the taping session there. As it

turned out our encounter ran well into the early hours of the next morning. I began by asking Stevenson about his background."

"Stevenson, you can't be serious about all this can you?" I asked him, looking up from the script he'd given me. The next pages were, by all appearances, a series of never ending questions spaced to leave room for Stevenson's yet to be expressed responses."

"You want money, is that it?" asked Stevenson. "Okay you've got it. Name your price."

"It's not the money," I said as the waiter brought Stevenson the cheque, "and you know it."

"Sixty-two dollars," said Stevenson, "but worth every penny didn't you think?"

I sighed audibly and asked, "what about your background?"

"Just a second till I get this tape recorder turned on. Just speak in a normal voice and the mike will pick it up. Would you mind repeating the question?"

"Your background," I said impatiently, "tell me about it."

"It's a sad story. I was born into an immigrant family. My father was an organ grinder. He was so poor he couldn't afford a monkey. So he used me. For ten years I grew up thinking I wasn't human. I really thought I was an ape. Of course, I finally grew out of the monkey suit and my younger brother took my place. A few years ago, after I'd made it big, I bought my father a real monkey. I bear him no ill will."

FS: Your father or the monkey?

Stevenson: Neither of them. You see my father had to do what he had to do. Even though he caused my health to be ruined. I'm a sick man.

FS: What about your health? There are various rumours that you might be dying, that you are losing your motor controls.

Stevenson: Psychosomatic. The press has made a lot more of it than it actually was. It's not a problem for me. Never has been. I'm perfectly able, as you can see, to lead a normal and productive life in society. I help people.

FS: Even before Fair Shakes were you involved with helping people?"

Stevenson: Of course. I was a promoter and an inventor.

FS: And how did you help people in these roles?

Stevenson: Well, you know, no matter what I do, I end up helping people. For instance, I started out as a promoter of quadruplegic painters. I wasn't very pleased with the results of their labours, painting with their teeth and all, so I was the one who developed the art of "Posterior Painting". It's like fingerpainting. You put the painter on a large canvas with a tube of paint sticking out of his ... posterior and he takes it from there. I think, personally, that we've had fantastic results, although most of the work done so far has been rather abstract. I look forward to the time when still life and even landscape will not be too much for the posterior painter. It's all a matter of eye-ass coordination.

FS: "And this innovation, I'm told, led to another one. Perhaps an even more important one.

Stevenson: You must mean the ass-hole print. Unfortunately, that one has not been the resounding success I thought it might be. Although I still have the patent, no law-enforcement agency has contacted me about

it. Frankly I don't understand it: it beats finger-printing hands down and is also of use with amputee criminals. It must just be a little bit ahead of the time.

FS: Why do you say your method of ass-hole printing is superior to finger-printing.

Stevenson: It's complicated for the layman but I'll try to explain it. Just like finger-prints, every ass-hole is unique. No two are exactly the same. Because of the greater size of the ass-hole, print comparison is easier. The only problem so far is that the ink stains the underwear.

FS: That's very interesting. Let's get back to the present and the future now. Do you plan any major changes in editorial policy at Fair Shakes?

Stevenson: Why change a winning combination. No, for the time being, there'll be no major editorial policy changes. We're just going to try to bring you the best possible work for, by, and about the handicapped. If anything, we're broadening our scope.

FS: How do you mean?

Stevenson: Well, just to give you one example, last year, you'll remember we ran a contest for the ten best dressed spastics. This year we plan to open it to any handicapped person. We think it may broaden our circulation.

FS: What can readers look for in the coming months?

Stevenson: Lots of good things, I think. For instance, we're going to have a spastic centerfold in the near future. After we get the wrinkles ironed out.

FS: How's that?

Stevenson: The pictures so far have all come out blurry. We can't keep the model still enough to get a clear shot.

"Stevenson, don't you think it's getting a little late. Maybe we could continue this some other time," I broke in.

"Of course," he said. "I know that not everybody can keep up my pace. I understand that you can't keep going forever and I respect that. I just hope you don't expect lunch like this everytime."

"Don't be silly. Why don't you come over tomorrow afternoon before the "Creativity" class. We can finish it there. Tell me one thing though. Is this business about your past all true?" I asked him.

He fidgeted a bit and then admitted, "It's mostly true, the part about my parents being immigrants. The rest, I may have romanticised slightly. Like, I did work for my father when I was very young but he was a chartered accountant, not an organ grinder."

I shook my head. "Stevenson, you're bonkers. I don't know why you've talked me into this. And I don't know how either."

"It's my charisma," he said rising. "Tomorrow at your house then."

That next afternoon, as arranged, Stevenson came over. I opened the door to find him standing there in a full goalie uniform.

"Notice anything different," Stevenson asked. He walked right into the apartment, tripping as everyone does, on the steps. "It's hard to see your feet with these pads," he told me.

"I can imagine."

Stevenson sat there in our arm-chair dressed in his insipid outfit, a very stupid expression on his face. It was as if he were an argument for the "Tabla rasa" theory of man's primal nature. Sitting there with his mouth hanging open I noticed and was bothered by a thin string of saliva that hung from his upper to his lower teeth.

"Stevenson, can I ask you why you're dressed like that?"

"You can ask, sure."

There was a silent interval until I understood he was playing with me. "C'mon don't play games. Why the outfit?"

"I needed new clothes and it was on sale. Do you like it? I think the mask is the neatest," he said pulling it down over his face, "you want to try it on?"

"No it's okay."

"You asked me before why I bought it. I bought it for my image. I'm going to wear it to school tonight. I was thinking about it last night and I realized everybody thought of me as an intellectual. I want them to see that I'm just a normal guy. Now they'll see that I like sports. Spastics are always type-cast. Maybe this will open people's eyes. The next time they watch a hockey game they'll think of me. Maybe they'll wonder if the guy in the nets isn't a spastic like me. It's within the realm of possibility, don't you think?"

I didn't have the heart to say I thought he was crazy. I'd told him enough and it still went right over his head. "You could be right," I said.

We continued the interview in the same manner we'd started it at the Ritz. The only difference was that the questions became more ludicrous and more unbelievable as we progressed. Prompted to ask Stevenson about his marital status, for instance, I learned that he'd once been married but was now divorced due to irreconcilable differences. Asked to be more precise, Stevenson blamed his marriage breakdown on his wife. "You see, she used me. She was a fart addict. She used to force me to submit to Creme de Menthe enemas with Marie Brizzard, no less. Finally I realized that she loved me only for my farts. I finally had to admit that the marriage wasn't a success and that I was leaving. There was no sense in continuing if she wasn't going to start contributing too. Marriage is a two-way street."

We finished the exercise of my patience, an exercise from which I emerged very successfully. I offered Stevenson a beer which he accepted and drank, chugging it down in one draught. "I can hold my own, eh?" he said, out of breath.

I told him that I was indeed very impressed.

"Despite my problems," he said, "you have to get up pretty early in the morning to get the best of old Stevenson." He punched himself in the shoulder pad as a team-mate would, if he'd just stopped a particularly tricky slap-shot. "Got another brew?" he asked.

I went to get him another beer, the last one in the house. I'd wanted to save it for later.

As I handed Stevenson the bottle, he said, "You know what you need is a gimmick. You need to be noticed."

I thought for a moment he was going to suggest I wear his goalie outfit.

"People notice me," he continued, "and you could get the same recognition I do. I can teach you in your own home. Just minutes a day. I'll be your manager if you want. Your agent."

"Agent for what?"

"No but I mean, I'll handle you. I'll give you an image. People will turn around when you walk down the street, just like they do for me."

"I really don't want to dress up in funny outfits, Stevenson."

"No but listen. You want people to think you're a writer, right? You want them to think of you as a director, right? Well, you've got to play your part to the hilt. For instance, I honestly don't think you drink enough in public. Tonight at class you should get bombed."

"Stevenson that's ridiculous."

"You wouldn't have to really get drunk. You could just pretend. You could bring a vodka bottle filled with water. Just take it out in class and start drinking. Think of the sensation it would make. People would say, 'There goes a troubled man. A spoiled little boy like all great artists.'

Am I so susceptible to suggestion? Am I the fluid that I seem to be? I guess I must be. Because the more Stevenson talked about the crazy little plan, the more I warmed to it. I wanted to see Blackburn, the upholsterer and Finster, and Hark Jones, I wanted to see them all shocked by my behaviour.

"Stevenson, this may be the beginning of a beautiful relationship," I said, aping Bogart.

Chapter 12

Stevenson and I were monkeys in a thunder storm: we had each other. Even if separately we feared the worst, we would never say. Together we faced the music. If I was the Bogart character at the end of Casablanca, he was Claude Rains, the cynical police inspector. Arm in arm we would move through life, two artists, two "enfants terribles" against the world.

Metaphorically embraced, we walked to the bus, the cold winter air making every breath both a pleasure and a pain as it was sucked into our lungs, was warmed and pushed out in breaths that were deliberately full and hard. Like Tennyson's Ulysses we were drinking life to the lees.

The two blocks to the bus stop--Maggi had the car--took more time than anticipated and we missed it. Stevenson in his goalie outfit, right down to Montreal Canadiens sweater and matching toque, ambled slowly behind me, hindered and unable to keep pace because of the bulky costume. He reminded me of a gorilla who has been dressed in human clothes over which someone has put a gorilla suit. It was as if simian features both natural and contrived joined to form an animal that was awkward in its own skin.

We arrived a little late, something Stevenson said was better for the image anyway, allowing us to make the compulsory flamboyant entrance. Making my way to the rear, I sat as close as I could to Julie, all the while clutching the brief case with the vodka bottle close to my chest.

"I trust you gentlemen won't mind if I continue the discussion," Hark said, the timbre of his voice betraying the fact that Stevenson's uniform was slightly intimidating. Or perhaps he was just thinking of trying to turn the situation toward one he could control. "The art of dressing in

outrageous costumes is, of course, a genuine art form," he might next have told us. "Does anyone have a comment of the effectiveness of Mr. Stevenson's statement."

But none of this was to be. The evening, at least the earlier part, belonged to Blackburn and a discussion of his latest work, an epic poem, he told us, which dealt with the minds of several people as they entered a supermarket. Hark who had had a preview of the work in question prefaced Blackburn's reading by telling us that the epic was an epic of epic proportions, "a truly scathing condemnation of the human psyche and supermarkets which takes the local A&P and uses it as a metaphor for ALL supermarkets. Truly," he told us, "it is taking the particular and universalizing it that is the key to art."

"Do Epics rhyme?" asked Mrs. Finster.

"Usually not," said Hark. "Does yours rhyme or not, George. I'm afraid I don't remember."

"I could change it," said Blackburn humbly. "I'm open to suggestion."

This was not the world of real artists. The real artists, Stevenson and myself included, didn't discuss things like rhyme. Sure technique was something we were concerned with, but it was something we figured out alone. This whole "Creativity" class reeked of amateurism. Through furtive glances we communicated this to each other. We understood each other now: we were sardonic without smirking.

"I have an objection," cried out Stevenson, rising from his chair. "I'm involved with publishing, as you know, and I think I can tell you that no one's interested in reading epics today. They're just not what we call marketable."

"In your opinion," said Blackburn, defending himself in the manner of an animal whose only defense is an odour that is unpleasant yet not quite offensive.

"Believe me," said Stevenson earnestly. "I know what I'm talking about. I'm what you'd call eminently more qualified to judge than you are."

"I don't want to hurt your feelings," Blackburn said, pausing to wonder, I suppose, whether to unleash his 'coup de grâce', "but I wouldn't say your audience is typical. Maybe spastics don't read epics but I'm sure that many other normal people do."

"Up yours," said Stevenson. "It's attitudes like yours that give my life meaning, Blackburn. Believe me your plan is ridiculous. As ridiculous as you are."

As Hark intervened to placate both Blackburn and my buddy Stevenson I opened the brief-case and extracted the vodka bottle. Coughing and knocking the bottle on the desk in order to draw attention to myself, I unscrewed the top and took a long draught, gulping the liquid down more quickly than I should have. I set the bottle down and belched.

The remainder of the evening unfolded like a day dream. It was real, a real binge, although the liquid in the bottle had no real power to alter my perception or my behaviour. I suppose we play the role that is expected of us. Memories of some parts of the evening escape me entirely. I recall rolling on the floor; I remember disrupting Hark's lecture; booing when Blackburn began to read his epic:

"Of Man's First Supermarket, and the fruit  
And vegetable department of that company which

Brought lower prices into the World, and cut the woe  
With loss of profits, that was their pitch..."

More than once I fell onto the floor tipping my desk and, the last time breaking the bottle from which I gained my inner strength. That put an end to the evening, Stevenson promising to take me home while all others gaped at my once pitiful and revolting demeanor.

"I wonder what he's got to hide," I heard Mrs. Finster saying to her companion. "A tortured soul like that, I suppose, is part of every great artist."

"Brilliant. Brilliant," said Stevenson, "you should've been an actor. Even I believed you and I knew there was nothing in the bottle. You know what you've got now? I'll tell you what you've got. In a word, you've got respect. Did you see the way they looked at you? Did you see the pity in their eyes? The pity and the respect too. Didn't you see the way they were thinking of you: a great artist, the problems of the world were too much for. Bob," he said earnestly, "I'm proud to know you." He took my hand and shook it.

But once in the street I felt empty. It was as if the lees of life had stuck in my throat and were slowly causing my asphyxiation. Throttled to death by life. "I think I'll go home now, Stevenson. It's been nice." Our parting must have been very like that of two astronauts who have been kept in the same close quarters for a long time. When they part, words must escape them. There must be something else but good-bye to say. Yet no one has invented the words.

I knocked at the door of Julie's apartment, confidently, like the giant that I was. The big man, the artist who'd finally extricated himself from the elephant that had plagued him for so long. NO ONE SHITS ON ME AGAIN, I thought to myself. I'M HOME. I'VE FOUND MY PLACE. An artist, a filmmaker whose work on the screen is only overshadowed by the public life. GARGANTUA, I thought to myself, THAT'S ME. I FEEL like a giant, I EAT and I LOVE like a giant. Nothing in halves. I DRINK like two giants. By rote I recited a poem I'd only half learned. It was a legend. My own story:

In the elephant's five-pound brain  
The whole world's both table and shithouse  
Where he wanders seeking viandes, exchanging great farts  
For compliments. The rumble of his belly  
Is like the contortions of a crumbling planetary system.  
Long has he roved, his tongue longing to press the juices  
From the ultimate berry, large as  
But tenderer and sweeter than a watermelon;  
And he leaves such signs in his wake that pygmies have fallen  
And drowned in his great fragrant marshes of turds.

"Come in," said Julie, "you still drunk? I heard you mumbling at the door."

"I'll come in, okay."

She sat me down and went to make coffee. "I don't want you to be ashamed," she called from the kitchen. "I understand. Sometimes the world just gets to be too much and you have to get out for a little while. That's all. Remember you have nothing to be ashamed of".

"I know," I told her. I had been going to confide. I had been going to tell her all about it: that the whole thing was really nothing more than a publicity stunt. Now, of course, I couldn't. Reality is such a subjective thing.

"I guess you don't want to talk about it," she said, sitting beside me. "I understand it might only make things worse."

I'm an actor. And then, I was sure I'd found my role. A tortured poet, my very life the poetry. "Sometimes the world is too much with me," I said, playing my part to the hilt. "The world, with all its bitter memories seems to be crashing down on me. Sometimes I feel I can't stand much more."

"You have me if you need a shoulder to lean on. And you've got Stevenson. You've got a lot in common."

She had to be kidding, I thought to myself. Let there be no confusion, I wanted to say to her. The similarities end--hardly begin--with the externals.

"It's exciting to know so many artists," she said. "There's so much passion, so much--oh--intensity in you."

"You're a very good judge of character," I told her. "You see clearly. I think you see my guilt. I think you see the way I'm on the rack of the world." I knew I was laying it on a little thick but it was like drinking. You never know your limit except in retrospect.

"The rack of the world. Yes, I see it that way."

Poor manipulated fools.

"I still can't get over the way I idealized him."

"Who?"

"Mike. I still can't believe the way I felt for him. I worshipped him. And I think that's partly where my guilt lies. I'm such a poor

judge of people."

"You mean that's all. Your guilt over misjudging someone is enough to turn you into a great artist. A film-maker so sensitive he has to hide behind alcohol."

"I suppose I feel nothing in halves. It's my size."

"There are times," she said, "when I just want to take you in my arms and hold you till everything's all right. I suppose it's silly."

"Human contact is about the only thing that keeps me going," I told her.

"You exaggerate," she said. "You have your art."

"I choose heart over art," I said making my eyes as pitiful and earnest as possible.

"Oh...," she said, nearly trembling with emotion.

The room began to feel unnaturally cold and we slipped off our separate chairs to embrace on the floor. In my chest, I could feel my heart beating against hers. I choose heart over art, I said to myself. It was the sort of thing you might find in a Rod McKuen poem. I imagined myself in black sneakers like McKuen's. On Johnny Carson, reading my "Pensées" to schmaltzy music, perhaps behind a recording of waves hitting a sandy shoreline.

"You want me to tell you about Mike," I said at a loss for words.

"Do you want me to explain the way it was. The memories aren't all bitter."

She only nodded, as if she were afraid to speak lest she miss some pearl of wisdom I might offer.

"Mike was the kind of person who when told that masturbation caused blindness decided to continue until he needed glasses. That was his version of spitting in the eye of destiny.

"All I want out of life is to be able to say that I lived with honour. It's not bad enough that my time with Mike was nothing but a few years of pranks, a few years where I idolized someone older and as it turned out, crueller than I was. But my whole impression of him was wrong. I saw him as some kind of hero who although his acts were sometimes antisocial, informed his actions with something higher. I was looking for someone who said he stuck his neck out for no one and then proceeded to stick it out further than anyone could expect. Instead, I'm stuck with memories of someone who avowed he wouldn't stick his neck out for anyone and did just that. I was looking for a Sam Spade, a Casablanca Rick and had to settle for an Angel with a dirty face. Cagney as the tough guy coward, Rocky Sullivan. Instead of a person who feels nothing in halves I was stuck with one who didn't feel some things at all. Love, pity, sympathy: they were only words."

Beside me, Julie stirred. In a smock, I would have guessed to be Mexican, she was stunning. She wore blue jeans that, I suspect, had been bleached to save her the time and the effort of wearing them into that condition. Gold earrings the size and shape of bracelets completed the outfit. She made me drool.

"Are you ready for a fantastic drink," she asked me. "You have to be fairly sober to appreciate it. Vodka and Peach nectar."

I said I thought I was ready.

When she returned with the drinks she said, "You know, creativity is

the only animal that separates us, or something like that. Anyway, it's a good drink. By questioning everything we come to the answers. This drink is a good example."

"Yes," I said, suspecting something terrible. Had I been the seduced not the seducer? I wanted to be sick; I wanted to cough up all my illusions. To tell the truth. Then, would I be free? I didn't know. But I knew I was going to tell her everything. I was going to tell both of us the truth.

In the last year of his life, Mike's behaviour could well be compared to that of a clockwork doll whose balance-wheel is working itself off.

Planning it well in advance, Mike has directed us into the restaurant, making us sit at the most central table and telling us to place large orders, the cost of which he will gladly cover. As politely as possible we order, angelic attitudes on our cherub faces. The waitress walks away. Taking a plastic bag filled with what appears to be vomit but is in fact Irish Stew, Mike spreads it across the table. Hiding the bag he heaves and retches over the mess on the table. Without subtlety we try to show our disgust. Mike sits back with a look of embarrassment on his face. He waits a moment, then picks up a fork. Apparently unsure of himself, he pushes the mess on the table around until he finds a rather large piece of meat. He stabs the piece and then slowly brings it to his mouth. He tries the piece, finds it to his liking and then begins to eat with more gusto. We shrug our shoulders and pick up our forks. Together, we also fish into the stew and choose large pieces of carrot, potato or lamb. "Not bad," we say, munching. "And still warm," Mike adds. "Miss,"

he says, "Do you think we could have some ketchup. And please cancel our orders. It seems we've all had enough to eat." We rise and leave the restaurant.

I won't tell you what happened if Mike ever ran across a stray dog or cat. Suffice it to say that they ended their days in something more than agony while Mike gloated. Intimidated, we said nothing.

Women were viewed as a different species altogether worthy of only contempt. They were ballcutters who wouldn't get his. They would be shown. Fucking was something you did to them before they did it to you. It was a rape where, for some reason, no charges were laid.

In all things, to demonstrate superiority was the thing. And the power of life and death was the ultimate. Although in our presence, all those chosen were granted reprieves, sometimes it didn't appear as though it would end that way. At random he would choose victims to threaten them with a forced drink of battery acid. Among us, there was a rumour that he kept a starved rat in his father's garage--for a rainy day.

It ended in mystery. And in tragedy. No one knows the truth. There were three bodies found, one headless. It was Mike's, his head having presumably been splattered on the four walls by shotgun fire, at close range. Self inflicted. The others weren't quite so lucky. To describe what manner of agony they had suffered would serve nothing. It would only be an understatement. They were mutilated to the point where there was some doubt as to the sex of each. It was done with a knife, it is

thought, long before they were delivered to death. Both were boys.

"It's all true," I said, "every word of it."

"Oh," she said, "you must have suffered more than anyone will ever know. They say that all artists have to have suffered."

"Yes, well...that is as it is."

She put an arm around my neck and left it there, I suppose wondering what manner of comfort she could give me.

Very briefly I kissed her, almost as a nervous reaction. After, I felt slightly self-conscious, like a man who is not accustomed to speaking in public and is having trouble knowing what to do with his hands. My whole body--and there's a lot of it--was an embarrassment.

"It's okay," she said. "Remember once I told you about monkeys in a thunderstorm?"

Very well, I wanted to say, the image has stuck with me.

"Well it can be like that with people too." She was moved nearly to tears. It was as if she had just realized she'd been unfair to one who had suffered more than she could ever know. She took me in her arms and caressed me at first gently, warmly, a warmth that moved nearer passion as I began to respond. When she wasn't kissing my warm feverish face she was quietly rocking me back and forth in her arms humming gently some song of her own invention. The song seemed to have neither words nor melody: it was the sound, some kind of primal incantation or mantra that expressed everything, all knowledge that humans have about themselves--simultaneously.

There is something truly amazing about the way clothes seem to dissolve to make way for passion. In my normal sexual encounters the atmosphere is always ruined by an image of a head stuck in a sweater, or of the struggle of a pair of hips extricating themselves from a pair of jeans with difficulty. But there was no such problem to mar our communion. It was the unravelling of a dream. In my mind I had often imagined our union. Now it was as though the direction of my dream had been taken over by an author eminently more qualified to manipulate. Now it was as if God himself were exercising his imagination.

Unencumbered by cloth I shivered slightly both because of the chill which pervaded the room and in anticipation of the full union of our flesh that was quickly approaching. Our hands were good to each other. Her well-tanned skin seemed to be covered by almost imperceptible blond hairs which, I was glad to observe, you would fail to notice unless you shared something very special and very close with her.

Later, she rose to fetch a blanket and, rolled in it, we held on tight as if we were resisting some kind of force--like gravity perhaps--that was trying to draw us away from each other. It was as if we were far-away moons of two separate planets that collided somewhere far in space and for which the gravitational attraction was not strong enough to keep together. We were holding on with the knowledge that our separation was inevitable. The natural laws of physics cannot be ignored forever.

I shifted down into the blanket and finding the teat, the jockey riding high on her laughing little breast, held my face to it. Salt tears began to wash down her hairy goose-bumped flesh and made it glisten as what light there was in the room seemed to emanate from within her. She was

gentle and so was I. I suppose for a time I slept and dreamt. It is either the very contented or the very disturbed who dreams incidents exactly as they occur in reality. My dreams--if they were dreams--were such.

Consciousness of the occasion and time itself appeared to me as it might to a somnambulist. I drifted through experience till with a shock I became aware of time, of the company in which I found myself. I began to discern detail and to assimilate it. Things again took on meaning.

"Are you staying the night or going home to wherever you're going home to?"

"I'd like to stay," I told her, "but I can't. It's late as it is."

"Was it good for you?"

"They haven't invented the word to say how good it was," I said. "The earth moved."

"It's always good for me. But this time...this time it was even better than with Stevenson."

"I beg your pardon?" Had I heard correctly?

"I know it's not nice to tell tales out of school or whatever the expression is but how can you help comparing? This was the best ever for me. I thought with Cedric I had reached my limit: it lasted forever. But with you it was like the end of the world. I like artists. I guess they're so sensitive that it rubs off on you."

"I get it. This is a little joke you're playing. A groupie."

"I shouldn't have said anything. Oh...I just knew I should've kept my mouth shut."

"You mean you're not joking," I said not slightly crushed. "You're not shitting me. You mean after all this, after all I've told you-- you're the only person I've told it all to--you tell me that I wasn't even the first one in the class. I wasn't even your first choice. You chose a spastic before me. A fool. You group us together."

"Don't be upset. I was just trying to tell you that it was great. It's true there's no comparison between you and Cedric. It'll never be the same between us again. But how can you compare if you haven't tried both?"

"I thought we had something really special going here?"

"We do. We don't even have to think about it. Don't you feel that you should experience everything in this world."

"No, of course not. Next you're going to tell me you sucked off a horse."

"Now I wouldn't tell you anything if I thought it was going to upset you."

"You miss the point."

"I'm sorry," she said, in tears. "I guess different people look at things in different ways. It's been nice, that's the only thing that I regret. It was so good."

"I'm surprised you didn't suggest a threesome."

She perked up, "Group fucking is what separates us from the lower animals."

I picked up my clothes, threw them on my back and made my way into the

night, something in the fashion of Dr. Frankenstein's monster after he has learned that the world will not return his goodwill. With the monster, and like him, I saw that the whole world was against me.

I cursed anything and everything I passed but most of all I cursed God, the greatest manipulator of all. If he could hear me he was going to hear how I felt. "God," I said, "you bastard, you great shitting elephant, just who do you think you are? What kind of a novelist, what kind of an artist are you? I'll tell you if you care to listen. LISTEN TO ME GOD: you're a hack. A hack. A sensationalist with a sick sense of humour. You think you can spin it out any way you want. C'mon man, where's your sense of responsibility. You think you can do it any way you want? YOU BASTARD, God, are you listening to me? Can't you leave a person just a little dignity. Your jokes are getting a little hackneyed don't you think? You think you can get a laugh anytime you want just by pulling down our pants when we least expect it? Why make us eat shit like this? You God-damned manipulating voyeur, don't you think the least you could do would be to leave us alone. Let us go out thinking we have some dignity left. Isn't it the least you could do? Is it so much to ask that you have a heart?"

Chapter 13

I've always had the feeling that this world wouldn't be half-bad if we didn't repeat our mistakes. Perhaps I exaggerate, but it's always seemed that way to me. Let me try to demonstrate this by my own life: it's as if I've been destined to repeat over and over again those parts of my life I find most unpleasant. It seems I'm destined to repeat mistakes of judgment, ad infinitum. Looking back on it, I've initially been wrong about practically everything. And this, I think, has been the cause of that tremendous sense of guilt I have alluded to throughout this little epistle of mine. Why do I feel guilt? If you listen I'll tell you:

In Mike I had idolized someone without ideals.

In Maggi I had fallen in love with someone I couldn't stand.

In Hark and Stevenson I had sought out artists unworthy of respect.

In Julie I had confided in someone unworthy of confidence.

And I've probably overlooked a number of other things. In short, I have been a giant-sized fool.

True, guilt is an emotion that I have felt strongly. But I have never been one to blame myself unduly. If I saw a single villain in my life, at this time, it was Maggi. Yes, Maggi. She was to blame. IT WAS HER FAULT. And she was going to pay for it. When the time came. She was the one who had made me embark on a film career. She was the one, by her every action, who made me hate her. It had nothing to do with me. She was the one who put me in the circumstances in which I met that twit, Stevenson. She was the one who threw me into Julie's arms. She was the

one who made me confide in Julie because she was the one who'd made it impossible to confide in her. She had made me hate myself and made it impossible to feel anything but disdain for anyone else: after all, how can you expect someone to love at all if he does not first love himself. SHE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYTHING AND SHE WAS GOING TO PAY.

On the way home I considered plans to avenge myself. Finally I fell on the following: I would have a party and invite everyone I knew. All the people from the "Creativity" class, those fools who idolized me, Hark, Julie, even Blackburn. And then once I got them all into the one room together I would beat them each in turn to a pulp. I would tear them limb from limb while tied to a chair Maggi watched in terror. Then would come her turn. She would pay.

"How's the mogul," asked Maggi as I came in. It was a nickname I'd come to accept after learning she didn't mean it literally--like a bump on a log.

"I was getting worried," she said. "It's getting late." And then moving closer, "I love you."

"Me too," I said, moving away from her embrace. Somehow being in close proximity to another person has always made it more difficult to lie. "I stopped for a few beers with Stevenson and we lost track of the time."

"I see," said Maggi, in that manner of hers that implies skepticism

and perhaps a smidgen of condescension.

I sat down and relaxed. "I bought some beer," she said, presenting me with one in a chilled glass stein. "I'm not sure if it's as cold as you like it."

"It's fine." I chugged and mused while Maggi seemed to hover about me almost like a vapour.

I stared into the half-lit space before me. After an interval I'm unable to judge, she finally asked, "Is there anything the matter? You seem distant, somewhere else."

"No it's nothing. I was just thinking we should have a party, that's all. A big party where we invite everyone we know."

"That's the greatest idea I've heard all day. We can have a tremendous bash--invite all your friends from school, Hark, Stevenson, everyone I know at work. We can fill the whole place with people. We'll drink till we're sick and then smoke weed till we pass out. It's just what we both need, you know. I've wanted to let it all hang-out for a long time now. I've felt like this apartment was some kind of a giant girdle that was strangling us. But when...it can't be this week, there's too much to do, but maybe next, what do you say?"

"Sure. I think we could manage it on Saturday. But maybe we should have two parties. My friends on Saturday and then yours another time."

"Whatever you say," she said slightly abashed. "Whatever you want."

So I was going to have my party. I was going to get my revenge. Oh

sure, I knew I wasn't going to do anything really violent; I knew I wasn't going to beat anyone to a pulp or anything of the sort. But I would be able to give them all a royal tongue lashing. I would tell them all what I thought of them and more. I even considered spiking the drinks with some kind of poison that would not kill anyone--just make things rather unpleasant. And then there was Maggi. I saw the unavoidable thing: I would leave her. In a way there were regrets over that--there had been some good times. But if I were to turn over that new leaf of mine, it was inevitable. That party would be the end of an era. No longer would I allow myself to live under the tail of that flatulent, feces spewing elephant that had plagued me for as long as I could remember. That Sunday was going to be day one of my life with honour. I was going to forget about Maggi, about the film career, about Mike, about Stevenson and start a new life for myself. I would do anything honourable to support myself, even if it meant putting an advertisement in the classified section of the newspaper to that effect. "Young man, new to city, will do anything legal for money." I would become an immigrant in my own country, making a fresh start, unaware of where opportunity might take me. Perhaps I would move to California and seek out one of those soda-fountains where people are discovered. Or perhaps I would join a circus and become a pint-sized side-show giant. Or I might join the staff of a small-town newspaper, to be groomed for the editorship by some aging fatherly pillar of the community. On the other hand I might sell all my possessions and invest in penny stocks--hopefully penny stocks that would not remain so for long. Oh how I was excited.

That very next day, rather than work on the "property" I had just

recently given up, I prepared for the big day. Looking up the names of all those I wished to invite, I phoned them each in turn, finally tracking them all down and asking, cajoling, sometimes pleading with them to come. At last, they all agreed to grace my home with their presence, some more willingly than others. After all, if you'll remember, I had made quite a spectacle of myself at the class and they didn't know quite what to expect. Only Stevenson and Hark thanked me for my kindness. The others, especially Julie, were rather more cold than necessary, I thought. Nevertheless, everything was arranged; the liquor, wine and beer bought; the delicatessen meats and breads ordered.

I could hardly wait. I imagined Mrs. Finster and her leather-coated friend standing in my living-room, their hair bleached black, wearing black transparent danceskins, ballet slippers and silver bangles, sipping Cin, making grandiose gestures with a free hand while they munched on smoked salmon canapés. It never crossed my mind they might need three hands to execute all this at once. The mind is an imperfect machine and imagines things only in parts. If they needed three hands then my mind would give them three.

And Stevenson. And Hark. And Julie. I imagined Stevenson asking Hark to contribute to Fair Shakes on the assumption that perversion is just as much a handicap as palsy, while, to the beat of bongo drums, Blackburn recites his latest epic. I slapped my leg in appreciation. Hark Jones--the author of several failed novels, countless stories published in mimeographed periodicals that paid in copies, collections of poetry photocopied and sold to good friends like raffle tickets--is

standing alone, one elbow on the mantel-piece, his hand over his brow. (The mantel-piece was invented too, for my purposes). "The art of giving successful parties is a genuine one," he is mumbling to no one in particular. "It is taking a diverse group of people, placing them in close quarters and then allowing them the freedom to speak to whomever they like about whatever they like that makes the difference between a party and a lodge meeting. The good host or hostess makes sure that those invited have just enough in common to make conversation possible yet are always careful that there is enough diversity that no one becomes bored. Altogether unfamiliar people with something in common or friends of diverse backgrounds do the trick nicely, as this party demonstrates. Does anyone have a comment on the effectiveness of this party?" No one listens. Hark is as distant from the action as a commentator at a golf tournament. The competitors are totally unaware of him. "Life is a fruit bowl where nothing is forbidden. Creativity is the way you eat it. Sugar your fruit with what you will, you can never change an apple into a banana. It is what separates us from the lower animals. It is through questioning..."

I could hardly wait.

Chapter 14

As the week progressed, I was looking forward to the party less and less. My frenzied rantings had ceded to a kind of cold blooded calculation that was difficult to sustain. I'd forget what I was angry about or even that I was angry. And Maggi didn't help. For some reason only she would know, she was being very nice.

"I love you," she would repeat at times I felt guilty not asserting the same.

I always answered that I loved her "too", qualifying with that small word. "Too." It made it more an agreement--and therefore more like a confession under duress--than the assertion implied in "I love you." I couldn't say it. "I love you."

Finally the morning of the party came. "Don't get up," something inside me said. "Never get up. Just let the whole day pass." I snuggled to the bottom of the short bed, taking on the fetal position it requires me to sleep in to the extreme.

Beside me, Maggi was a dark mysterious cat. She yawned and moved closer to me, warming herself against my prehistoric bulk. Content in sleep, she nearly purred. It is not the first time I've said it. She reminds me of a cat so much I can't get the idea out of my head. But how? Svelte, black, mysterious, with eyes that imply some kind of supernatural, nearly occult knowledge and understanding that is beyond me--a mere throwback. Or is it a mutation. But most of all it is her selfishness. Cat-like: selfish and ruthlessly carnivorous.

I tried to lie very still in the bed, the womb from which I would soon have to emerge. Maggi, the world of the foolish and the insane: it

would all become part of the past. There were some good times; I thought to myself, becoming nostalgic and sentimental. I mean, it hadn't all been a wash-out, had it? Of course not. There had been some good times, some affection (if only physical) and yes, sometimes even love. A line from something ran through my head. "After all, it's only personal." I smiled to myself and Maggi moved closer to me. By the change in her breathing, I sensed she must be awake.

"What you say," she asked, groggy.

I didn't answer: I just remained quiet in the bed, my knees drawn up, my back to her. I suppose by the same means I had been aware that Maggi was awake, she too was aware now that I was not sleeping. She must have thought I'd meant to play, for she draped an arm over my hulking torso and began to tickle me, to make me aware of my own body in the bed. And of hers. She tickled me; she grabbed me; she tried to give me cauliflower ears.

I must add that I am the most ticklish of the ticklish. I have even been known to lose control of my bladder and bowels. Yet I feigned death. I accepted her ministrations without a fight: to all appearances I was either dead or very soundly asleep.

She had rolled me on my back and I lay motionless in that attitude--I reminded myself of a corpse at a wake or of Snow White, perhaps, waiting for a prince (Princess?) to breathe life into me--until she began the game again with renewed enthusiasm: tickling me, blowing in my ear, violating my body with a vengeance. Then she stopped and kissed my face warm and hard on the lips. I imagined her eyes wide open, looking into my close, closed, stone-carved fossil-face.

The first kiss in the morning. Oh how I hate it. Have always hated it. There was something about it, a warm face pressing near you, you can feel the heat, you can't focus on the face approaching quickly, trying to press its warm lips against you, you can feel your teeth--halry from lack of brushing--pressing against her mouth, you can feel your eyelashes against her cheek where you like to kiss her because it is the softest skin on her body and is where you kissed her for the first time.

After, when I've taken inventory of myself, when I've seen that all my parts are intact, then kissing is all right. Even good sometimes. But kissing for the first time in the morning is like a medical examination--the doctor telling you of some fatal disease you haven't even suspected.

Maggi continued to press her red red lips against mine. Still I didn't move. "You don't move soon, I'll have you buried," said Maggi.

"The giant sleeps," I said between clenched teeth. "Wake him on Wednesday."

"No such luck. Row bare entertains the hordes this evening."

Usually this would have been a time for tenderness. Rested, our bodies would serve us well. But I rejected this at once, regardless of the member that was coming to life under the blankets. It simply wasn't fair. One for the road has never been my style. Not to beg the question, I rose and went to the washroom where, as they say, I gave myself a hand. I pumped and pulled and squeezed all the while trying to summon images that would precipitate a release. Alas nothing was happening and my member was beginning to get chafed. Flame red as a wino's nose I had to emerge from the washroom with it poking insipidly from behind my

pajama bottoms. Back in the bedroom I retrieved a pair of jeans from the floor, and sat on the bed to get dressed. Maggi approached me and kneeled at my feet, taking me in her hands. She caressed me, my manhood in her hand like a handle: a key to what remained inside me. Turn the key, play with it the right way, unlock it, learn the combination first and the door to all the prizes inside opens, the mystery is revealed. Maggi looked for the combination. She kissed and nudged with her nose, caressed it, while with some kind of paralysis that knotted all my muscles, I fell back on the bed. I felt like the catatonic, who is trying to be summoned to consciousness, to mobility. Yet, I remained passive as she tried to make the organ sing her a song. It stood for her, it bulged, it beat, but yet could not be motivated to perform for anyone but itself. It was not interested in giving, only taking, finally exploding as it was held and puffed like a huge, poorly rolled cigar.

Supine on the bed, I looked like an elephant's interpretation of Michaelangelo's "David". In that manner, I lay motionless until Maggi left the room and I heard the shower running. I got dressed, went into the kitchen, and made coffee.

After that, I suppose we simply stayed out of one another's way. Maggi tidied one room while I organized the other, not forgetting to set the details of the room in such a way that they would reveal my character. The film-maker, "artiste", "Enfant terrible". I set out copies of film magazines on coffee-tables, moved interesting nick-nacks to locations in which they could easily be noticed. For fear it would betray any weakness, I carefully went through the bathroom, censoring both the laundry hamper and the medicine cabinet. Any undergarments of Maggi's and any of mine that bore tell-tale stains were removed. Then I replaced the missing

articles with brand new underwear and shirts. Anyone to pry into the hamper could only think me fastidious. And then the medicine cabinet. Anything suspect--suppositories, enema bottles, douches, and old hairy razor blades--was carefully hidden away.

Before long it was time to dress and to await our guests. Watching Maggi dress I was struck by her artifice. Dressing was a tricky business: she experimented with different outfits, trying to effect a delicate balance of chic and devil-May-care. She had to pretend she was dressing no differently from her norm but at the same time had to be wary no one could say she was not suitably dressed for the occasion. She finally chose a blue Kaftan I'd bought for her months before, after I'd found Julie so alluring in a similar one. Unfortunately it had had no effect on me. In the dress, Maggi looked pale, almost virginal as her long black hair hung over her gaunt shoulders onto her small breasts, that unbattened by corsetry, seemed to float (almost drift) over her long thin ribcage. Milkweed white face against the coarse cotton cloth, I felt something near pity for her, as I might have for one who's been falsely accused of witchcraft and is now being unjustly persecuted.

I then repaired to the livingroom, wordlessly, while Maggi went to the kitchenette and, without being asked, fixed us two large Cinzanos. We sat in separate ends of the room (good mise-en-scene, I thought) and Maggi proposed a familiar toast: "Here's looking at you, Kid." She held her glass high, like you might a burning bull-rush--so that the angle of the torch might afford more light.

"Up yours," I toasted under my breath, not unkindly. For some reason "As Time goes by" was running through my mind and with it, of course,

Casablanca. "A kiss is just a kiss...as time goes by." The music playing through my head brought back all the oceans that had flowed beneath us. All the water under the bridge. And I felt that Maggi and I in the living-room were somehow replaying that scene where Bergman and Bogart part at the very end. Where was the vitriol I had hidden behind? Now that I needed it, needed to be as caustic as possible, I was suddenly (maybe not so suddenly!) getting sentimental. Maybe I've never been anything but an incurable romantic, I thought to myself. But no sooner had these thoughts entered my head that I cast them aside. Bite the bullet, I told myself and play your part to the hilt now that you've decided on the scenario. There's no turning back now, nor should there be.

We finished our first drink and still no one had arrived. I collected both our glasses and poured us each a handsome dividend. Handing her the glass, I returned to my corner to slurp in silence and wait.

And wait...

It was getting embarrassing. To bridge the silence I'd put a stack of records on the stereo—nearly everything we owned: everything from Joan Baez to Tchaikovsky's "Symphonie pathétique", to our newest record by Carole King, something called "You make me feel like a natural woman." There was some irony, I thought to myself, in the manner the music moved from protest, to pathos, to platitudes. After all the records had played through, I turned them over to play the second sides, this time in reverse order. I picked up the glasses once more and refilled them. "I love you," Maggi said gently grabbing my arm as I bent to pick up her glass.

"I love you—too," I said, not lingering by her longer than necessary.

When two lovers woo, they still say, "I love you"...on that you can rely, as Time goes by.

It was now nine-thirty, and there was no sign of anybody, not even Stevenson. We drank the sweet Cinzano--only an inch or so now remained in the bottle.

"This is getting ridiculous," I said finally. "I wonder what the problem is."

Maggi remained silent.

By ten-thirty it was clear that no one was coming and I retreated into the bathroom with a full bottle of Scotch to contemplate my next move. This certainly was not what I'd anticipated. How was I going to show them what fools they were, when they didn't even have the decency to show up? How was I going to humiliate Maggi when there was no one in front of whom I could humiliate her? The whole world is against me. Nothing ever goes my way. I took a long draught from the bottle. I paced the space between the bathroom walls. How was I going to show her, now? How was I going to show them all? On the other side of the locked door Maggi admonished, "Don't be silly. You're not going to do anything silly, are you?" And then when there was no response from my side, she continued more arrogantly. "Don't be an ass. You're just being childish about the whole thing. You're a fool."

"Go away," I said taking the bottle and drinking once more. "Just leave me alone."

"I suppose your going to blame me now that none of your stupid little friends have showed up. Somehow your going to find a way to blame me."

"Shut up," I said, "or I'll come out and shut you up."

"Don't kid yourself, you wouldn't have the guts."

She was probably right. I didn't have the guts. I didn't have the guts to break out from behind the door and show her who was boss. If I'd been Bogart I would've stormed out of that bathroom and let her have it. "I won't play the sap for you," I would've told her. "You're going over for it, you understand. Oh sure you're going to tell me you had nothing to do with it. And maybe Christmas is in July." Her whole body would go soft as putty when I slugged her. "You're going to fry," I would've have told her. "And don't try any of that crying stuff either, kid, 'cause I'm not the type tears do anything to."

It just wasn't me. If I were going to get even, it would have to be in my own way. But I had to get even. She was responsible. Even more now than before. At least before, I'd had the illusion that I was controlling things. That I was an idol, in my own way. If deep in my heart I'd known I was a fool, I felt I was the only one who knew it. Now I'd cruelly discovered I was the last to find out. Imagine how that would make you feel: the joke's on you. I was the cocksure comedian who never realizes he's getting laughs because his fly is down and everyone's learning the truth about him. Discovering what everyone already knows makes it hard to continue the routine into the second set. Oh sure, I've said that I was essentially a manipulated person. But it was always informed with the idea that it was a guise I used to be a manipulator myself. Nothing aids strength more than the illusion of weakness.

I drank Scotch till my head swirled. Maggi was responsible for the whole ordeal. If she'd just left well-enough alone, I would have been

able to continue my studies, to have nearly graduated by now. Instead she had destroyed me. She had made me believe in plans that were so unbelievable that in fact, no one--not even the most foolish of people--had believed them. She was going to pay.

If she hadn't forced me to see Julie, if I hadn't told Julie everything then...then.... She was going to pay, that's all.

I thought of Mike. "You know," Mike had told me, "I've found the perfect way to do away with a broad. It's foolproof and fun. I read it in Time. You blow in her cunt and finally the air gets into her bloodstream and she dies. Really. I read it in Time. Until the fatal moment, it's supposed to feel beautiful. Then a little pain, then nothing. They don't know what you're up to. And then even if you admit how it happened, you can always say that it was an accident. Who's going to know it was planned ahead?"

I don't think I have to tell you what next crossed my perverse little mind. I'd found a new--if slightly more drastic--way for Maggi to pay.

I took a last long draught from the bottle and slightly drunk and disorganized made my way back to the livingroom where Maggi was sitting. I could see she'd been crying.

"I guess we've both been a little childish," I said. "There could be any number of reasons why nobody came."

"Of course."

"And there's no real reason to waste a perfectly good evening moping about the way things are."

"Yes."

I sat down beside her and hugged her hard. Then we kissed. I feel guilty saying it, but there was something very exciting about it, knowing that I was going to be the last person ever to kiss her, that my body was the last she would ever be aware of.

Suddenly we were naked. In my chest, my heart beat as though it had to supply blood to an elephant. It was working overtime, triple time. Literally, I could feel the blood racing through my veins. Yet in my head I had the sensation that I was being deprived of oxygen. I couldn't think straight. I was aware that in our lovemaking Maggi had suddenly become the aggressor. She was playing with me, using all her imagination, all her body to arouse me. And how I was aroused. I know how the paralytic must feel when his body will not obey him. That is the way I've always felt, not only with my own body but in all things. I have no control over anything.

"I love you," said Maggi. "I love you so much."

"Me too," I said.

I suppose murder is the ultimate act of the ego-maniac. But I suppose no murderer sees it exactly that way. We murderers do what we must do to mend the way the world is treating us. And why shouldn't we? Why should anything or anyone stand in our way? We understand only one perspective--the proper perspective--the utterly subjective one that we call objectivity.

Taking my time, I manoeuvred our bodies to give me a proper shot. I took my time, I considered the angles, the time factor: I took a rather scientific position throughout.

The proper time had come. I took a deep breath and then imagined not my own, but Maggi's whole life before my mind. In cinematic terms, it was a tragedy. Twenty-odd years wasted. Nothing accomplished. I took another deep breath and this time let her have it. Her back arched, she shivered noticeably and tried to reach my shoulders, to egg me on. "Again," her body seemed to say. "Again." I blew once more.

If she hadn't made me act like a fool. If I hadn't told Julie everything I'd at least have Mike. She was going to pay.

She moaned. I blew till I was breathless and still there was nothing but her pleasure to show for it.

If it wasn't for her. If she hadn't driven me to Julie's arms, then I would never have had to know I was a fool.

Maggi begged me to join her. She wanted me, she said. She loved me, she said.

There was an instant where I didn't know what I would do. I was completely disorganized.

But then. Then the earth moved. For both of us. Together.

I suppose it's true what they say about cats having nine lives. But then, nothing could have made me happier.