

Cleo Birdwell

# AMAZONS

An Intimate Memoir  
by the First Woman  
Ever to Play in the  
National Hockey League



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*An intimate memoir by  
the first woman ever to play  
in the National Hockey League*



by Cleo Birdwell

Holt, Rinehart and Winston  
New York

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Published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston,  
383 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

Published simultaneously in Canada by  
Lester & Orpen Dennys Limited.

LC 80-80241

ISBN 0-03-055426-8

First Edition

Designer: Joy Taylor

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

**Only childhood is ours. The rest belongs to strangers.**

***Wadi Assad***



**AMAZONS**

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*I*F a man's name sounds right whether you say it forward or backward, it means he went to Yale.

Sanders Meade, class of '67, was the Rangers' general manager when I made my first appearance under the smoky lights. Sanders's job was to wear plaid double-knit pants and a leisure-type jacket with his shirt open at the top and the shirt collar worn outside the jacket. That's all you have to know about him, excepting his surprising prowess the time we hopped into bed during the snows in southern Ontario. I couldn't tell you why I wanted Sanders. He was the absolute antithesis.

That's the kind of year it was. Everyone said I made a blazing entry into the NHL. They wrote about my honey blonde hair flying in the breeze, my silver skate blades flashing, my plucky work in the corners, my style, my stamina, my milky blue eyes, my taut

ass and firm breasts, the nightmarish bruises on my downy white thighs.

If you read sports at all, you know I'm not exaggerating. They have tried to make it grown-up. Most of the writers have beards and they dream about secret book projects in the real world. They are trying to make the leap. I heard the whole story one incredible night in Dallas-Fort Worth from Murray Jay Siskind, watching him chop garlic with a four-inch Wusthof that he carries coast to coast for that purpose.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In a memoir, which comes from the Latin for memory, no big surprise, I don't think you can capture all the minute-by-minute excitement. Hockey is so fast it's practically nonlinear. What I have in mind is a book that's slow and sunlit and kind of meadowy. Reflections and meditations. I think my experience in the National Hockey League lends itself to some major thematic material.

Not that I intend to slink away from the physical issues. Murray Jay says athletes are people with bodies. Whatever that means, I don't want to overlook it. It is probably safe to say that except for homosexuals, bisexuals, and transsexuals, no athlete has discussed the intimate details of his or her life with the kind of refreshing candor I plan to use in the pages ahead.

Athletes are searchers for meaning. Behind the easygoing facades and the put-down humor, we are all a little restless with our lot. The games we play are sometimes beautiful. But there is more to life, and also less, as I think this book will demonstrate.

**ONE**



*I Am a Jumper*



# 1



*I*T was Wadi Assad who wrote: “What must the child wonder about his elders when he sees they are so big—yet the size of betel nuts compared to the elephant?”

I know this kind of stuff aggravates some people. But Wadi Assad’s books were pretty comforting, and not just for me. Most of the guys on the team were reading either *The Mystic Prince I*, *The Barefoot Rose*, or *The Romance of Being*. It was my agent, Floss Penrose, who first got me interested in Wadi Assad.

I thought Floss, being a players’ agent, would be a whippy little woman who chain-smokes and says fuck, fuck, fuck over the phone all day. What I found was a shy, frightened person. She was about forty-five years old and tremendously petite. Her office was in a midtown Manhattan skyscraper that had a curving, swooping glass facade, like an incredibly high, steep, sliding pond. It was my second time ever in New York.

“The Rangers are ready to sign,” she said. “God, you must be terrified. I confess the worst moment was when they acquired your rights. That sealed it right there. When a team like the Rangers, with their resources, makes that kind of move, you know they mean business. I literally woke up choking last night. Tension makes me choke.”

She put her hand to her throat. Then she went over to the small table range in a corner of the room and began making soup. Outside the rain was lashing down.

“The numbers are acceptable,” she said. “They’ve made an offer commensurate with your box office appeal.”

“What about commensurate with my abilities?”

“That was figured in as well. I don’t miss much.”

“Do they want to bring me up to the big club?”

“Immediately,” she said.

“I think I’m ready.”

“If it were me, I’d change my name and go live in some little flat on the teeming Lower East Side.”

“I think I can skate with them. That’s all that matters, isn’t it?”

“Cleo, you sweet, dimply, doe-eyed baby.”

“Huh?”

“Skating is the least of it. You’ll be in the smoky lights day and night. People will press against you. And watching. They’ll always be watching. How I despise visual scrutiny.”

She gave me soup and crackers and went to sit on a large, black sectional sofa, wrapping herself in a lambskin coat.

“I would die a thousand times rather than face that horde of newspeople tomorrow.”

“What happens tomorrow?”

“The signing. The news conference in the Ranger offices at Madison Square Garden. I’d rather be force-fed day-old bread.” Pause. “Anxiety makes it hard for me to swallow.”

“Floss, I’ve done all this. It’s not hard.”

“It’s not easy.”

“It’s not easy, but it’s not hard.”

“You’ve done it in Kitchener,” she said. “We’re talking about New York, New York. It’s so awesome we say it twice. It’s like the

tail end of a prayer. The priest turns to the congregation and he spreads his arms out wide and he says, 'New York.' And the congregation answers, 'New York.' And then everybody gets up and goes home because there's obviously nothing left to say."

"I've done it about six times in six cities. I'm always the first woman, and there's always a news conference."

"You've done it in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in someplace-or-other, Manitoba. It's one thing to do it in the Land of the Midnight Sun. It's one thing to do it north of the Arctic Circle in continuous daylight or continuous dark. The Rangers play the Black Hawks on Tuesday, in New York, New York, under the smoky lights, and they want you in uniform. Eighteen thousand glandular people and countless other thousands in front of TV sets and they'll all be looking, looking."

She sat there trembling. I was beginning to think I was supposed to go out there naked to the waist with a slain calf slung over my shoulder. We talked about the contract and speaking engagements and endorsements. Then she went to the desk and took a small, thin volume out of the bottom drawer.

"You'll need this, Cleo. It is a book by Wadi Assad. It will give you spiritual comfort, especially during those long, empty, terrifying road trips when you spend endless hours in hotel rooms, motel rooms, airport terminals, or walking the streets of our frightening inner cities, or trying to figure out where you are in one of those strange, trackless areas where satellite cities and bedroom communities and suburbs all overlap and where the developers tend to build sports arenas these days, my God, you'll need this book. Wadi Assad writes the kind of books that, when you meet someone who's read them, you know you've found a friend for life. How many writers can you say that about?"

When it comes to contact sports, the male argument always ends the same way: "What about her poor, floppy, delicate breasts?"

They think breasts are the ultimate burden. Breasts are the visible sign of our pathos. Well, you saw and heard what happened if you were watching the late news on TV that night, how this reporter from the print media asked me, with a kind of lemon-



sucking look on his face, the way they look when they know they are being obnoxious and stupid, what about my highly vulnerable upper body, because after all this is a contact sport and it gets awfully rough out there, and how I answered, “You wear a jock for your lower plumbing, I wear pads for my upper.”

Everybody was at the conference, including anchor people, I’m told, who don’t usually cover sports, as well as the commissioner down from Montreal; all the Garden brass; all of Hughes Tool’s top people; many, many network executives; nine people from Time Inc. alone; tastemakers from the Sunday supplements; hockey people from Russia, Sweden, and Czechoslovakia; executives from other sports including boxing, basketball, and baseball (*it is only a matter of time*); plus a lot of famous women athletes; some males of the same stripe; and a huge, raging, swelling mass of print reporters, TV reporters, radio commentators, cameramen, soundmen, lighting technicians, and various bespectacled creatures on the supervisory level. UPI sent a lesbian.

The Garden president, James Kinross, asked me into his office after the news conference. With him was the Rangers’ general manager, Sanders Meade. I felt a little foolish because I was still wearing the mostly blue road jersey—the photographers wanted me to pose in it—over a pair of dark green pants, with my black and tan silk scarf visible at the neck.

“We’re nearly to midseason,” Sanders said, looking at his watch, “but we didn’t think there was any point in waiting. The team needs new blood, I don’t mean that the way it sounds, and we think you can do the job centering for Fergie and Gord. They’re rink-wise vets who will help you adjust.”

Kinross wasn’t interested in details. He was a big-ticket item—a large, jowly, slumping, pouchlike man with shaky hands and a voice with enough rasp in it to fell trees. Naked in his hot bath, he must have looked like an envelope of corn coming to a boil.

“That was the media,” he told me. “I felt like blasting away with a burp gun. Welcome to the Garden, Birdwell.”

“Why do they call it the Garden?”

“What do I look like, the fuggin Answer Man?”

“Well, it certainly doesn’t resemble any garden I’ve ever seen.”

“A lady from Saginaw, Michigan, writes: ‘Dear Mr. Answer Man, why do stars twinkle?’ Hell, I don’t know why they call it the Garden. Sanders, why do they call it the Garden?”

“I don’t know, but I can tell you why stars twinkle. I’ve known that since my first summer camp.”

“God bless the simpleminded elite of the world,” Kinross said. “Sanders, you’re so fuggin refreshing I may stop shaving with menthol.”

He hit the desk, laughing violently at his own joke.

“Well, will I take a regular shift?” I said.

“At this juncture,” Sanders said, “we’re projecting a regular shift for the first two periods.”

As Sanders and I chatted about my playing time, Kinross shifted massively in his chair.

“What are you drinking?” he asked me.

“A small Scotch.”

“Sanders, get me and the lady a brace of Johnnie Reds, why don’t you? A’boy. God bless.”

We drank and talked. Kinross suggested I remove the team jersey, and when my head emerged I saw him watching me with a look so openly, sadly, forlornly lustful that I wanted to capture it on film and blow it up to poster size.

“Hell shit, the chief exec ought to drink with his men once in a while. Sanders, what are you doing?”

“Making notes on the press conference.”

“You’re not drinking,” Kinross said in his mouth-twisting rasp. “Where’s your glass? Get yourself a drink. We’re here to drink, Sanders. We don’t want any kibitzers. Either you drink with the rest of us or you go over to Orange Julius and drink over there.”

“I *will* drink, Jim. I was about to get myself a drink. I just wanted to make these notes while the salient points were still fresh in my mind.”

“I respect you for what you are, Sanders, you fuggin miserable Ivy League hard-on. Let me know when your testicles descend, I want to have a coming-out party.”

When Kinross finished coughing, laughing, hitting the desk,

and turning dangerously red, he asked me about my views on life in general.

“All I want to do is play hockey,” I told him.

“Tell you the truth, Birdwell, I hate hockey. It’s a fuggin shit-ass game for my money. You don’t have a black or Hispanic element. It doesn’t reflect the urban reality. Who wants to see two white guys hit each other? The violence has no bite to it. It’s not relevant. It doesn’t reflect the streets, and I come from the streets.”

“It reflects the Canadian streets. It’s a Canadian game. It reflects ice and snow, that’s what it reflects.”

“Well and good. I understand that. But this is New York, New York. Where’s the fuggin criminal element? Who do we root for? Escapist violence is all right in the movies. But this is live. Real people swinging sticks. Without any relevance, it’s kind of disgusting. If it doesn’t reflect the streets, you wonder what these guys are doing it for. What’s the point? Sanders, are you drinking or what?”

“I *will* drink, Jim. I definitely plan to drink.”

“You’re okay, Sanders, God love you, we’ve been through some tough campaigns together, battling the media and so forth, and you do more than your share of work, and what’s more you do it without complaint, and I respect you as a human being, Sanders, God bless, all kidding aside, you’re a sweet-natured man. But I understand you’re still single, which either means you not only look half-faggy but you perform the foul acts—or you’re getting so much pussy you’re gonna upset the office staff with your musky aroma. We’re part of a giant corporation here. Hughes fuggin Tool wants normal outlets for their employees’ animal urges and the animal urges of dependents. They’re not ready for fags in the front office and they don’t want guys who get more pussy than the national median. They’re already fuggin aghast at what goes on around here.”

Sanders said, “As far as the gay business, Jim, be assured I’m not in that ballpark, barring a few prep school episodes that were, at most, ambiguous. Marriage is definitely in my plans, although I haven’t done any specific targeting to date.”

A look my way. What's the Latin for insipid?

"Well, I happen to fuggin hate it if somebody's not drinking when I'm drinking. It's like having a midget in the room."

Sanders and I glanced at each other, wondering what he meant by that.

"I will drink, Jim. I *want* to drink."

"When people get together to drink, they don't like any kibitzing going on. Either you drink or you fuggin depart. We don't want onlookers to our drinking, Birdwell and me."

Sanders Meade shrugged and left, taking the Ranger jersey with him.

"What number you wearing?" Kinross asked me.

"I've had ten for the last three years, but Bruce McLeod has ten, so they're giving me fourteen, which is the nearest unoccupied number. Sort of a nothing number, isn't it?"

"Hell, you want ten, I'll get you ten."

"That would not be a good idea, Mr. Kinross."

"Favoritism to the fairer sex, I get it. The troops mutiny, we're off to a fuggin shit-ass start."

"That's right."

"You happy with the money? That agent of yours is a little fuggin crazy, you know. We don't know what to make of that agent of yours around here."

"She's used to tennis players and people in tennis. I think all her other clients are tennis."

"That must be a rough game, that tennis. Even in those pitty-pat dresses."

"What did she do?"

"She fuggin wept is what she did. She sat right in that chair trembling and weeping."

"What did she say?"

"Nobody fuggin knows. She was incoherent. I had Hughes Tool in here. They were sitting right in that chair and that chair and that chair, and this little bitty thing is crying into her fingers. You think these guys don't start shooting hooded looks at each other? Of course they shoot looks. These people are multidiversified only three months. They don't know about this whole tremendous

realm of sports artistry and sports temperament and so forth. It is like outer space to these guys. These are guys who have sex fantasies about oil drilling equipment. She's sitting there with her fingers in her mouth, bawling and shaking."

He started laughing at the memory of Floss Penrose in tears. Then he downed his drink in one amazing gulp.

"But you're happy with the money?"

"Yes," I said.

"You're happy with the incentives?"

"Yes."

"She got us to put in all kinds of shit-ass clauses."

"Well, that's her job."

"Have another drink," he said.

"I'm still working on this one."

"I'm trying to get you drunk, Birdwell, so I can pretend to myself I'm on the verge of molesting your body. Hell shit, I can't molest Bruce McLeod, can I, or that fuggin Mongol we just bought from Colorado."

"What fuggin Mongol?"

"Wayne Lassiter," he said. "That's the kind of player, all kidding aside, you're gonna have to watch out for whoever and wherever you play. Those crazy fuggin Canucks from the mines, from the smelters, from the mills, from the iron ranges. All they know is hitting people. Bent noses, glazed eyes, those gaps in their teeth."

"Mr. Kinross, I'm a professional. I've played all over North America. I've played in the Western League. It may not be the slickest and showiest hockey in the world, but it's tougher than the NHL, physically. Not that I don't appreciate your concern."

"I'm glad to hear somebody appreciates something around here what with all the shit I been taking from the fuggin Zionist media. I'll tell you the truth, Birdwell, my days are numbered. I'm like a space object with a decaying orbit. The press can't stand me. Hughes Tool don't know what to make of me. Bunch of pussies if you want to know the truth." He leaned across the desk and lowered his voice, speaking confidentially. "Talking about pussy, my wife's been keeping it under wraps. She rolls it out once a year,

on New Year's Eve. I'm supposed to say, 'Whoopee, the dessert trolley!' "

He laughed and coughed simultaneously. He turned red and starting hitting the desk with his fists.

"I'm glad you're amused, Mr. Kinross. They say laughter is a wonderful tonic. But your choice of words leaves me a little cold, frankly."

"What words? Are we talking about fug?"

"No."

"What words? Fug? What words? Did I say fug?"

"I don't mean that."

"What words? What? Fug? No fooling, tell me, so I can adjust. Fug, sug? What words? What?"

"Pussy, if you really want to know."

"Pussy? What do you want me to say? I grew up in the streets. I come from the streets. Little shits like Sanders Meade, I stomp on. I stomp on people like that."

"Stay calm."

"Anybody come into our neighborhood, we'd crack their fuggin heads open. I opened more heads than a brain surgeon. We used to break aerials offa cars and use them for weapons. Swish, swish. Whip one of them things across somebody's face, he's gonna be looking at glass eyes on a jeweler's tray. We used tire irons, we used chains, we used windshield wipers, we used entire steering wheels. We ripped entire steering wheels out of cars. All our weapons came from cars, except for rocks. Not many cars have rocks for parts. Our rocks came from empty lots. We used to have rock fights at point-blank range in empty lots. You wouldn't believe the blood, the guys out cold, the guys staggering around holding their open heads—it was fuggin urban mayhem. And you're telling me I can't call it pussy?"

His secretary came in to tell me I was urgently wanted for an interview being beamed live to Japan. Behind her were two Japanese men leaning under the weight of still cameras and lights. One of them spoke English well.

"Our TV equipment is being unloaded from the truck. The ice

is free right now, Miss Birdwell, but I wonder if, beforehand, we can get a couple of still shots of you and Mr. Kinross against that window there."

I looked at Kinross.

"All right, I guess so," he said. "Do the Japs have hockey?"

"No, but we have women," the man said.

"What do they call their pussies?" Kinross said. "I'm looking for a new word."

Floss Penrose was nice enough to let me stay in her apartment while I looked for a place of my own.

Later that same day, she made me a nice little meal of mostly salad and two kinds of soup. She lived in a prewar co-op building just off Park Avenue, and it was full of European treasures—paintings, lamps, tapestries, vases, goblets, fancy dishes, all kinds of objets d'art. I was impressed. Here was someone in sports who didn't decorate her apartment with pseudo abstract paintings of some quarterback throwing a football through a green slime of bodies.

We took our coffee into the sitting room.

"I hope you don't mind," Floss said. "I've asked Archie Brewster over for a drink later. He's here to sign books at Brentano's. I wanted him in the pit at B. Dalton as well, but there are all sorts of time conflicts."

Archie Brewster, of course, was Floss's top moneymaking client, winner of every major tennis tourney going. He was a tall, lanky type—kind of freakily attractive in the sense that he wasn't the everyday godlike body you come across in the world of sports.

As if reading my thoughts, Floss said, "Now, don't you get too interested in Master Archie. You'll need every bit of energy and verve for the Black Hawks tomorrow night. Besides, Master Archie will be too tired for anything but Monopoly. Poor boy has been logging air miles by the hundreds of thousands."

Sure enough when Archie came by about an hour later, out comes the Monopoly set and we all sit around the table throwing the dice and moving the weird little things around the board.

"I've never seen a hockey game," Archie said.

"It's vile, don't go," Floss told him. "I'm worried sick for Cleo. I'm afraid she'll be brutalized psychologically."

Archie landed on Park Place and bought it. His travel fatigue was beginning to interest me. He sat there with his shirt half open like some soldier home on leave in the relaxing warmth of mom's home cooking, and he'd occasionally stare off into space with his hawkish eyes kind of hooded and weary and knowledgeable, as if he'd seen and done so much that nothing could ever again get him truly interested, and that happens to be just the kind of thing that gives me a buzz. I like a withdrawn man with a far-off look.

Although I have to say I wasn't crazy about the fact that he was a tennis player, or athlete period. I wanted to try something in the arts.

Archie landed on Boardwalk and bought it.

"Done much traveling?" he asked me.

"Short range compared to you."

"The game is nothing. The outside interests are nothing. What kills you is the travel. You're looking at a two-hundred-year-old man. All I can tell you is learn how to travel."

"What's this book you're here to sign?"

He shrugged and looked at Floss.

"I can never remember the title," she said. "Something about Archie Brewster's killer backhand. Nice cover. Picture of Archie hitting a backhand."

"Frigging terrific," he said. "Who wrote it?"

"I don't know who wrote it. Who writes these things? Does anybody know?"

We played Monopoly for about twenty minutes. Next thing I know, Archie's easing out of his shirt altogether. Floss gave him a long, tight, searching look.

"Aren't we playing by the usual rules?" he said.

"Don't be a beast. You're tired and need your sleep. Two blue pills and off you go."

Archie looked at me.

"What we normally do to get me unwound is play strip Monopoly."



Floss turned her head toward the window and just sat there, tremendously motionless, gazing into the night.

“Whoever owns property,” Archie went on, “has to take off an article of clothing every time someone lands on the property and forks over rent. This way the rich get naked and the poor get to keep their dignity. At least that’s one way of looking at it. Depends on what kind of body you have, I guess, and how much you like to show it.”

“And Floss just landed on your hotel,” I said. “Which is why you’re taking off your shirt.”

When Floss finally moved, it was on a short, straight line right out of the room.

I said, “I can’t believe she removes her clothes in anyone’s presence. She can’t bear being looked at. She thinks it’s the worst thing that can happen to a person.”

“She does it with me. We have a special something. She’s my Aunt Glad and I’m her Master Archie. That’s the kind of thing jet lag does to people.”

A special something, he called it. The world outside Badger, Ohio, where I first laced on skates, was sometimes slow to come into focus. But I guess my eagerness and high spirits sent me crashing right into the middle of things, even when the edges were so blurry I didn’t know where I was.

Inside of ten minutes of intense dice-throwing, buying and selling of land, and paying rent and collecting rent, I was down to my teddy pants and old Badger Beagles T-shirt, while tennis great Archie Brewster was the sleepest nude since my old dog Bowzer.

“Roll a five,” I told him, “so you’ll land on one of my green streets. I’m beginning to feel overdressed, and it’s embarrassing.”

What Archie did was to slump, ever so slowly, toward the table, finally resting his head right in the middle of the board. It didn’t seem strange to me that I crept under the table and began playing with his thing. It woke up, but he didn’t. He was too heavy to carry, so I knocked him off the chair, gently, gently, and tried dragging him by one long foot out of the room. On his back, of course.

I got him into the hallway, his thing still amazingly aloft, and I was trying to figure out how to get him past Floss's room and into one of the other bedrooms without making any noise when it occurred to me that the rug in the sitting room might be the answer, and so I went back in there, moved the table with the Monopoly set, kicked our clothes out of the way, dragged out the rug, and with a little maneuvering got Archie onto it. And then, leaning over and moving backward with a hand at each of the two nearest corners of the rug and my ass up in the air, I proceeded to pull the jet-weary fellow along the floor and into my room.

Quietly I shut the door. Then studied the body. Arms tan only as far as the biceps. Legs tan from calves to thighs. A body full of long, lean muscle. Sort of quietly strong. And that far-searching hawk's face with sunken cheekbones and a humorous mouth. Droll is a word I like for certain kinds of mouths. A longish pecker softly fluttering. Long, bumpy feet. Knobby knees. Wide, bladelike, *touching* shoulders. *Poignant* shoulders. Callused, nail-bitten hands. Definitely capable of a killer backhand.

I ought to stop right here and say I am more or less a connoisseur of the male form. Despite being as young as I was, which was twenty-three, and that's *old* for someone entering the NHL these days, I was pretty thoroughly informed on the subject of men's bodies, having played their games and shared their locker rooms to one extent or another since the age of about four and a half. I like to look. I enjoyed my years of looking. They are interesting bodies, the bodies of athletes, because of the wounds and bruises as much as the general excellence of form. The hurt is what gives these bodies their special emotional quality. Years of physical stress have made the players look noble and battered and ancient Greeklike, except for goaltenders, who look like mounds of vanilla horsemeat, by and large. Pain is what makes the bodies interesting to look at. Pain, stress, defeat etc.

But it's one thing to look at an unconscious nude person and quite another to climb aboard. So what I did was dribble Archie's head back and forth, crooning little words of encouragement. I was astraddle him, doing this, and when he woke up he looked

straight into my T-shirted breasts as if they were a couple of old friends whose names he couldn't recall.

I got off him and jiggled out of my things.

"Some body," he said. "Excellent stuff."

I thought he was talking about something that's aged in oak casks. I sat cross-legged on the bed. Archie was still on the floor.

"My body isn't very up to date," he said. "It's a forties body. It's the body of a gawky tail gunner who gets killed while John Hodiak is bringing his crippled B-17 in for a crash landing. You see a close-up of this pilot in his Zero, and he's grinning as he fires his guns. Then you see me die, with glass flying. Then you see John Hodiak struggling with the controls. Then you see the landing field. You see the tower. You see the faces of men looking into the sky. You see the windswept field. You see the ambulance crews, guys smoking. You see the commanding officer, with binoculars. You see the tower again. You see men looking at the sky, their trousers whipping in the wind. Back home my girl is helping my mom bake a cake, but you don't see that until after the plane lands."

"I think your body is interesting. It makes me feel tenderness and pity."

"It's my boyishness."

"Could be," I said.

"The bell rings. My girl runs out and opens the screen door. It's a man with a telegram."

"You're dead."

"Cut in half," he said.

He did some sit-ups and then climbed onto the bed. We embraced. I reached over and turned the three-way soft-white bulb down to thirty watts.

Rain fell on the city.

"I wish we'd done some necking first," he said.

"We still can."

"And I would have liked feeling you up. We should have felt each other up."

"Don't you need your clothes on to get felt up?"

“I guess you’re right,” he said. “And I’m too sleepy to get dressed.”

With the lights low, and the rain hitting against the windows, and his longish thing probing between my thighs, I felt as romantic and tender and young as someone can feel who has five full years of professional hockey behind her.

# 2



*S*O my season began. In the dying moments of games, I heard lonely, wounded, human sounds bellowing down from the dimmest heights of arenas, and on the bench I'd glance up over my shoulder and wonder at the stark emotions that lived in the thick smoke up there.

The world of men was a sound in my ears. Men on skates marching over concrete. Sticks tossed into corners. Men muttering matter-of-fact curses. The blast of hot showers. A hundred banging kinds of background noise.

That's why these memoirs will be quiet, reflective, and thoughtful.

I'll recount this much about my debut, and it's mostly stuff you didn't see on television or read about in the newspapers the next day. After we'd won and I'd played creditably, getting an assist

on a goal by Jack Ferguson, helping keep their second-best line basically throttled while I was in there, and drawing warm applause from the big crowd, I'd finished all the interviews and was dressing in the restricted area they'd set aside for me, savoring the first quiet moment of a pretty hectic day, and sort of enjoying the bone-deep fatigue, when a man whose face I recognized but whose name I couldn't recall right off—an ex-Ranger I played against when we were both in the Central League, stuck his head around the corner and gave me a couple of words of congratulations.

I was more or less naked to the waist, but seeing he was a former player I didn't especially rush to cover up.

He said, "How come they've got you dressing back here?"

"Sanders Meade's idea."

"What did he say?"

"It would be disruptive if I dressed with the guys."

"You're part of the team."

"I agree. I dressed with the guys in Springfield and Flint, and nobody fell over dead. I didn't exactly flaunt myself. I remember showering pretty quickly as a matter of fact. We *all* showered quick. We were just a bunch of kids and the novelty was probably so startling we were all kind of immune to the great social issues."

He was studying my upper torso.

"Big-league boobs," he said.

"What?"

"Just paying a compliment."

"Okay, but don't call them that."

He was a short, chesty guy with white-blond hair, and he was still young, maybe twenty-six. There was something else besides his name I couldn't recall, some story or rumor or garbled version of something—I'd heard it in Kamloops out in B.C., but I couldn't remember the exact nature of the thing.

"Remember me from that charity game in Toronto?" he said.

"Sure, you nearly checked me into the gray seats."

He paused, I thought a bit sadly.

“They gave you my old number.”

“Fourteen. I didn’t realize.”

“A nothing number,” he said.

“That’s what *I* said. It *is* a nothing number.”

I was about dressed and waiting for him to say so long.

Instead he said, “Speaking of fourteen, do you know the story of the fourteen scorpions?”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t.”

“An idiot boy was walking in the desert one day and came upon fourteen newborn scorpions moving in single file. The first scorpion says to him, ‘If I sting you, you will be completely paralyzed for three days and three nights.’ The second little scorpion says, ‘If *I* sting you, your eyes will fall out of your head and your teeth will rot.’ The third scorpion says, ‘If *I* sting you, your feet will hurt so badly you will spend the rest of your life walking on your hands.’ And so on and so on, all the way to the fourteenth and last scorpion. This scorpion says to the idiot boy, ‘If *I* sting you, you will live happily ever after.’ Whereupon the boy picks up a stone and crushes the last scorpion to death.”

“Why?” I said.

“Even an idiot knows the difference between exaggeration and lying.”

“I have to think about that. That’s pretty good.”

“I read it in a book by a guy named Wadi Assad,” he said.

“Want to borrow it?”

Small world etc. I told him I’d just started my first Wadi Assad book but wouldn’t mind looking at another, and he said he’d bring it along next home game.

I was on my way out—I was taking Floss to late dinner by way of a goodwill gesture—when I ran into the Ranger announcers, Merle Halverson and Toby Scott.

Merle was about thirty years older than Toby and had a wrinkled brow and houndish jowls, and he did play-by-play in a big, sloppy voice that was always five seconds behind the action.

Toby was an ex-player who did so-called color. How do the people with the funniest voices end up in these jobs? Toby Scott would be polite to you if you were looting and burning his home,

and his voice sounded like something he'd borrowed from the noisy kid down the street, full of shrill cries and rapid little barks. He was beady-eyed, too. The absolute antithesis.

Anyway, I described my locker-room visitor and they said it had to be Shaver Stevens, and I hit my head with the heel of my hand. Of course, of course.

"Sad story," Merle said. "The club's been picking up his bills, but there's a limit to what they can be expected to do. He's been out of hockey for six or eight months now."

"What bills?" I said.

"Doctor."

"What kind of doctor?"

"I'm not sure anyone knows. Does anyone know, Toby?"

"I don't think anyone knows," Toby said.

"Great game, Cleo."

"Thanks, guys."

After a tense, picky meal, Floss and I sat over cups of coffee in an after-theater restaurant where occasional figures from sports or the networks came over to say hello and get introduced to me.

She'd had her hair cut short and it would have looked pretty good except it made her seem popeyed, and she was wearing big, vicious rings on her fingers.

Finally I could sense she was working up to discussing the matter openly.

"Did you two have any sex last night?"

"No," I said.

"None at all? Not any?"

"Honest, Floss, no."

"What do you think of Archie?"

"Casual type. Nice. Probably wears Ban-Lon Windbreakers."

"Do you think he's sexy?"

"What's sexy, Floss? I don't know what sexy is anymore."

"There's something about Archie. I think it may be his shoulders. They make me just want to hug him and mother him and take him to bed."

I sensed an opening.



“How long have you two been playing Monopoly?”

“Since I’ve been his agent. Since he was seventeen. For eight years. But we don’t talk about that.”

“Who doesn’t talk about it—you and I?”

“Archie and I. I just get out the board and we play. Nobody speaks. We just roll the dice and go to jail and buy up property and so forth. It was stupid to get out the board last night. But in the past we’ve played straight Monopoly with other people and nothing unseemly happened. He must like you. You must have piqued his interest. This means you can’t ever see him again.”

I ordered two more coffees.

“Why do you call him Master Archie?” I said. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a pet name. I had a dog with that name.”

“A dog?” I said.

“It’s all very complicated, farfetched, and depressing. We don’t talk about it, he and I. That’s the thing with Archie and me. We have always sensed complicity in each other. We are silent accomplices in a strange plot. That’s why I was so taken back by that business with the shirt last night. When he started taking off his shirt, it was as though eight years of silent, dirty, guilty secrets were being laid bare to the world.”

“I didn’t take it that way.”

“How did you take it? How *could* you take it when a man you’ve just met takes off his shirt in the startled presence of a dear old friend twenty years his senior. Did you have any sex with him *at all* after I went to my room? None at all?”

“None.”

“I took a pill, put on my sleep mask and went out like a light. I didn’t want to think about anything that might be going on at either side of the board.”

“It was an early night, really.”

“Archie has changed remarkably little in the eight years I’ve known him. It must be all that air travel. It must keep his bones young or something. Time moves at a slower rate once you get to a certain altitude.”

“We just talked a while.”

“Neurotic attractions are the deepest kind. They’re the deepest and best. They encompass the whole spectrum of emotions, from a thrilling sort of forbidden ecstasy that just shakes you to your very foundations, on the one hand, to the utter extremities of blackest shame, on the other.”

“It’s just Monopoly, Floss.”

She made a little pug’s face and shook her head rapidly.

“If you’ve never had an affair that was neurotically grounded, that was tainted in some basic way, you just haven’t lived, Cleo. You don’t know the first thing about life, love, sex, or shame. He was seventeen and so sweet. The clothes were his idea. I had Baltic and Mediterranean avenues with a whole stack of houses, and he said, with that little humorous look he gets, ‘I’m not coming across with a penny’s worth of rent until my mean old lady landlord plunks down a nylon stocking or some such thing right here on this table,’ with that funny little look of his.”

“Droll,” I said.

“That’s it exactly. Droll.”

“If you have a name for him, he must have a name for you.”

“How do you know? What did he say?”

“He didn’t say a thing, Floss. A pet name is usually a two-way thing, that’s all.”

“He calls me his old Aunt Glad. She was a real lady landlord who owned half of downtown Sarasota. She used to give him baths and tickle him.”

I signaled for a waiter to bring the check.

“Well, seeing we’re still friends, I’m glad we had this little get-together.”

“You can’t ever see him again, Cleo. Give me your word.”

“If it’ll make you feel better, I promise.”

“What Archie and I have is something extra special. It is something a person couldn’t find if she went looking for it in every corner of the world for an entire lifetime. It is better than incest.”

The check came.

“It is *like* incest but better. It is better because there is a small

opening, a seam. You can see outside yourselves, if only darkly. There is something primeval about the whole thing. It is like an ancient biblical crime. At least that's the feeling I sometimes have, and it plunges me into despair. Archie's understated humor gets me over the worst parts, fortunately. I wish you could have something like this in your own life, but you never will because it is one of a kind."

The check was so amazing I had to borrow twenty dollars from Floss to cover it.

"I'm scared when he's with me and scared when he's gone. Right now he's about two hours out of Rio. By the time I'm home and in the tub, they'll be making their descent."

Tyrone Penny, the basketball star, came over to say hi. Tyrone was so tall he should have carried his own hole around with him, to make the rest of us feel we lived on the same planet. He was fitted out in velvet and fur and kidskin, with a swatch of alligator here and there. Looked pretty awful. But I wish I could have snapped a picture and sent it to my dad, Tom Spencer Birdwell, who always had a weakness for roundball.

Floss and I took a cab to her place. The driver was a New York wacko who had mechanical mice running around on the dashboard and all over the seats. When we got out, he recognized me and insisted on kissing my hand.

It was only game one and I was already riding high.

The team played well on a short road trip. I had a hand in this, scoring my first goal against the Red Wings and getting a couple of assists two nights later in Philly. The new man Wayne Lassiter did some heavy shelling and our best defenseman Nils Nilsson was blocking shots all over the ice.

The way teams soar and plummet is sometimes mysterious, but I think in our case, to be open about it, my presence had a lot to do with the way we were playing. The media was living in our toilets, which meant we were super aware, always conscious of the spotlight.

Some of the guys complained about all the attention I was getting. Most were okay about it. There was a small group that chose

to ignore me. And two or three gave me the long, crooked eye, as though they were members of a snake-handling cult and I'd just wandered into their tent.

I was still dressing and undressing by myself. After another victory, this one at home against the Sabres, Bruce McLeod sort of skittered, accidentally, into my area, nude, in the midst of some horseplay with a bunch of other guys, and I got caught up in the merrymaking and took a friendly little swipe at his cock.

"What are you doing?" he said. "Hey!"

"Just playing around."

"Hey!"

"Don't be so touchy."

"That's my penis."

"I know what it is. It's from the Latin."

"Well, you can't do that."

"It's locker-room stuff," I said. "Fergie's always grabbing your penis."

"He doesn't grab it; he grabs *at* it. There's a world of difference."

"He grabs at it, okay. And Dougie grabs at Fergie's. It's locker room."

"Well, if you don't know the difference between their grabbing at it and you're grabbing it, I don't know what to tell you."

I handed him a towel and he covered up.

"We're teammates, Bruce. It was just an impulse. I didn't mean to violate you."

"Well, okay, I guess, but try to watch it from now on."

He handed back the towel and walked off. In came our coach, glancing back at Bruce's ass as he entered. This, of course, was Jean-Paul Larousse, known as J.P. or Jeep. He was a small, attractive, soulful man who always needed a shave and who smoked French cigarettes constantly, even on the bench during a game, leaning over behind the backs of the players so that the TV camera wouldn't pick him up when it scanned the bench. Jeep had a wife and four children back in Quebec somewhere, and he coughed a lot, and sometimes he lost his temper and his mind and climbed over the barrier behind the bench to attack drunken fans

who were taunting him, and then the whole team would have to follow, skates and all, and pull him out of there before he was mauled to death.

In hockey it is important to display solidarity, and in our win at Philly every single one of us had to go side-flopping over the top of that stupid plastic panel in order to rescue Jeep from six or seven people beating on his head. Cops came, punches were thrown and sticks swung, and some elderly gent tried to wedge himself between me and a retaining wall. With the heavy jostling going on, I guess he thought all he had to do was stand there and enjoy the friction.

Anyway, J.P. rubbed his darkish jaw and said, "I have to say when they told me you are coming, I didn't react too happy. I threw a few things, eh? I mean what do I need with this, a female, with her own body, in this crazy city which will eat us up alive? It is not sympathetic. But I have to say you do pretty good. That Seventeen, he is tough. You play on top of him, like I tell you. I can say this, which the other guys they never listen, but you play the body, you stay on top the man, there is no way you can lose in this game. This game is not hard, it's easy. What is the name of this game?"

"I want to say hockey, Jeep, but I know that's not the answer you're looking for."

"The name of this game is play the body, take the body, stay on top the man, shadow the man, chop the man's ankles. They give you a stick, which nobody knows the first thing how to use it. A bunch of wind-up-and-shoots. Who plays this game today? You take the body, no way you gonna lose, I don't care how many sixty-goal guys they got. It breaks my heart, eh, the way these kids come up here thinking they gotta do nothing but wind up and shoot. You know why it breaks my heart?"

"Because they're right."

"I am sick to my body. It tears my guts apart. They're right."

"What's wrong with Shaver Stevens?" I said.

"Who, Shaver? He didn't take the body. He didn't play defensive, and he was a defenseman."

“I don’t mean hockey, Jeep. What’s wrong with him that he has to see a doctor?”

“Who, Shaver? The guys talk, I don’t know. I took him into my office, we smoked some cigarettes. I don’t think he ever smoked before, Shaver. His father was some player. Chucker Stevens. That guy could play. He was a hockey player. No way his son could even carry his skates.”

We said goodnight and I headed home to Floss’s place. I kept thinking about Shaver and about what Floss had told me: *When you meet someone who reads Wadi Assad, you’ve found a friend for life.*

Shaver was too young to be so sad. But I didn’t know what I could do about it. I knew practically nothing about him and was too new to the team to get overly inquisitive. It’s always extra tragic to come across somebody who’s young, strong, and eager for life, and then to find out he’s got some rare condition or illness. Athletes aren’t supposed to die.

When I got to the apartment, Floss was sitting in the dark watching TV. She was in a robe but was still wearing those big rings. Her hair looked even shorter.

She was watching an old movie about a mummy’s curse and seemed engrossed. I felt compassion for Floss, but couldn’t help wondering whether I was wasting my deep feelings on a basically unhealthy relationship. That’s how she saw it, anyway. Primeval, biblical, neurotic, shameful, and dirty.

But if somebody needs compassion, does it matter what the root cause is? Does compassion have to be earned? What kind of problem merits compassion, and what kind falls short? Where do we draw the line?

In a case like strip Monopoly, which you are playing with a person twenty years younger than you are and which you think is better than incest, it is hard to say what a well-meaning friend should properly feel for you.

“Hey, how’s the movie?”

“Sh, sh, sh. He’s going into the crypt, the damn fool.”

“Did you get your hair cut some more?”

“It was uneven.”

“They took a lot more off.”

“How does it look?”

“Nightmarish,” I said.

“I know. My eyes look twice the size. But I always get my hair cut when I’m extremely tense. Here’s where the hand grabs him by the throat.”

The phone rang and she sprang out of the chair and ran into the next room to answer, slamming the door behind her. A hand *did* grab the man by the throat and then a commercial came on.

About twelve seconds later, Floss returned and sat back down.

“It’s for you. A man with a curious, far-off voice. I had a great deal of trouble understanding. I think he must be calling from a kiosk in Central Asia.”

I couldn’t guess who it might be. Practically no one knew where I was staying, to give me some peace from the media blitz. I felt a little sad for Floss. Obviously she’d thought it was Archie Brewster.

It *was* Archie Brewster.

“I disguised my voice,” he said. “She thinks I’m your Uncle Billy, the bachelor uncle who does a lot of traveling and calls from exotic places and comes to stay with your family once every two or three years and who may be just a wee bit gay. Don’t turn around. She has probably followed you out into the hall and is lurking, even as I speak, just beyond the doorway. Speak only in code, my darling, the Free French are on the way.”

“Where are you, Uncle Billy?”

“I’m not sure,” he said. “We were heading from Rio to Vancouver to Johannesburg. I know we got to Vancouver because there was hockey on the room TV. I saw you score a goal against the fellows in red. I was naked at the time, so it was extra exciting. But we never made Joburg. The plane’s air conditioning went haywire and the martinis iced up and we had to come down in this tropical ditch. Do you wish I was there?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish you were here?”

“Yes.”

“No, you don’t. It’s hot, humid, and full of carnivorous insects. We’ve been in the airport about eleven hours. It looks like Lubbock, Texas, but that’s ridiculous. Are you naked?”

“Talk about ridiculous.”

“Is she naked?”

“Be serious, Uncle Billy.”

“Your Uncle Billy is never, ever serious. He brings you funny little hand-painted dolls from Santa Fe. He sends you jokey postcards from the St. Louis Exposition. And if Mom and Dad sometimes whisper about him, it’s only because he does a little tipping in his room. His visits never last very long, and although you’re always sorry to see him go, he passes from your mind in a matter of minutes. And it’s not until you’re a big, grown girl that you realize he always *knew* how little he meant to everyone.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“I’m only trying to even things up,” he said.

I was thrilled and delighted by the craziness of the gesture. Disguising his voice to his own neurotic lover. Employing a secret identity. It was a terrific routine and it went so well with his travel-weary look and droll mouth and bladelike shoulders.

“Even as I speak, the voice on the Muzak is announcing resumption of my flight. Darling, darling, darling, we’ve been apart too long. It is winter in Vienna and the streets are full of horse-drawn sleighs.”

Floss *was* lurking in the hallway, although she pretended she was on the way to her bedroom. As I crawled into my own bed, I realized a strange equation was beginning to develop. Floss had a Master Archie, Archie had an Aunt Glad, and now I had an Uncle Billy.

What happens just as I’m falling into a deep, warm sleep but another phone call. I go padding in my pajamas to the nearest telephone, which was in the living room under a big, gorgeous painting of stags, hunters, and gathering clouds.



Who is it but Shaver Stevens.

"I owe you a large apology," he said.

"How did you find me?"

"Sanders Meade. Twisted his arm."

"So what's doing?"

"I promised you a book next home game, which was tonight, but I just couldn't get over to the Garden. I had an appointment that ran way, way over. These things happen. I want you to know I'm sorry."

"Where's the book?"

"Right here."

"So bring it over," I said.

I called down to the doorman, told him I was expecting company, told him Ms. Penrose was asleep and not to do any buzzing or bell-ringing, put on my robe, and twenty minutes later there was a light tap on the door and in walks Shaver Stevens.

"You'd like some beer? A Scotch? Cookies and milk?"

"What kind of cookies?" he said, and I studied him carefully before deciding he was serious.

I found some oatmeal cookies and some week-old milk, and we sat at the table in the large kitchen, which was done up to resemble a Brittany farmhouse.

"Well, here's the book," he said. "*The Mystic Prince I*. I hope that's not the book you already have."

"I have *The Immortal Peacock*."

"That's a good one. I read that one straight through after the Rangers outrighted me to Tulsa."

"All the guys are reading Wadi Assad. I've been noticing."

"They picked it up from the Bruins. One of the Bruins started it. Now it's catching on all over the league. It's the travel. It's the road. You need something out there."

He was talking and munching. He'd dunk a cookie in his glass of milk, wait until it was just about ready to break apart with soginess, and then swoop down and take the whole thing in one bite. He was very unselfconscious about it, and I thought he'd probably been doing it that way since he was two and a half.

“Shaver, I feel kind of bad about the fact I ended up with your jersey number.”

“I never liked the number.”

“How long did you stay with Tulsa?”

“Four days and three nights.”

“And that was it?”

“Into the real world,” he said. “Except I’m beginning to think hockey’s the real world and this is the fantasy.”

“What are you doing in New York? You’re from way out west somewhere, aren’t you?”

“Red Deer.”

“Manitoba?”

“Alberta,” he said.

“Red Deer, Alberta. I like that. That’s pretty.”

“I won’t be in New York much longer.”

“And your dad played in the NHL.”

“He raises horses now.”

“And you couldn’t make it to the Garden because of some late, late date.”

“Just an appointment.”

“What kind?”

“You don’t want to know about it,” he said.

He reached for another cookie.

“This may be stupid, Shaver, and maybe I’m meddling, but you don’t resent your dad’s success as a hockey player, do you?”

He dunked, paused, swooped.

“You’ve been talking to Jeep. Jeep tells everybody I couldn’t carry my dad’s skates. Jeep thinks my dad is Chucker Stevens. My dad is Trooper Stevens. My dad was in the NHL for a total of about seventeen days and sixteen nights. But that’s Jeep for you. Too many batterings from maniac fans. He’s been out to lunch since 1964.”

“Want to go inside?”

“What’s inside?”

“A room with a bed. I think it’s called the bedroom.”

He did a strange thing. He stood up, lifted one leg back behind

him, and took a look at the bottom of his shoe. Then he took a stick of gum out of his pocket, unwrapped it, and put it in his mouth. We went to my room. I took off my robe and pajama tops. He stood against the wall, watching and chewing. I moved toward him. He offered me some gum, which I refused.

He had thick, blond brows and the palest green eyes I've ever seen. His neck was short and broad. He had a smallish nose and full mouth. He was blinking a little.

With my knees first and then my breasts and then my full body, I pushed him against the wall. We kissed clingingly. I was a little taller than he was, and he held me by the pelvis, pulling in and down as though to equalize our height. I started pulling off his sweater. When I got the back of it over his head, I realized I had him effectively pinned, like a player in a hockey fight. At first he struggled instinctively, but then he remained more or less motionless as I undid part of his shirt and then his belt and zipper.

With the sweater over his head, his upper body hunched over, and his arms trapped up around his ears with his elbows bowed outward, and his pants down around his ankles, he looked like a big, white monkey in some vaudeville routine.

I looked over at the door. Floss was standing there in a black nightdress with her sleep mask up on her forehead. She looked from Shaver to me and back to him.

His erection was struggling around inside his boxer shorts and I reached over and parted the fly just enough to get the whole thing catapulting out into the open.

"I am speechless," Floss said. "I never thought when I bought this apartment six years ago that I would ever witness a scene like this. The whole point of living in a safe, expensive part of town is to avoid this kind of thing. Do you know how many apartments I looked at? Sixty-two apartments. I chose this one. It is secure. The whole building is secure. The street is patrolled by private security men. This is a street of Jewish doctors. Walk up and down this street. Every window has a Jewish doctor's sign in it. This is one of the things a prospective tenant looks for when she is out

apartment-hunting. She looks for delivery boys without needle tracks in their arms and she looks for Jewish doctors. I spent enough money furnishing this apartment to finance a manned flight to Jupiter, and then I get rid of the painters and spacklers and sanders, and I get the furniture moved in, and I walk in the door, and I get settled, and the place begins to acquire a pleasant, lived-in look, and what sort of scene do I witness?"

Shaver, with the sweater still over his head and his arms akimbo at ear level, was smart enough to remain absolutely still. For a moment, Floss and I watched his erection deteriorate.

"Never mind what it cost me to furnish the place," she said. "Do you know what I paid for the apartment *itself*? Do you know what I would have to pay if I bought it *today*? When you're dealing with sums of money at this rarefied level, I think you have the right to ask questions. For example, who is he and what is he doing here?"

"You won't believe this," I said. "I found him like this outside Bloomingdale's four days ago. I thought he might be hungry and I brought him up here on the freight elevator. He's been standing in that spot ever since. I feed him honey and cashews. They seem like such terrific staples."

"That is not funny, miss."

"Floss, come on, we're sorry if we woke you, but we're only having a little whatchmacallit. You're not really mad, are you?"

"I told you. I am speechless."

"Well, I'll be finding my own place soon."

"When is soon?"

"Can we talk about it in the morning?"

"How soon is soon?" she said.

With that, she walked out, slamming the door. When she got into her bedroom, I heard her slam that door, too. Right after that, she must have gone into the bathroom that's off the bedroom because there was one more horrific slam.

I went over to Shaver and pulled the sweater off. Going around on tiptoe, we undressed, keeping our voices very low. I thought if we disturbed Floss again, she'd make a citizen's arrest.

Shaver was rock hard top to bottom. A defenseman. Slow-skating, tough, direct, shot-blocking, fearless. The signs were all over him. Bruises, dents, nicks, scars, knots, bumps and gashes.

We hopped into bed. The sight of Shaver's well-marked body made me think this would be like wartime sex with a fellow who was due to hit the beaches at dawn. I'd feel a sympathy, a loyalty, a sisterliness, a grief, a duty, a sense of loss, and a horror at the waste of it all. That is a heavy burden for one sex act to bear.

I reminded myself his wounds were hockey related. They were entertainment wounds, and nothing to get emotional about. There is enough awe in sex without bringing grief and duty into it.

I groped for the three-way bulb. This is the second straight chapter that ends with sex and intimate lighting. There is a huge tradition behind this, but I'm not sure I want to be part of it. There are other ways to end chapters and I'm determined to find some of them before too long. Not that there isn't something right about a chapter that ends with sex. There *is* something right. Sex is the thing that nothing can follow. It asks for blank space. We wish for a silence that will last at least for the turning of a page.

In the midst of our heavy breathing, Shaver took the gum out of his mouth and stuck it on the wall near his head. For later, I guess.

# 3



*I*N my new apartment near Central Park, our twenty-four-hour doorman, Washington Post, let me borrow his bayonet so I could slit open a couple of giant cartons just shipped from home. Inside were my accumulated belongings, including about seven albums of family photographs. Once I start looking at those things, I'm hooked for about a good hour and a half, I am totally lost in time, and the only trouble with *that* is that you have to look up eventually, and when you do, you see a room, a street, a city so starkly different from the world inside the pictures, with all their warm memories and associations, that you're liable to get a little sad and misty.

I guess technically I was too young to be thinking warm thoughts of home. But when you've traveled as much as I have, through the night, across hundreds of miles of prairieland, in a

ramshackle bus, or puddle-jumping in single-engine pisspots, or being bounced over the continental divide in your sleek 707 from one storm front to the next, or whatever, you might find yourself feeling kind of affectionate toward a town like Badger, Ohio.

Badger was a literal-minded place. The school was on School Street, the bank was on Bank Street, the river ran by River Road. Looks a little silly set down on the page like that, but growing up in a town that works and thinks this way has its comforts and its safeties. That was the thing about Badger. Safety. I mean safe in the way that hot oatmeal is safe, oatmeal on a snowy day. Or people shoveling snow—the sound of shovels on a brick sidewalk. This is the kind of safe I mean.

I more or less grew up on skates. There's a dammed-up creek in a place called Snowy Owl Glen, and my mother took me over there one day and fitted on some double-runner skates and then just patted me on the rear and sent me on my way. I remember bigger kids skating hand in hand and playing crack the whip, which must have struck me as pretty daredevil, and my mom doing figure eights.

The sides were banked with hard snow. I have pictures in which I am weighed down by many layers of sweaters, mittens, socks, coats, and a big, long stocking cap that my father called my moron hat. I wear *white* skates.

A lot of my childhood was a shuttle between the pond at Snowy Owl Glen and the old, now demolished public library. This was a one-room library with floor-to-ceiling shelves, and it was dark, empty, and quiet, with maple trees outside and dusty gold light filtering in through the tall windows. I liked the place so much I not only went there to borrow books, but I'd pick out a chair and sit down and start reading then and there, in that mysterious, soft sunlight. An old, red brick building. The library.

They put a stick in my hands when I was five or six. I became your typical sleepy-eyed rink rat. The rink was about twenty miles out of town and you had to reserve ice time well in advance. My poor dad had to get up at 5:30 on Saturdays and take me on over there. The place was swarming all winter long with

so-called midgets, peewees etc. Kids all yawning while we waited our turns on the ice. Parents asleep standing up.

Hockey was the only exception in my life to a strict observance of the seasons. I played hockey when and where I could, on or off skates, in one form or another. In general, though, we did certain things only in certain seasons. Seasons were strictly marked off and adhered to. More literal-mindedness. And we were always early in Badger. We started thinking about spring on Groundhog Day, probably because we weren't too far from Punxsutawney, Pa., which is where the groundhog comes out of his hole and either sees his shadow (six more weeks of winter) or doesn't (spring is practically here).

The official *end* of spring was Decoration Day. Holidays were important events, and also strictly observed, and made you feel safe, and Decoration Day, which is known as Memorial Day in most places, was terrific fun, if you can say that about a day in which people go around decorating the graves of dead soldiers.

The days were getting warmer and longer. All the trees had big, new green leaves. The buckeye trees were flowering. The air was full of bumblebees, the grass spotted with dandelions.

Everybody's lawn had dandelions. Nobody in Badger was out to create the perfect, manicured suburban lawn. I don't want to be militant about it, but these were smalltown lawns, and they were full of clover and dandelions and Queen Anne's lace and black-eyed Susans and weeds of all kinds. The lawns.

But what about Decoration Day? Well, I'd wake up to the sound of my brother mowing the lawn. We're talking about a hand mower, making those little, rhythmic, chugging sounds. A nice noise to wake up to. It made me feel safe and comfortable. Like shovels on brick sidewalks in winter.

A flag hung on every front porch. All up and down our street, you'd see flags hanging down off the tops of porches.

There'd be a parade up Third Street in the morning. The American Legion, the high school band, the fire engine, and a whole lot of kids. You know how kids march. They don't just march. They tramp their feet, swing their arms, and bob their



heads to such a degree you almost think they're making fun of the elders. Veterans handed out poppies on the street corners, and everybody followed the parade to the cemetery, where one of the veterans made a speech.

It was a terrific cemetery. All the graves were decorated with flags and planted with geraniums and pansies and dusty miller. Big old trees provided a lot of shade. There were tombstones from the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. People used to go to the cemetery on Sundays just to go to the cemetery. That custom began vanishing when I was still pretty young.

After the speech, we'd hear the noon whistle blow at the firehouse. Then my family would get in the car and go on a picnic, and this picnic marked the end of spring and the beginning of summer. The parade was still spring. Once we saw and heard the bumblebees flying around our food, we knew it was summer.

My mother always baked a ham, fried some chicken, made potato salad, deviled some eggs, pickled some beets, and made a chocolate cake. We drove around back in the hills, looking for the Perfect Picnic Place. This always brought on squabbling. To me, the best place of all was near the Pennsylvania state line, where the woods were thick and a stream ran down through a gorge with waterfalls here and there, and big, dark, flat rocks along the bank.

Everything smelled so good. The food. The homemade lemonade and iced tea. The sweet, dry grass. Definitely summer smells. And we'd hear the drone of bees and the water rushing over smooth stones.

Safe. Very safe.

As I got older and taller, I began to get serious about my hockey. I worked hard on speed skating, stick handling, shooting, and even played defense now and then because I liked skating backward. People didn't fail to notice there was something a little bit tremendous about my ability. I seemed to see everything that was happening on the ice. I had excellent anticipation. As you've heard four hundred times on TV: "These are things you can't

teach, Merle.” “You either have it or you don’t, eh, Toby?” And I could skate stride for stride with boys two or three years older—big, pimply, hulking, pubescent, moody kids.

I played with them, I fought with them, I shared their locker rooms, I drove them half-mad with sweaty, aching, voice-changing, male lust. After a while, they began to accept me.

What could they do, take me to the walls of the city and stone me?

We are in the Garden—why do they call it the Garden?—and some toothless, crooked-faced Penguin is trying to maul hell out of me in the corners. My wings, Fergie and Gord, show no interest in helping out this particular snowy eve.

Near the end of the second period, I butt-ended the son of a bitch and then dropped my stick and gloves and started punching. He hit back, hard, and melees developed, and the benches emptied.

When it was nearly over, I stood in a corner and saw the ice strewn with gloves and sticks, and all the players on both teams paired off, just clutching now, and I felt good. I felt a white hot elation. I’d started it, throwing my first NHL punch, and they’d come to my aid, my teammates, my mates, come swarming off the bench like legionnaires.

What could they do, avert their eyes and pretend it was tennis?

In Chicago, I bumped into our GM Sanders Meade in the hotel lobby, and he asked me if I wanted to go to dinner along with the announcers Merle Halverson and Toby Scott.

We went to a Polynesian restaurant where certain drinks are so devastating the management limits the number you can order.

Merle kept talking about the new kidney-shaped swimming pool he was having installed on his Westchester property. It turned out he also had a swimming-pool-shaped kidney. He hadn’t been feeling well, and recent scans and X rays showed that one of his kidneys was practically rectangular. He said further tests were in the works.

Toby Scott wondered aloud if he’d get to take over the play-

by-play. I got the impression Toby liked being recognized. He kept shooting weasel-eyed looks around the room, probably hoping someone would spot him and come over to chat or to ask for an autograph. One thing not so all-out wretched about Toby was his raven-black hair. He had a cleft chin and raven-black hair, and if you could ignore his voice, his eyes, and his paunchy ex-goaltender's body, maybe you'd share your sweet roll with him on a frozen steppe in Asia.

"Time for the likes of me to be wending my weary way," Merle said.

"I guess I'll go, too," Toby said. "I'm speaking to a bunch of juvenile offenders tomorrow. Real mean kids. Hardened delinquents. I want to do some more work on my talk."

"What's the subject?" I said.

"Goaltending. How goaltending prepares you to let Christ into your life."

"Will there be a guard there?" Merle said.

"I don't know."

"Make sure there's a guard there," he said.

After the announcers left, Sanders tried to get me drunk, which I thought was a schizy thing for a general manager to do to one of his players the night before an afternoon game.

His voice was husky with rum, which I have to say I found appealing even in a Yalie.

In Los Angeles, Murray Jay Siskind interviewed me for a major piece he was doing. Murray was one of the new breed of adult sportswriters. He hated hockey, baseball, football, track and soccer, all of which he covered. He liked boxing because it was animal, but his paper wouldn't let him cover it.

Murray had a little Amish beard that came straight down off his lower lip like a baggage tag. It was interesting that he had no moustache because Wadi Assad says somewhere that men with beards but no moustaches believe themselves to be holy, persecuted, and doomed.

After the interview, Murray and I had a drink with Sanders

Meade (again), this time in a cliff-top lounge where the waitresses wore jump suits and parachute harnesses.

"I talk about your downy white thighs in this piece," Murray told me.

He wore owlish glasses and had big pink lips.

"Has he seen your thighs?" Sanders said.

"Have you seen my thighs, Murray?"

"Not up close, no, but I manage to catch glimpses in the locker room. We're all waiting for this schmuck over here to let you dress with the rest of the troops."

"So am I," I said.

"Unconscionable," Sanders said.

"It's hypocritical not to," Murray told him. "She gets beat up like the other players, she scores goals, she contributes. You can't segregate her on the basis of sex. It's a thing I could easily attack."

"Attacks on hypocrisy are a dime a dozen," Sanders said.

Although I agreed with Murray, I have to admit I liked the way Sanders came out with that line. It was the way people who know they are dead wrong try to find a humorous twist, and besides, his voice was husky with tequila.

In Minneapolis–St. Paul, Jeep hoisted himself over the plastic barrier to attack some college kids who were shooting water pistols at him. Tired, cursing, locked in a two-all tie, the whole team followed. By the time we scrambled over, the kids were gone and there was nothing to do but punch innocent people and swing our sticks at the stadium cops.

I've been trying not to do this in short, quick bursts because it doesn't seem very reflective or thematic that way. But this is how my memories of those events are arranged, in bursts and flashes, in little jumps from city to city.

In Denver, I called Floss Penrose for the third time, trying to apologize for the incident with Shaver. Her secretary said she was

on another phone to Seoul, South Korea, and would I mind waiting.

The other two times I called, Floss had been on another phone to the Indianapolis Speedway and the Golden Gate Bridge.

As soon as I hung up, the phone rang. It was Shaver Stevens calling from his small, lonely, pathetic apartment out in Flushing somewhere. At least that's how the place had sounded to me when he described it.

"They're coming to turn off the phone," he said. "I couldn't leave without saying goodbye."

"Where are you going?"

"Red Deer, I guess."

"You're leaving for good?"

"I don't think I'm making any progress here, so I might as well do my sad-sacking where they know me."

"Progress in what?"

"Nothing you want to hear about."

"Those appointments you have?"

"You don't want to hear about it."

"Shaver, when are you going to start talking to people about this problem of yours?"

"Oh, never, I guess."

"You're such a big dope. Look, here is what I want you to do. I want you to hop in a cab and go to my apartment building. As soon as we hang up, I will call the twenty-four-hour doorman and tell him to expect you. He is the only black doorman on the block, Washington Post, an oldish, string-beany man, so you'll know him right away. He will let you in. I will be back on Tuesday, when we play the Bruins. This game is followed by three off-days. You and I will spend a lot of time together. You will tell me what has been troubling you. It will be good for you to discuss it with a friend. Then you will decide about Red Deer."

"Why are you talking so slowly and clearly?"

"I always do that when I give instructions."

"It's eerie."

"My mother used to do that when she gave me instructions. And her mother before her. Slowly, very clearly, in complete sen-

tences. Our women believe that mumbling is the devil's work. Who's this doctor you've been seeing?"

"How do you know about that?"

"Someone mentioned it."

"Dr. Glass. Clinical psychiatry."

"At least I got that out of you."

"I won't miss him."

"No, but you'll miss me, won't you?"

"Yes, I will."

"How much?"

"I can't put a number on it, Cleo."

"Come on. How much?"

"Bunches," he said.

"Then do what I say. Three generations of Presbyterian ladies from Badger, Ohio, agree on this. Go to my apartment and wait for me."

There was a pause and then a strange sound—almost the sound of someone clapping hands—and then the phone either went dead or Shaver put it back on the cradle. I called back several times and could hear it ring, but no one picked up.

I began to get depressed. Partly it was Shaver, partly the city-jumping. I wasn't sure I'd talked him into going to my place. And I wanted him there. I wanted someone there when I walked in. I guess the airports and the hotel rooms and the long, empty nights were already beginning to get to me.

I called Washington Post and told him Shaver might be coming. I definitely wanted to feel there was someone waiting at the end of it all.

In Montreal, I saw some TV newsfilm of Archie Brewster winning a tournament in Melbourne. Instead of throwing his racket in the air, he just dropped it on the ground, probably out of sheer travel fatigue.

In Toronto, the big snows hit. We were one of the last flights in before they closed the airport. Our bus moved slowly around huge drifts. We couldn't see a thing out the windows.

At the hotel, I tried Shaver at his place, but the phone had been disconnected. And then I tried my place, but no one answered.

Five hours to game time.

I hung around the lobby awhile, talked to some of the other players, bought some magazines and went back up to the room. I called my place again. No answer.

I tried to sleep. I tried to read.

I called Eric Torkleson's room and asked Eric if he wanted to go out in the snow. Eric was a good-natured guy who stood about six-six in skates and had a penis so humongous it was given a separate identity by the other players. Eric was Torkleson; his penis was Torkle.

A player would say, "How's Torkle doing today?" Or, "Who's playing Torkle in the movie version?" Or, "Is it true Torkle's being asked to endorse Jimmy Carter?" Or, "There's a story the airlines aren't counting Torkle as carry-on anymore. You'll have to buy an extra seat or crate him."

A torkle was a unit of measurement. If a player took a shot that went wide, someone on the bench might say he was off by half a torkle. If another plane came into our air space, someone would say we were sixteen torkles from flaming death.

A straight torkle was Torkle erect, and the phrase was used to describe events of only the most tremendous magnitude. It had to be something that brought on practically worldwide awe. The sinking of Atlantis was a straight torkle. The Russian Revolution was only a rising torkle. The building of the pyramids was a straight torkle. Beer was a straight torkle. The loaves and fishes were a classic straight torkle.

"What do you mean, go out in the snow?" he said.

"You know, just go out and see what it's like."

"There's a blizzard raging, Cleo."

"We won't go far. We'll stay near the hotel. I want to see if the snow packs."

"If the snow packs?"

"You know, for snowballs. A blizzard isn't necessarily what you need for snowballs. Sometimes the best snow is the quiet snow. The snowfall with big, wet flakes. That kind of snow really sticks.

If you're walking around and feel the flakes sticking to your eyelashes and blurring your vision, you know it's going to pack. Otherwise you can forget snowballs."

"Cleo, I like to take it easy before a game."

"In Badger, the best snows were the quiet ones. It always seemed to start in the afternoon. Two-fifteen, about. Look out the window and there it is, sort of like it snuck up, this beautiful, white, silent, feathery snowfall. And someone would say, 'It's the real McCoy,' by which we meant it was going to stick and not just vanish on the wind."

"Badger?" Eric said. "What is this Badger?"

"Never mind."

I didn't like these moods. I called my apartment again. No answer. I got a bright idea, and dialed the number of the apartment building. After a while, Washington Post, or Mr. Willie as the other tenants called him, picked up the phone.

"Did someone come over? This is Birdwell, Seven-D. You loaned me your bayonet."

"Birdwell, Cleo?"

"That's right."

"I recall he came and went."

"Who?"

"He didn't leave his card, Missus."

"Was his name Stevens?"

"You don't *expect* that of a man in my position. I deal with names all day. There's sixty-seven apartments in this building. All those people have the same name? You don't *expect* that."

"Can you describe him?"

"White Caucasian."

"That's him," I said.

"Good, I'm glad. That make my day."

"But he's not there anymore?"

"I don't know where he went to, Missus."

"Do you know if he's coming back? Did he say he'd be back?"

"He never said he was going. I spun the door around and out he went."

"Thanks, Mr. Willie."



“I have to cross the lobby and go into the office here to answer this phone every time it rings. Meanwhile, who’s walking in the door unannounced? You know what happens when unannounced people are at large in this building? It comes down on my head. I get crimped looks for three days after.”

“It was important.”

“They could be coming in right now, filling the elevators, and here I am with this phone alongside my head.”

I got all bundled up in long johns, woolen pants, heavy sweaters, boots, a big sheepskin coat, and a bright red wool cap (to make it easy for rescue workers in case I got lost in the drifts). I took the elevator down and walked through the lobby, to the mute amazement of the half-dozen players sitting around, and pushed and pushed and pushed against the revolving door before the wind finally let up enough to allow me to get outside, where both my arms were nearly torn from my body by the arctic blasts and where my face was pelted red by about half a million little crystals of stinging ice.

I thought, This stuff may not make good snowballs, but there’s a fortune out here in shotgun pellets if somebody can figure out how to package them.

I struggled back inside, gave a little wave to the guys, and went back to my room. I tried to sleep. I tried to watch television. I tried to read.

Four hours to game time.

The phone rang. It was Sanders Meade.

“You’re the first to know,” he said.

“What?”

“Game’s been called.”

“After we risk our lives getting in here?”

“We have teams, we have officials, but there’s not much chance of having any people in the building to watch them. Impossible to get to the Gardens if you live more than a block and a half away. I’m not sure we’d make it ourselves.”

“Why do they call it the Gardens? Why are all these big, dumb, smoky hulks known as Gardens?”

“Feeling out of sorts, Cleo? Weather got you down?”

“Forget it. Why am I the first to know about the cancellation?”

“I want us to have plenty of time to make our dinner plans.”

“Sanders, I don’t like you well enough to have dinner with you.”

“You had dinner with me in Chicago.”

“You snuck up. I didn’t have time to come up with an excuse.”

“You had a drink with me in L.A.”

“You were lurking around when Murray and I finished the interview. Murray wanted you to come along because he likes to have someone to abuse.”

“I don’t believe you, Cleo. You *think* you dislike me, true. This is because all the other players dislike me, and there’s that feeling, whenever I’m around, of intense, wordless mass dislike. It’s so universal the players don’t even exchange glances when I walk in. At most, one or two of the newer guys will roll their eyeballs up into their heads. You probably think I haven’t noticed.”

“Sanders, I haven’t noticed. I’m in my little cubicle around the corner from all this wordless dislike.”

“But they talk when I’m not around, don’t they?”

“Not to me.”

“Maybe that gives us a bond, Cleo.”

“Maybe camels eat lasagna.”

“I may not be popular, but I think I’m a relatively perceptive person, and what I perceive is that you’re responding to an image people have of me. Kinross’s whipping boy. Kinross’s go-fer. Kinross’s scapegoat. I just walk around mouthing platitudes. I don’t know the first thing about hockey talent, or how the game is played, or where my ass is in relation to my elbow.”

“If you’re accusing me of seeing you in those terms, Sanders, I may have to plead guilty.”

“But that’s it, you see—it’s just an image. And I believe you’re aware of that. I believe you see deeper. I think I detected a certain warming in your attitude the other night in L.A. All I ask is that you examine your feelings a little more deeply and a little more honestly. Get in touch with your feelings, Cleo.”

“What do you want me to say, Sanders? You’ve got a name that goes forward or backward and I want to have your baby?”

“All I want you to do is think about having dinner with me. I have a lot of calls to make. I’ll get back to you. Please think yes.”

“How can we have dinner if we can’t even make it to the curb without a team of huskies? And you can forget room service. And you can forget the hotel dining room. I don’t think it’s a good idea for the only female Ranger to be seen with the only general manager three times in one road trip.”

“You forget the vast underground network in large Canadian cities. All we have to do is take the elevator to the sub-lobby, stroll along a carpeted passageway past a series of shops and a movie theater, walk down a flight of stairs, make a left turn past a bookstore and a hairdresser, and settle ourselves in the plush seats of a warm, darkly lit, wood-paneled restaurant, far beneath the howling snows.”

I called my apartment again. No answer. Nothing. The sound of a phone ringing in an empty room.

New York, New York.

# 4



*I* WOULD think of it afterward as the Night of the Howling Snows, like some Indian legend involving terrific events.

I met Sanders by the newsstand that's located just to the left of the elevator bank (*your* left, as you emerge), one level below the hotel lobby. We'd agreed not to ride down together. I didn't like this element of secrecy because it made the whole thing seem like some white hot extramarital romance involving windswept passions, broken homes, and private investigators. But that was better than being seen by reporters or by people associated with the team.

I wore a black and white, satin-finish, double-breasted kind of mock tuxedo—very amusing, very now, very New York. Floss had picked it out for me when we were on better terms. Also a pleat-front dress shirt and a droopy French-impressionist's cravat. The

cravat was somewhere at the red end of the spectrum, drifting toward bullet-wound purple.

Yes, it attracted attention as we walked past shops full of rubber-booted, storm-tossed women and popcorn-eating kids and as we descended a stairway into another carpeted plaza, this one vast, with trees and shrubs and fountains. And, yes, it probably made Sanders's heart thump a little louder. And of course all of this was directly opposed to common sense, discretion etc. But when you own an outfit like this, which is practically neon, you don't sit around and wait for an invitation that specifies black-and-white tux. You want to get out and show it and get it over with, so you can resume a normal life.

"There's something I should have told you on the phone," Sanders said.

"What?"

"The restaurant I wanted to go to is booked, solidly booked, until ten P.M., and I don't know about you, but I just couldn't hold out, food and drinkwise, a minute beyond eight."

"Then where are we going?"

"There's another restaurant right nearby. If anything, it's better than the first restaurant. And they're able to take us right away. You see, the first restaurant has these conventioners staying at the hotel and they just booked the place solid, this manufacturing association, so I made a spot decision."

"Sanders, you're drifting."

"You see, the second restaurant isn't totally underground. We're heading right for it. This is the first restaurant we're passing right now. You have to pass the first restaurant to get to the second restaurant. Then you take an escalator."

"Up," I said.

"We go up one level, two levels. Then we walk down a corridor and right out some big glass doors, and the restaurant is no more than fifteen feet away."

"On street level."

"That is the level we are talking about, yes."

"Through the howling snows." I said.

"I didn't want to say anything on the phone. I felt you were

wavering and I didn't want to tilt you the wrong way. I thought if I mentioned heavy coats, you'd tell me to forget it. I thought fifteen feet. This is a woman who plays big-league hockey without a helmet."

"It is not totally underground, you say."

"They store things two levels down. The kitchen is one level down. Only at street level do we find the restaurant proper. Where people eat."

We were on the escalator.

"I paid big bucks for this suit, Sanders. I'm not going out in that storm. If you'd just said fifteen feet, I would have dressed differently and there would have been no problem. I don't mind the fifteen feet. It's what I'm wearing that minds. The suit minds. The suit is very upset with you."

We got off the escalator but I refused to walk any farther. Sanders tried a joke.

"You can't say I took advantage. I don't have a rolled-up raincoat or plastic booties hidden under my jacket. Our suits are in this together."

We were thirty yards from the entrance to the street, and I could feel the cold begin to penetrate.

"Cleo, do you realize how short a distance fifteen feet really is?"

"We could die."

"Not if we hug the wall."

"Even if we live, we'll look like fools staggering into that restaurant all covered with ice and snow. They'll have to set us near the stoves."

He began whispering in a confidential manner.

"We slip out the door, we hug the wall. Before you know it, we're settled in plush seats, we're getting drier by the second, we're looking at two drinks and a big plate of warm hors d'oeuvres."

"If you'd said something on the phone, I could have dressed for these fifteen feet."

"Think of it as five yards. How long does it take to travel five yards with your head down and your arms pumping? We hug the

wall. It has to take less than two seconds. I picture a lot of dark wood, Cleo. Tiffany lamps casting a warm glow. Sparkling stemware.”

“Stop whispering, damn it.”

Does anyone understand why I grabbed him by the wrist and led him toward the glass doors and right out into the street, and then released him to hug the wall or whatever he wanted to do while I more or less sauntered through the blowing white inferno, surrendering my perfect composure and nonchalance only to the extent that about halfway to the restaurant door I started moving a little sideways, *edging* into the wind, because it was either that or the children’s game called Statues.

Sanders was already at the door, clutching it with one hand and reaching the other hand out toward me as though I were bobbing along on the surface of rushing floodwaters and he was hanging off some treetop. The trouble was that the wind was against me, not with me, and there was no danger of my whirling past him—just of my extremities turning blue while I was trying to reach the door.

Well, he pulled me inside, finally, and we spent a few minutes between the outer door and the inner door blowing on our own hands and on each other’s face. We also did little hops and jumps and beat our forearms against our ribs, all the while making strenuous, panting noises. Sanders persisted in blowing on my face.

“Worse than I expected,” he said.

“Oh, I don’t know, I kind of enjoyed it.”

“I’m really sorry, Cleo.”

“It was like turning a corner and walking into an exploding star.”

“Blow on my face some more,” he said.

“There’s a certain point at which your body no longer knows whether it is very cold or very hot. It knows only intense pain and humiliation.”

“It was a long, long fifteen feet. I have to admit. I may have erred on the low side.”

He started blowing on me again. I pushed him away and we went inside.

Faces floated through the dimness. Captains, waiters, slowly circling us, looking for signs of hats and coats, scarves and boots. As we were being led to our table, I detoured to the women's room, where I took off my shoes and held my feet up—one at a time, of course—to the hot-air blower. It takes a limber body etc.

I went back out. There was still some frost in Sanders's hair and he was bleeding slightly in two places on his left hand. From hugging the wall, I guess.

Anyway, we started in with a couple of drinks and assorted appetizers, and after a while the stinging sensation caused by all that flying ice began to leave my face and hands. I was still doing a fair amount of sniffing, but it was Sanders who kept the people at nearby tables on edge with his great, wet sneezes.

When he leaned toward me, I backed up and got my napkin ready, but he just wanted to whisper again.

"What do you think of Kinross?" he said.

"Your typical unique madman," I think I answered.

"How good are you at keeping secrets?"

"Not good. Terrible."

"He may be ousted," Sanders said. "The conglomerate's unhappy. They may ease him out. They want a little less color. They want someone who lacks impact. Kinross gets a terrible press. He keeps telling reporters to suck, to eat shit, to rotate."

"To rotate?"

"He gives them the finger and says rotate. He keeps dredging up insults from his early days as a street tough. 'Your mother wears combat boots.' Then he hits the desk and laughs. 'Up your giggy with a rusty meat hook.' "

"Up your giggy?"

"So they want someone inoffensive," Sanders said. "Someone who will endorse and promote every aspect of the Hughes Tool policy without the slightest question or hesitation."

"What did you say?"

"I told them I'd think about it."



He called the waiter over.

"When you have a minute, we'd like two more drinks."

I ate some celery.

"Maybe you should have said yes right then and there. You showed hesitation. They don't want hesitation."

"If I'd said yes then and there, they would have thought I had a mind of my own. It would have shown decisiveness. I think it was in my best interests to be weak-willed and indecisive."

"Who knows all this?"

"No one," he said. "It's in the utmost confidence. I trust you to remain silent."

"I'm awful with secrets. I've always thought people who keep secrets are untrustworthy."

"That sounds like a contradiction, Cleo."

"You know what I mean. They're certain types."

"You mean if you know you can trust someone with a secret, you'd better not tell it to him."

"I mean if someone is good at keeping secrets, you can be pretty sure he's a certain psychological type. He may keep your secret, but he'll give you the feeling you shouldn't have told it to him. The more you're certain he won't reveal the secret, the more uncomfortable you'll be, knowing that he knows."

"Why don't we look at the menu?" Sanders said.

"In other words, your secret is safe with me because I'll probably reveal it."

"The halibut looks good."

"I'm not getting through, am I?"

"It's probably my fault, Cleo. If I can't picture something mentally, I have trouble following."

"Why do you need a picture? I'm giving you words. This is how people communicate, Sanders. It's called talking."

"Yes, but sometimes I need a picture painted for me. That's the way I think. I know it's not your fault, but your argument is kind of abstract and elusive. You're not painting a word-picture."

"You mean like I say 'cow' and you see a little cow in your head?"

"That's a perfect word-picture, yes."

“What about ‘shit’?”

“Good and clear,” he said.

We looked at the menus. Sanders told the waiter that whenever he was ready, we would order. No hurry. Anytime he happened to find himself in the area.

“The point is this,” he told me. “If they give it to me, I expect to grow into the job. I may start out by being spongy and clammy, or whatever metaphors are called for, but I want to be a strong president eventually, and I think I can be.”

“Isn’t it unusual to jump a man from team GM all the way to Garden president?”

“No one else has the qualifications I have.”

“I believe it.”

“I know you’re reacting to the snow, the fact that you didn’t want to have dinner with me at all, and your general feelings about me, so I’ll let that slide,” he said.

The food was good. I never know what to say about wine except it’s good, it’s bad, or I don’t know. This was good. Sanders must have been hungry; his plate was scoured clean in a matter of minutes. He kept looking around for something else to eat until I pushed my bread at him. There was no more butter, but he seemed reluctant to ask the waiter to get some.

I began to wonder about the possible connection between a man’s timidity in a public place and his prowess in the bedroom.

Don’t men and women have different kinds of timidity? Floss Penrose was shy, timid, fearful and full of anxiety, and very small as well, but in restaurants and shops she got the kind of service they reserve for heiresses and legendary movie stars; and I don’t know how she did it except it had something to do with her clothes, the big, dark rings she wore, and the ambition and power-madness that people probably thought they saw in her petite frame. But I think timid men are most timid when they’re in public. On reflection, I would say this is male pride in conflict with the guilt and anxiety caused by centuries of taking charge, but that’s all the social psychology you get out of me.

Sanders sat there looking around for something to spread on the bread I’d given him. He wasn’t a bad-looking man, thirty-five

or so, with a longish head, sincere and puppylike eyes, and his hair artistically cut and sculptured at about the \$25 level.

He dressed in the wholesome boy-man style that young sports execs and the whiter athletes favor, and on the Rangers it was only J. P. Larousse with his short, wide neckties and shadowy beard and hand-knit sweaters who varied from the norm.

We finished off the wine and ordered dessert and coffee. I was feeling no pain, as my dad used to say, until I heard an extra loud gust of wind go roaring down the street. This reminded me of the reality ahead, fifteen or more feet of white wilderness.

After dessert and coffee, we ordered liqueur and coffee. The place was slowly emptying out. Whenever someone left, we heard the wind through the double doors and felt a creepy chill at our feet.

When we finished our liqueur, we went back to drinking Scotch.

"It's great to be single, isn't it?" Sanders said.

I had no idea what he meant by that.

"I was always afraid of getting married because I knew I'd want children and I figured having children would cause tensions in the marriage."

"Why would children cause tensions?" I said.

"Well, the modern marriage tends to be pretty selfish, and I was afraid of all kinds of conflicts once the kids started being born."

I imagined babies sliding down a conveyor belt.

"That needn't happen, Sanders, if a man and woman agree on what kind of marriage they want."

"What kind of marriage do you want?"

"I'm too young and too drunk."

"I want a marriage in which there is respect for each other's shortcomings."

"Don't you mean tolerance?"

"I'm not sure tolerance goes far enough."

He finished his drink and ordered another liqueur. There was a thoughtful pause.

"And I want my children to go to Yale," he said. "Maybe you

think I'm looking too far ahead, since I'm not married yet, but whatever I am I owe to the influence of *Time*, *Newsweek*, Yale, the Racquet Club; J. Walter Thompson, where I started out as a copy cub; General Foods, which made me a brand manager; Standard Brands, which hired me away from General Foods; Hughes Tool, which hired me after Standard Brands fired me; ITT, which was so nice to my dad all the years he was an executive there; Pleasantville, New York; Montclair, New Jersey; and Westport, Connecticut, where I spent my formative years; Camp Wonset for Boys; Yellowstone and Sequoia national parks; F. A. O. Schwarz, where so many of my toys came from; and the books of Wadi Assad."

I studied the pleasant, earnest, elongated face across the table. You could say I gazed levelly.

"You don't read Wadi Assad, Sanders."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

"I've read everything the man wrote."

"You haven't. I know you haven't."

"Test me, then."

"What's the title of his first book?"

"*The Heart-shaped Moment*."

"How many *Mystic Prince* books are there?"

"There are three *Mystic Prince* books."

"Why does the fish know nothing of the sea?"

"Because the sea is all there is."

"Why did the emir give up all his wealth and enter the land of the blind?"

"He wanted to see with new eyes."

"Get the check," I said.

Sanders gestured to the waiter, who came over.

"When you have a minute, would you let us have the check, please."

I asked the waiter whether we could return to the hotel by going down through the kitchen and the cellar and then out through some fire door or whatever into the second subterranean level. He said he'd check.

Sanders told him there was no hurry.

The waiter came back with the captain, who moved in a sinister glide, his right hand over the left part of his abdomen, as if that was where his phoniness hurt him most.

“He wants a tip, Sanders.”

Sanders coughed up five and we followed the captain down into the kitchen, where everybody was yelling at each other, and through a rear door into the cellar. Only a dim light was on down there and he pointed to a big metal door at the other end of the room, over by the wine racks, and asked us to do such and such with the locks and latches before we closed the door behind us. He went back upstairs to yell with the others, and Sanders and I moved warily and with little cackling sounds out of a hundred horror movies toward the big door, except I stumbled on something and he grabbed me and held me. His nose was in my hair and he was saying, “My nose is in your hair,” and we were both laughing but at the same time pressing in, practically grinding against each other, and he kept taking big whiffs of my hair. We kissed, and his hands were at my bottom, moving me into him, and my pelvis was shifting and dipping and thrusting.

“*My room,*” he said, all business, and we got to the door and had all kinds of trouble opening the thing much less locking it behind us, but finally we were out in some corridor and his hand gripped mine as we ran and walked simultaneously toward the nearest staircase.

Out of breath, I said, “Why did the kindly lion eat the well-intentioned man?”

“He was hungry, he was hungry,” Sanders shouted.

I grabbed him and kissed him and we nearly went through a shop window. We climbed the stairs and headed toward the elevator bank. The door opened and Sanders pressed seventeen and we grabbed each other and started gyrating and kissing. We knew enough to separate as the elevator reached the lobby, where the door opened and in walked Eric Torkleson. He nodded casually, pressed twenty-one, and faced the closing door. At the mezzanine level the door opened again and in walked Brian Mc-

Call, Bruce McLeod, Gordon Fraser, Brian Fraser, Jack Ferguson, Mike McPherson, and Fergie Sinclair.

“How’s Torkle?” Fergie said.

“Sleepy,” Eric said.

“Did you take him out to play in the snow?”

“We shoveled a while.”

They all laughed a little, rising on their toes. Sanders and I were pressed against the back of the elevator, careful not to touch each other. I realized he was looking at me, trying to communicate some kind of signal or instruction by making exaggerated facial gestures and mouthing words.

*One seven one eight.* His room number.

At seventeen, Sanders got out. I couldn’t remember what floor I was on. Where was my key? Inside jacket pocket. *Two one zero nine.*

At twenty-one, Eric, Bruce, the two Brians, and I got off. We said goodnight, and I walked very slowly toward my room, hearing each of the others in turn open a door and then close it behind him. I decided to be cute and take the stairs down to seventeen. Why risk another meeting in the elevator and the possibility of awkward questions? I walked right past my room to the red door at the end of the corridor. I had to push hard to get it open, and when it did open it *flew* open and I went tripping forward.

*Shit! I was outside!*

These were fire stairs and I was flattened against a metal rail by a mean, sharp, whistling wind that took my breath away. I couldn’t breathe, and I couldn’t see a thing in the face of all that blowing snow. The only way I could turn was slowly, and I did this and then gripped the rail with both hands, not sure whether the metal was burning me or freezing me, and then I squatted down to get part of my body out of the full force of the shrieking wind and I felt my way back to the door, which was banging crazily against a wall. I stumbled inside, found the stairs I wanted, and took a deep, deep breath. Although I was inside and safe, I was still in a state of near shock and I hurried down the stairs, still hunched over in a protective ball, and limping a little,

and with one hand touching the wall for support, and cold, very cold.

I couldn't unclench my hands, so there was no problem knocking on Sanders's door, except it hurt. I heard a loud sneeze and then he let me in.

"I was beginning to worry," he said. "I called your room. What happened? You're wet. You've got so much color. Let me feel."

He was wearing a tremendously wide-sleeved kimono with a broad, monogrammed sash. I hobbled past him to the bathroom.

"Give me water," I said.

He grabbed a toothbrush glass and started filling it from the tap.

"No, no, big water, hot water, for bath."

"Cleo, let me feel you, you're so cold and wet."

He started blowing on my face.

"Big water," I said. "Hot, for bath."

He started filling the tub and together we got my clothes off. Sanders was terrifically earnest and conscientious about wrapping me in a large, white towel and rubbing me down. He hugged me with great, life-saving, manly bear-warmth, scrupulous about keeping his pelvic area sort of recessed to avoid intimate contact. He got his nose into my hair a few times, but that may have been unavoidable.

The water was just right. Sanders called room service for something bracing to drink and then sat at the edge of the tub, his face showing anxiety, concern, desire, lust, and the interplay between them.

I told him the story and he leaned over the tub and kissed me tenderly. I felt like such a lummoX to have wandered out like that, but Sanders whispered and cooed and soothed. He asked me if he should run some more hot water and I said no. He asked me if he could soap my breasts and I said only if he took that silly robe off.

We sat facing each other in the tub. He'd turned off the bathroom light and there was just a dim glow from the bedside lamp. We got a little closer to each other by raising our knees and

bumping along the enamel on our bottoms. He soaped my breasts.

“I feel we’re getting to know each other, Cleo.”

His voice was husky with Scotch-base liqueur.

I put my legs over his and we got still closer. His hands reached down under my buttocks and he scooped me sort of onto his lap. We kissed slowly. The wind was howling. His nose was in my hair.

After a while I sensed he was getting restless.

“It’s going to be one of those nights,” he said.

“What nights?”

“It was those damn guys on the elevator.”

“What do you mean?”

“Torkle. It got me intimidated.”

“You mean the kidding?”

“That Torkle remark. Just mention of it. I was so ready, Cleo. It would have been memorable. If only Eric and those guys hadn’t gotten on the elevator with us.”

“Sanders, are you saying that just hearing the word Torkle got you so intimidated that you are unable, as they say, to perform? You’re going to let somebody else’s sex organ dictate the course of the rest of this night?”

“Torkle, Torkle, you hear it all the time. It gets to you after a while. I’ve never even seen Eric’s penis and I don’t want to, but just hearing about it, and knowing it’s there, and being aware of the size of the thing—well, it gets to you.”

I moved back toward my end of the tub and spoke to him in the softest of voices.

“Sanders, I know it’s my role in a situation like this to be understanding, sensitive, supportive, and protective, but you can’t expect me to be those things if you tell me that we’re in this tub together to get *clean* and that it’s all because of Torkle.”

“But wasn’t it great, the urgency we felt, Cleo, down in the subcorridors? It was only when Eric got on the elevator that I began getting edgy.”

“That kind of raging, grinding, teenage lust never lasts very



long anyway,” I said. “If you’ll just relax and forget this Torkle business, we’ll have something much sweeter and dearer.”

A knock at the door. Room service.

“I wish I could believe you,” he said. “But I know how my mind and body operate, and this is just one of those hellish nights we have to put behind us, and the sooner, frankly, the better.”

He got out of the tub, put on his robe, and went to open the door. Over the next ten or fifteen minutes, I could hear him dressing, drinking, and pacing.

I got out of the tub and wrapped the towel around me. I turned on the light. I didn’t have to touch my mock tux to know it was still wet. Not only wet but battered. I walked inside. Sanders was fully dressed—shirt, jacket, pants, shoes, socks. I walked over to him, unzipped his pants, put my hand in, and yanked once on his cock, just for fun.

“Cleo, that’s not the kind of thing that’ll help.”

“Just fooling around. Trying to find the humor in the situation.”

“There is none. Not for me.”

I sat on the bed watching him drink and pace.

“Do you want me to see you to your room?” he said.

“My clothes are wet.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you walked right out.”

“Sanders, my clothes are wet.”

“Aside from that, you have every right to just get up and walk out.”

“I agree.”

“I don’t deserve your company. I wanted this to be a perfect evening. First I foul up by taking you out in the snow. Now this.”

“Your fly is open.”

“It doesn’t matter, Cleo. Who cares about the fly of someone like me? I was a fool to think I could take over the Garden presidency. I’ll crack under pressure in a matter of hours.”

He poured another drink.

“It just hurts so much, especially with you sitting there looking incredibly desirable with the towel pulled up on one thigh and

the tops of your breasts exposed. So fresh faced and warm and terrific to touch, and I can't do a thing."

"Try, you creep."

"How does one try?"

"There must be muscles you can move. Contract some muscles."

"A doctor once told me about the squeeze technique, but I don't think you'll want to do it. There's also yoga and aspin."

"What's the squeeze technique?" I said.

"You have to know all the different parts of the penis to do it right. You have to put certain fingers on certain parts. It involves a lot of fondling, but it has to be scientifically exact."

"Where does the squeezing come in?"

"You use your thumb and pinky, but I'm not sure where exactly. You have to know ventral, dorsal, and at least one other part."

"Does it have a Latin name?"

"I think so."

"Frenulum," I said. "And that technique isn't for impotence, it's for premature ejaculation."

"I get that, too."

"I used to do it with Georgie Schlagel back in Badger. His father was a therapist and Georgie knew all the techniques."

"Did it work?"

"Georgie didn't suffer from premature ejaculation. We just liked doing it."

"I thought it hurt."

"It didn't hurt me."

"But you both liked doing it."

"Georgie was one of those boys who's totally, everlastingly in love with his own penis. He never got over his first erection. He just loved flaunting himself. He was always playing with it. When he wasn't playing with it, he was looking at it. Looking isn't the word. He would study it. We'd be in the back room of his house when his parents were out and he'd be sitting there with his pants open and with the most absorbed, studious, dumb-kid look on his

face, examining himself—wondering about it, marveling at it, softly blowing on it, *dusting* it. His penis was a never-ending discovery, I guess.”

“I’d like to forget mine.”

“We were fifteen. I used to get tired of sitting there watching him examine himself. So we started using techniques out of the book. The squeeze technique may have involved some pain, but this was all part of the learning process as far as Georgie was concerned. Even pain was fascinating as long as it involved his penis. ‘Look at what it’s doing,’ he’d say. ‘Look at the color change—quick, look.’ ‘Now here’s where it springs straight up—see, see?’ ”

“I never did anything like that. We rode bikes.”

“We rode bikes, too.”

“I couldn’t do it even now. I’m too self-conscious.”

“Come here and sit next to me, Sanders.”

“Where?”

“Right here. Come on.”

“That would only make it worse, Cleo.”

“It’s this towel,” I said. “It’s too provocative. It’s tearing you apart inside, isn’t it?”

I took off the towel. He barely noticed.

“We used to ride bikes to the reservoir,” he said. “Then we’d skip rocks.”

I had an idea. I hopped off the bed, went into the bathroom and got all my clothes down off the shower-curtain rod. I went back inside and dropped the clothes at the end of the bed. Then I sat back down.

“Come sit next to me, Sanders. Come on. Come sit.”

I patted the empty side of the bed.

“You mustn’t feel any pressure,” I said. “This is a no-pressure event. You won’t be asked to do anything you can’t do. Now that’s a promise.”

I patted the bed again. He took another swallow of his drink and came straggling over and sat on the edge of the bed with his back to me.

“Put your legs up, Sanders. Put your legs up on the bed.”

He pivoted on his ass and swung up and around until we were

seated next to each other, legs extended, our heads resting against the headboard. He kept looking straight ahead.

“Now breathe deeply. Breathe evenly and deeply. No pressure. Just sit and breathe.”

He began to breathe deeply, looking straight ahead.

“This is meaningless breathing. I don’t want you to think this breathing will cure anything or solve anything. It is meaningless. Its only meaning is to get both of us breathing together so that you won’t feel uncomfortable and under pressure being fully dressed on a bed with a totally naked woman.”

We sat there breathing deeply.

“All right,” I said, “now you just keep on breathing and pay no attention to what I am going to be doing at the other end of the bed. Breathe evenly, Sanders. You’re still a little spastic in your rhythm.”

I crawled to the foot of the bed, unlaced one of his shoes and took it off.

“This is a cruel experiment,” he said.

I dropped the shoe on the floor.

“It is better not to talk,” I said. “It is talk that creates pressure and strain. Now while I go back to my original seated position, I want you to lean forward and reach over and lift my teddy pants off that pile of clothes and feel the silky, intimate texture in your fingers and hands, right through to your wrists and beyond”—I was whispering—and then just raise my feet off the bed slightly and slip them into the pants and then glide the smooth, delicate fabric up, up, slowly up along my legs until it is snugly in place over my mound, belly, waist etcetera.”

He kept looking straight ahead.

“Do you know what this is called, Sanders?”

“What?”

“Painting a word-picture. We are painting a word-picture.”

He looked at me, but did as he was told, continuing to breathe deeply. First he held the pants up and studied them. They were almost knee length and a tight fit, unlike the teddy pants of old, but Sanders got them over my calves and knees and thighs, and when I lifted and wriggled a little, he was able to complete the

snug fit. Then, with my left breast more or less in one of his ears, he backed off slightly and looked at me with such a deep, sad, questioning apprehension that I began to wonder if this was such a good idea.

We sat back and breathed evenly.

I crawled to the foot of the bed, unlaced and took off his other shoe, and then removed both of his one-size-fits-all fluted black socks.

"I think we ought to stop," he said. "I am so torn."

"You don't want me naked, you don't want me dressed."

"I want you dressed, Cleo, but I don't think this is the way to go about it."

"This is the way," I said.

I nudged him sharply with my elbow and then pointed to my Badger Beagles T-shirt. I leaned way over with my arms outstretched like a Moslem in prayer, and Sanders went about fitting the T-shirt along my arms and then over my head and my breasts.

I noticed him looking at the nipple bulges out of the corner of his eye. He seemed very near tears.

"You're forgetting to breathe, Sanders. Now sit back and we'll both breathe a while."

After some breathing, I had him lean toward me at an angle while I lifted first one arm and then the other free of his jacket, and tossed the jacket on the floor.

"Now, Sanders, slowly and deliberately, because this is a very pricey outfit, I want you to put my trousers on, and remember there is no pressure, no intimidation, no threat, no strain. You are simply dressing me."

I lifted my legs straight out and well up, and by the time Sanders maneuvered the trousers past my ass, he was on his knees between *my* knees and I think his hands were quivering.

"How you doin'?" I said. "How's it goin', cowboy?"

"Cleo, it must be three in the morning."

"Don't you see the humor in the situation?"

"People think they have to find humor. A situation is plain rotten, it is hopeless, and people feel obliged to look for humor. It's a

compulsion. Something is obviously not humorous and could never be humorous, and still there are people going around on all fours, Cleo, no offense, looking for the humor.”

“Don’t you *like* being between my legs?”

“I like it and don’t like it.”

“Stay there while I get your belt unbuckled. I am going to unbuckle your belt. Stay right there.”

Without moving from my supine position, and using one hand, I undid his belt and pulled the front of his shirt out of his pants. Then I sat up, unbuttoned his shirt, and took it off, making him wince when my hands accidentally touched his bare chest. I threw the shirt across the room.

“I need to breathe,” he said.

We went back to our original positions and sat breathing.

“I took off your shirt. You put on mine.”

Slowly, even more slowly than the devastating price of my ruffled shirt might call for, he slipped the soft, wet garment over my shoulders, and then ever so carefully began buttoning, buttoning.

“I love this,” I whispered. “I love being dressed by you.”

He was looking at me with immensely earnest eyes. He was breathing evenly. He was not hurrying at all. I thought these were probably good signs.

“I wonder if I want you vertical or horizontal for the pants, Sanders. What do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“There is no pressure. Take your time. If you don’t want to make the decision, I’ll be happy to take care of it for you. You make decisions all day in the office. This is your time to relax.”

“It might be easier for you if I stood.”

“What would be easier for you, Sanders?”

“If I stood.”

“Stand, please.”

“I don’t know what we expect to accomplish.”

“Push up with your hands,” I whispered, “and rise to your full adult height.”

He stood in the middle of the bed. His belt and zipper were

already undone and his pants were more or less hanging from his hips. I knelt in front of him and slowly moved the pants down his flanks. I kept the cloth between my hands and his legs. We didn't touch, in other words, skin to skin. He stepped out of the pants and I wadded them up and tossed them toward the bathroom door. A lot of small change came flying out.

Neither one of us changed positions. We were not in any way in physical contact. I listened to him breathe.

"Those are pretty shorts," I said.

They were the same colors as the wide-sleeved kimono—gray and green, an ensemble—and they were cut well below the navel. I leaned forward just a bit and blew lightly on his belly hair.

"This is the first time I've worn them," he said. "I've had them for months, but I never wanted to wear them until tonight."

I blew lightly on and around his belly.

"*Time, Newsweek, Hotchkiss, Yale,*" he said.

I felt a short pause was crucial here. I moved back to my original position on the bed, legs extended, head against the headboard. I did some breathing.

"You owe me a jacket," I said.

I think he liked standing over me. It is sort of the warrior's view. The sacker and plunderer.

Fairly gracefully, he leaned back behind him and without taking his eyes off me, he plucked my jacket off the bed and held it ready at his hip with a certain deftness, I thought.

I duck-walked over on my knees and put one arm in, and turned, and put the other arm in. Then I stood up and faced him. I blew softly on his lips. He closed his eyes. I blew on his closed lids, softly, very lightly, barely a breath of air.

I put my hands on his shoulders and he trembled slightly, he quaked. Dipping my knees, I moved my hands down along his arms, and he got the idea and held my elbows, helping me keep my balance as I dipped slowly down, blowing on his neck, his chest, his navel. His hands came up along my forearms and held my wrists as my knees touched the bed. I blew on the curly little hairs above the elastic band on his shorts.

With two fingers, delicately, I pulled the band away from his body and then blew softly into his shorts.

“Do you know what we’re doing here, Sanders?”

“What?”

“We’re painting word-pictures, and we’re not even using words.”

I took the band between my teeth, put my hands on his buttocks, and carefully pulled the front of his shorts down over his genital area—with my teeth, mind you, which they don’t teach at the Meriweather School in Badger.

His thing hung there, trying to levitate.

I let the elastic band slip from between my teeth—softly, of course—and drew back a bit. Then I put my right arm between his legs and grabbed the back of his shorts and rolled them down sort of lingeringly over his ass, letting my knuckles glide lightly over the narrow cleft.

Finally I raised both hands to his armpits and then moved my fingers slowly down the sides of his body, taking the shorts with me when I reached his thighs.

He stepped out of them.

I whispered, “This is a no-pressure event, Sanders. You don’t have to do a thing. I know you kind of enjoy just looming up there above me.”

Then I whispered, “Get my shoes, Sanders, would you?”

My patent-leather dress pumps were still in the bathroom.

“I’m not completely dressed,” I whispered. “You’ve got to dress me, Sanders. All the way. Every stitch. I love it so much.”

He went and got my shoes. I sat at the end of the bed. My feet are pretty ordinary, just feet, I don’t know what else you could say about them, but Sanders seemed to regard them with awe, and he fitted each shoe as tenderly as some fairy-tale prince might do.

I went and stood in the middle of the room.

“I love how you dressed me, Sanders. You were so good. Did you like the way I took off your clothes?”

“No one’s ever done that before.”

“Of course not,” I whispered. “And no one’s ever dressed me



before. And there was no pressure. And you did so well. You were so tender and patient and gentle.”

His thing began floating upward. I was almost too exhausted to care. I was like a pastry chef who creates a swirling masterpiece for the president of the republic, but would never think of sitting down and eating a hunk of the leftover stuff. Sanders’s cock was more or less a leftover.

Anyway, he approached and kissed me, his hands gripping my bottom, and started grinding, grinding. He pushed me toward the bed and took my jacket off almost in the same motion. I sat on the bed and he practically tore the buttons off my ruffled shirt. I remembered the cravat. My fifty-dollar purple eyesore. He hadn’t tied on the cravat. I knew it was just a passing thought.

He pulled my T-shirt over my head and started on my pants. His cock was bobbing the way Georgie Schlagel’s used to when I spread Oil of Olay all over it.

He remembered my shoes, and took them off before he tried to get the trousers past my feet. There was nothing left but the teddy pants, if I remember correctly.

I wondered if we’d have to stop so I could dress him. No, that was going too far.

He took the undies off and we flopped onto the bed together. I think we were athwart the bed if that means crosswise. Sanders licked me everywhere, nuzzled my labia, from the Latin, and blew on my face and in my ears, and nibbled me so good, and ran the ends of his fingers around and around my nipples, and then he entered, entered, entered, and we did a wild sort of rolling hoop routine that would have been impossible if we’d thought about it for so much as two seconds.

Sanders had a lot of prowess for an insecure man. We bumped and slammed and rattled and shook. The written history of these boudoir seductions is thousands of years old and I can’t add anything to it except for my own little personal delight in both our bodies just doing so well, and sort of liking each other, and turning a long night that was having its schizy moments into a triumphal, world-class event.

When we were finished and wringing wet and feeling a little reflective, I kissed Sanders about where his breastbone is and then just settled my head there and we listened to the wind howl and to the little specks of ice go ricocheting off the window.

"It's so hard being a man," he said.

"I know, I know."

"Is it hard being a woman?"

"It's a bitch."

"Women know so much."

"Does that make it harder to be a man?"

"God, yes, terribly."

"Well, there's not much I can say except we're not about to start getting dumber."

"I know," he said. "It's going to be awful."

"Men will adjust. Don't you think?"

"We'll have to, but it will take its toll. It already has. I pity future generations."

"Men will adjust, Sanders."

"Take yourself, for example. You're tall, vigorous, attractive, a brilliant athlete, and smart, too. How do we adjust to that?"

"I don't want to sound high and mighty, but I happen to be one of a kind, at least as far as my athletic ability is concerned. I'm the first. That means I have my own set of problems and adjustments."

"But you're equal to it, Cleo. You know you are. You wouldn't have been able to get this far if you didn't have tremendous will."

"It's hard, Sanders, and sometimes it's lonely."

"You're not as lonely as I am," he said.

"I'm pretty lonely."

"I'm lonely all the time. I'm lonely when I'm by myself and I'm lonely in a crowd. TV makes me lonely, radio makes me lonely, airports make me loneliest of all. Maybe the answer is a family. But I'm afraid my kids won't respect me."

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid I won't give them the right input. I don't see myself as a father. I see myself as a son. At most a brother. The idea

of being a father is awesome. My own father handled it well. He was able to bring it off. He just sort of walked through it. I admire that in a man.”

“You have more to offer than you think.”

“I wish I could believe that, Cleo.”

“You have lots of prowess, for instance.”

“No one’s ever said that before.”

“Some women don’t care that much for prowess in a man. Maybe I’ll feel the same way someday. Maybe I’ll want different things out of love. Tenderer, paler.”

“I doubt it, Cleo.”

“You never know. There’s plenty of time for change.”

“Change isn’t necessarily improvement,” he said.

“Maybe improvement’s overrated. I’ll take change four times out of five.”

Out in the hall some conventioners went by, making noise, and that reminded me it was time to break camp and roll on home.

I got dressed in the bathroom. Sanders put on his kimono to see me to the door. I noticed matching sandals this time. He stuck his nose in my hair. I walked down the hall to the elevator, wondering what kind of snowballs you could make from whatever a howling blizzard leaves behind.

# 5



*S*HAYER Stevens was waiting in my apartment, all whitish blond and green-eyed and broad of shoulder. Just sitting there in a canvas chair with a Wadi Assad book in his lap.

He barely raised his head when I walked in the door. There was a soft smile in his eyes. We were just kids really, both of us, but there was a tenderness to this moment that was so deep and warm and familiar that I felt an eerie kind of twilight glow. We were like an old married couple who look at each other one day and realize they've had a pretty good life together and are still going strong.

We spent some quiet days getting to know each other, being amused by each other, reading and walking and feeling just so satisfied to be together. He didn't say anything about this problem of his, but I figured all would come in good time. We were busy looking at each other. We looked all the time. We studied eyes and hair and teeth. We found immense interest in earlobes

and feet. I rapped my knuckles on his rock-hard chest and we listened to the hollow thump. Mostly we just looked. We studied each other up close, from across the room, walking, sitting, in snow and rain, on buses and in elevators, through windows, along corridors, in the diamond district, and at the zoo.

We also spent a lot of time munching on Ralphies, which are those bite-sized bits of whorly snack food that you can only get, as far as anyone knows, in one little Chinese grocery down behind the courthouses.

It was fun living with Shaver, even if he was rock hard with none of the fleshy parts that the wandering hand likes to grab hold of. I just couldn't get enough of looking at him.

Shaver had that bantam vanity you see in undersized athletes. He was all chest. He practically walked with his chest. He had semidwarfish arms and held his head high and he seemed to be trying to rise into the air as he walked. He was all deltoids, pecs, and lats.

I'd watch him sometimes clipping the hair in his nostrils. I'd watch him trying to check out his profile in the mirror and he'd practically slide one eyeball into his ear to get a good look. His face was plain, compact, and boyish. He was missing several front teeth as a result of a series of stick duels when he was in the juniors, but he had a plate he stuck in there except for when he was in and around the bed.

Shaver is the only person I've ever known who brushes his tongue. His dentist convinced him it was important. Apparently, brushing your tongue gets rid of bacteria that accumulate, mostly overnight. Shaver always brushed his tongue before sex. I used to watch him.

He spent as much time looking at me as he did looking at himself, or as I did looking at him. We were constantly maneuvering to get fresh views of each other. He kept telling me how much he liked my small-town look. By this he meant my slightly upturned nose, which used to be the bane of my life until I finally accepted the fact that being cute isn't necessarily fatal.

We kind of bathed in each other's glow.

Sanders Meade called.

"I want to see you, Cleo."

"Negative."

"I was afraid you'd say that and I can't say I'm surprised. I was expecting it. I always expect it. That's probably why I get it."

"We'll talk sometime."

"We play the Flames tomorrow night in their building. Let's have dinner after the game. It won't be snowing in Atlanta. Little joke."

"We'll talk, Sanders."

"You have someone there. Is that it? I half expected it. I almost didn't call. I wanted to call yesterday, but I was afraid you'd have someone there. Okay, it's happened before. I'll just go to a movie and then come back and make myself some hot chocolate. No problem."

Floss Penrose called.

"I need to talk," she said.

"Of course."

"Can you talk?"

"Of course I can talk."

"Is someone there?"

"It doesn't matter, Floss. We can talk. What's wrong?"

"Who's there, Cleo?"

"A friend."

"Male or female?"

"Aw, come on, Floss, what is this?"

"It's not Archie, is it?"

"Of course it's not Archie. It's the man you got so mad at me over."

"The fellow with the sweater over his head?"

"And the pants around his ankles."

"The arms up around his ears?"

"The fellow with the boxer shorts," I said.

"You're sure, Cleo?"

"His thing hanging out."

“Let him say something over the phone.”

“Floss, why?”

“I want to be sure it’s not Archie.”

“You won’t take my word?”

“When I get in one of these states, Cleo, nobody’s word means a thing. I know I’ve been avoiding you lately, but I need to talk to someone, and since you know about Archie and me, I feel I can unburden myself freely.”

“Of course you can. I’m happy you called. I want to be your friend.”

“If you want to be my friend, put that man on the phone and make him say something so I’ll know it’s not Archie who’s with you. You have to do this for me. I’m in one of my states. When I get like this, I insist that people indulge every paranoid whim that pops into my mind.”

“That’s why your life isn’t exactly overcrowded with friends.”

“Fuck friends,” she said. “This is fear and terror we’re dealing with.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“First put that fellow on the phone and make him say something.”

What could I do but shrug my shoulders, call Shaver to the phone, and ask him to say something?

“Hi,” he said.

I could hear Floss’s voice: “*Not nearly enough. Make him say more.*”

“Walla Walla, Washington,” he said.

Floss said: “*More. Give me more. I need to be absolutely certain.*”

I pictured her with bulging eyes, practically bald from having her hair cut twice a day, and wearing black rings on every finger.

“Give her more, Shaver.”

“My full name is Charles William Stevens. They call me Shaver because that’s what my dad called me when I was little. Little shaver.”

I took the phone.

"All right?" I said.

"Thank you, Cleo. That was sweet of both of you. I'm already calming down."

"Now tell me what's been bothering you."

"It's Archie. What else? He wants to call it quits."

"Why?"

"He said he doesn't get the same perverse wallop he used to get out of our Monopoly games."

"Did you see him?"

"He called. He's in Sri Lanka. He said the games were great, and he'll always think fondly of his sweet old Aunt Glad, but the old debased feeling just isn't there anymore. The unnatural, slimy, incestlike pleasure."

"Maybe that's just more of his understated humor."

"He was serious. Cleo. He said he'll never really grow up until he stops playing Monopoly with me. He's right, of course. I don't know what I'm going to do. I count on Archie's visits. The time we spend is precious to me."

"Maybe you can spend time without playing Monopoly."

"It would never work."

"I guess you're right."

"When you share something this deeply neurotic with someone, you can't just cut it out of your lives and expect to continue seeing each other in a different light and on a different level. Being abnormal with someone is so deeply ingrained in both of you that not to be abnormal would be even more abnormal. The tension would be fantastic. My God, I am two decades older than Archie. Can we sit around talking tennis?"

"I guess not."

"I've sat across the table from this young man, this *boy*, really, absolutely naked except for one brassiere cup which I would be holding with one hand while I moved the little green race car around the Monopoly board with the other. We're supposed to take walks on the beach at Montauk?"

"No."

"We're supposed to drink Perrier water with lime slices?"



"No, Floss."

"Shakespeare in the park?"

"I guess not."

"This boy and I are supposed to go antiquing in Connecticut? We're supposed to toss a Frisbee in the Sheep Meadow?"

"What you need is a good night's sleep."

"I need to get out of this business. I need to get away."

"I agree."

"I look like *Death in Venice*. People get on the elevator and shrink away from me."

"Maybe Archie will change his mind."

"He's too intelligent. He'd have to be crazy to change his mind."

"You ought to get away, definitely."

"I ought to get out of this business. It's no longer a challenge. I need something totally obsessive. The way to survive this crisis is to throw myself mind and body into some compulsively demanding preoccupation. Something I can totally immerse myself in. It has to be something that will occupy me from the core of my being to the very tips of my fingers."

"I was going to suggest a weekend in Saint Thomas."

"It has to be something that no one else could succeed in because no one else would be willing to pay the emotional and physical price. When my toy bulldog died, I became an athlete's agent. I totally immersed myself. I became obsessive. I looked like *The Grapes of Wrath*. I have to go beyond that now. It's the only way. I'll let you know what happens. We'll have lunch if I can spare the time."

It was about this time that my memories of Badger started getting stronger, more frequent. It was like a pull from the ocean. Time, consciousness etc. It was as though I somehow sensed that I would need a mental refuge in the days and weeks to come.

Home.

My mother taught Latin three days a week at the Catholic school in Toms Ferry, across the river. There weren't enough nuns

to go around so they had to bring in someone in a polka-dot dress. Both my parents come from families that have been stark Presbyterian as far back as anyone's bothered to count, but my mother learned some Latin from a quirky aunt who had ancient Rome on the brain, and Dorothy (Mom) stayed interested right into adulthood.

Latin was something to be preserved, like good manners or elm trees, and I think she also liked the fact that no one actually spoke the language. Just by conjugating verbs with a bunch of kids in Toms Ferry, she was keeping something alive.

Around the house, she and my dad would occasionally bat around some Latin phrases or roots or common endings—in his case totally made up, like, "Pass the saltus, please." My father was like that. He would be purposely unfunny. This lack of funniness was supposed to be funny, but it hardly ever was. Tom Spencer Birdwell, as he liked to call himself, was at the mercy of his own corny sayings and bad jokes. Not that anyone minded. It was humor, even if it wasn't funny, and I think it made our house a more cheerful place.

What my mother really excelled in, more than Latin, was the Christmas holidays. She was the five-star general of Christmas. Picking out the cards, making the gift lists, shopping for the tree. Searching out the proper turkey, decorating the tree, baking up a storm. Helping organize the carolers, keeping an eye on the Nativity scene my dad and I would put together on top of a big Chippendale table in the living room.

We all took part, we all had plenty to do, and plenty of fun doing it, but Dorothy was the driving force. She cared about Christmas, and standards, and neatness, and precision, and doing things right, and customs, and tradition, and never settling for second best.

Did I tell you about my older brother?

We had the same cute nose. Aside from that, we differed, I'd say, in all the right ways. Which means we got along and liked each other without being treacly about it. Kenny grew up awkward. Even running, a simple thing like that, he'd make one long

stumble out of it. In school he ranged from brilliant to dumb. Nobody could figure it out. He was shy and polite, but he had a streak of daredevil in him, too. He learned to drive at the age of nine, thanks to some old guy who used to hang around the drugstore and who took a liking to him. He stole his first car at the age of eleven—just a joyride around the block and what gets me is that he kept it a secret for about six months, or until he drove off with his second car and got caught. After Tom and Dorothy took turns whamming him around the house, he gave me that shy little smirk of his and told me about the first car—a big silver Buick with those antennas that stuck off the sides to tell you electronically when you were nearing the curb.

Kenny didn't skate. I can't remember ever seeing him down by Snowy Owl Glen, not even in summer when I used to wade in the brook and collect the smooth stones that lay on the bottom. The dammed-up part was too deep for wading—maybe six to ten feet—and according to legend, giant snapping turtles were supposed to dwell there—great, slow-moving hulks silently paddling through the murk. Of course this was the part we skated on, solidly frozen by the end of November. More than one older kid reminded me in my early days as a wobbling, swaddled babe that if the ice broke and I fell through, I wouldn't have to worry about drowning or double pneumonia because those big, dark, shadowy snapping turtles would have my rear end bitten off in about six seconds flat.

No, Kenny didn't skate. If Kenny had skated, his ankles would have collapsed completely inward, as if he thought the blades were on the sides of his feet, and he would have spent a whole lot of his time just crawling toward the banked-up sides of the rink, which can be fun in and of itself.

My brother's big love was UFOs. That and dolphins. He spent a fair part of his adolescence standing motionless in the woods waiting for some silvery, beeping contraption to come hover in a clearing nearby. Don't think he didn't have a camera along. He subscribed to a lot of UFO journals and newsletters, and he had UFO pen pals in about nineteen states and Canada.

He'd worn glasses since the age of four, and he was the first

person in Badger to come around in those little rimless spectacles that everyone started wearing during the Vietnam War, as if looking like a Quaker would absolve us.

Eventually he also grew the beard and wore the clothes. This was the time when practically every male American under the age of thirty-five looked exactly the same. The little rimless spectacles. The full-faced but modest beard. The alert, gentle, frightened, socially conscious eyes. The shambling walk. The jeans, the heavy work shirts, the gum boots.

I kept seeing young guys I thought were Kenny. Not just at first glance, either. I would go up to them and scrutinize their faces and say, "Ken, Ken, are you my brother Ken?" It was a real look-alike generation. They'd all grown up awkward, I guess.

And they all had a thing for dolphins. I don't know what it was about dolphins, but I guess other civilizations had their centaurs, two-headed dogs etc. Kenny used to ransack the new library on Library Road for books and periodicals about marine life, especially experiments with dolphins, or dolphins as biocomputers, or what dolphins are saying to us. Also, his room was usually full of books whose titles included words like modality, phenomena, feedback, electrophysical, cognitive, spatial, astral, sensory and psychodynamic.

I skated on the pond. My skates were *white*. I have the pictures, still.

Shaver met our plane when the team came back from Atlanta. He and I went outside to get a taxi. There were eight or nine people in front of us. As we waited, Shaver raised one leg behind him and looked back at the bottom of his shoe. Then he did four deep knee bends. The line started moving and we advanced several places. Shaver did two more deep knee bends. He clapped his hands.

Halfway into town, he took a piece of gum out of his mouth and stuck it to the plastic shield between the front and rear seats.

The next day I went to a studio on the West Side to shoot a commercial for a Hughes Tool subsidiary that made whirlpool baths. About fifty people were there, walking around, yelling, rearrang-

ing the set, mostly drinking coffee out of Styrofoam cups.

Glenway Packer, who was Floss's associate, came over and helped guide me through the chaos to a relatively quiet spot. Glenway was a tall, well-dressed, middle-aged man with a shaved head and light blue eyes. Floss was always saying he had "beautiful manners." Certainly he had beautiful fingernails—they gleamed—and beautiful shoes and a beautiful crease in his trousers. An impeccably turned out person, I believe is the phrase.

He gave me the script. I read the audio part first.

*You know me. Property of the New York Rangers. That's right, Cleo Birdwell. I shoot pucks for a living. But once I climb down off my skates, I like to sit in my Primal Vortex and feel the tingling excitement of nature's own fluid fingers. It is like the first woman's first experience. Primal.*

There was more, but I skipped over to the video portion of the script.

It seems they wanted me sitting in this whirlpool, eating an apple, and showing *moderate to heavy* cleavage.

"Floss didn't approve this," I said.

"Floss is on extended leave."

"I know she is. And I know I'm not doing this commercial. My cleavage stays where it is. Inside my shirt."

"It's a reasonably deft little twenty-second cameo, I thought."

"Glenway, forget it."

"It could create a small sensation. Granted, that business about 'nature's own fluid fingers' is a bit sillier than it absolutely has to be. But I think the apple is deft. The apple is fun."

A sort of elegant drawl crept along the underside of his voice. He offered me a cigarette from a silver and black case that looked expensive enough to have the relics of a saint inside it. He took one himself and tapped it expertly on the closed case before lighting it with something that resembled a prizewinning Scandinavian utensil.

"I want to talk to Floss."

"Cleo, you can't. It is simply not feasible."

"Whatever it is she's up to, she'd tell you how to get in touch with her. Get in touch with her."

“Cleo, she is so far away. Getting in touch would be tedious and boring. We told these people we’d be here to shoot their commercial. The money is substantial.”

“Why didn’t somebody see the script before today? I walk in the door and they want cleavage. Glenway, I’m a hockey player.”

“Well *I* saw the script and *I* thought it was a damned piquant little idea. We’re nearing the end of the century. What is cleavage? People out there have seen everything on their TV screens up to and including the male reproductive organs swinging slowly to and fro. Don’t tell me it was just a bunch of nomadic goatherders on some National Geographic special. The industry has matured, Cleo.”

“Go swing *your* organs. I’m a hockey player.”

“No one’s asking you to swing any organs. We protect our clients. This is simply *cleavage*. The water will be well above your nipples. Lord, it is no more naughty than a World War II pinup.”

“Where is Floss?”

“If I could explain to you, in less than half a day, how exceedingly tedious it would be to have to contact Floss Penrose, I would gladly do it. But the explanation alone would demand more of me than the good Lord in his wisdom has seen fit to instill. Floss is my oldest and dearest friend. But she doesn’t approve everything that passes across my desk. This commercial will be good for you, good for Primal Vortex, good for Hughes Tool, good for us all. Good business, good fun. It is the merest of cleavages these playful little admen are calling for.”

“Moderate to heavy, Glenway, it says here.”

“Cleo, no nipple. Isn’t that the crux of the matter? Think about it. *No nipple.*”

“The crux of the matter is, do I even want to get in that thing?”

“Kind of late in the game to be backing down conceptually. I can empathize with nipples. But the concept, Cleo—they are selling a whirlpool device and it is no more than basic merchandising sense to demonstrate the product in use.”

“You’re right,” I said. “I never even thought about what I’d have to do.”

"I am right about the concept, I am on equally sound ground in the matter of cleavage."

"I'd feel so dumb."

"We all feel dumb, most of the time. This is not sufficient cause to cancel a shooting. Believe me, there is dumb everywhere. We are surrounded by dumb. One simply plows through. This is called making one's way in the world."

"Where is Floss?" I said.

Glenway Packer sighed. He leaned way over, placed his cigarette on the floor, then ground it well into the cement with the tip of his beautiful shoe.

"You must know?" he said.

"I'd really like to talk to her. I really don't think she'd want me to do this commercial."

"She's in Sri Lanka," he said.

Sri Lanka? That's where Archie Brewster was. Which meant she'd changed her mind about some terrifically demanding new profession and had gone chasing after Archie, after all. By the time she got to Sri Lanka, he'd probably be in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, or one of the Benelux countries. Poor little Floss.

"If you've never placed a call to Sri Lanka," Glenway said, "you can't imagine the hazards and obstacles. Besides, she left no word as to exact whereabouts. We'd have to try *all* the hotels in the whole country. Obviously she doesn't want to be disturbed. What Floss needs least is to mediate a philosophical dispute pertaining to cleavage."

"I agree," I said. "Let's let her rest."

He seemed relieved that he wouldn't have to put through a call to Sri Lanka.

"All right, Cleo, let me try a different tack. It will take these people a while longer to get the set the way they want it. They are perfectionists. In the meantime, I will set out to win your goodwill by telling you that the Kelloid Company—of Battle Creek, Michigan, lest we forget—is about to introduce a new line of snack foods and they are considering you, Cleo Birdwell, as their spokeswoman. It is a gigantic market, they will make many

commercials, the gold will come sliding out in hot little ingots. Apparently all those pregame and postgame interviews you've been doing have impressed these people. They think you are the bee's knees. It is not yet settled. But I think they are definitely leaning your way. It is all very hush-hush. I fly to Battle Creek in a couple of days. More talks. Final word shouldn't be long in coming."

"I don't think I can do it, Glenway."

He turned his head sideways and then looked slowly, slowly up toward the ceiling.

"Pray, why not?"

"I eat Ralphies," I said.

"You eat what?"

"Ralphies. They're a terrific little junk food."

"Who makes them?"

"I don't know. Probably Ralphies and Co."

He looked directly into my face.

"You realize this is stupid."

"Yes, I do, but I think if I'm going to endorse some other junk food, it would be dishonest, because of the Ralphies. I eat them all the time. I couldn't go on television and say I eat these other things. Maybe I would eat the other things if they were good. But I would also eat Ralphies. I would eat Ralphies by a wide margin over anything else."

"You know how incredibly stupid this is," Glenway said. "You must know. I'm convinced you know."

"I do know, yes, but I can't help it if that's the way I feel. It is stupid. I agree with you. I see what you're saying. It is very, very stupid."

"I will go to Battle Creek anyway," he said.

"You probably should."

"I'm convinced you'll feel differently by then, if not sooner. Perhaps within the hour."

"I know it's stupid, Glenway. What I've been saying *is* stupid. Very stupid."

"It isn't stupidity that troubles me, Cleo. There is stupid every-



where. In this business, one eats and drinks stupid. One has stupid with one's coffee. There are massive doses of stupid coming from every direction, virtually around the clock. One dissolves two stupid in half a glass of water. So I don't mind stupidity. What I object to is misplaced stupidity. Do you see the distinction? You are using your stupid in an unworthy fashion. Your stupid deserves better than this. You are wasting it in a sense. You are misusing it. No one will see it for what it is."

"Where did you go to school, Glenway?"

"Yale," he said. "Why?"

I talked it over with Shaver and he agreed with me. In a way I was let down. I knew it was stupid. It *was* stupid. I wanted Shaver to tell me I was nuts not to do the Kelloid commercials if they chose me. Either do them or don't do them, I wanted him to say, but either way don't base your decision on a craving for Ralphies. How can anyone be loyal to a brand of junk food? But Shaver didn't say these things. He agreed with me. He backed every word.

As for Primal Vortex, he thought I should have done it. Just for fun, he said. Eat an apple in a whirlpool. The first woman's first experience. What's a little titty? That's what he said. When I told him I'd walked out and left everyone standing around with hammers and screwdrivers and hoses in their hands, he kept saying, "What's a little titty, what's a little titty?"

That night we went to a farewell party for Garden prexy James Kinross. It was true; he was being ousted, just as Sanders Meade had said on the Night of the Howling Snows.

The party was held in a private room in a restaurant near the Garden. About sixty people were there, including some Rangers, some Knicks, a few boxing people, some wives, a lot of executives. No Sanders Meade. No Hughes Tool.

There were hors d'oeuvres by the ton and a girl bartender in a Knicks warm-up suit that was unzipped more or less to her knees. Kinross sat spread out in a leather chair and people kept leaning over to shake his hand or peck him on the neck. He did a lot of laughing, coughing, and turning red.

When Tyrone Penny, the roundball legend, asked Kinross what his plans were, we were close enough to hear him say, "I'm gonna go home and blow my fuggin brains out." Then he hit the arm of the chair, coughed, laughed, bounced, and turned red.

Shaver and I went over to say hello. Kinross grabbed my hand and wouldn't let go.

"This kid is something, ain't she?"

Shaver smiled.

"I got a lech for this white woman. Look at her. What's she like in the sack? Seriously, she must be the all-time greatest thing since the Chinese did it sitting down in hammocks. I bet she's like semi-sweet butter. No fooling, what's she like? I bet you never stop doing it, God bless you kids, first thing in the morning, right? The neighbors can't believe it, they got a trampoline act living upstairs. God bless you both, all kidding aside, I wish I had your youth, your energy, your ideals. That's what I miss about getting older, in all seriousness—youth. I miss youth. I bet you do it in the bathroom, in the elevator, standing up, sitting down, sideways, God love you, I wish you the best of everything, you deserve it, and anybody tells you different I'll open their fuggin heads."

Shaver began shuffling his feet.

"Hell shit, she looks to me like it's no holds barred. That's the way they are, these farm-fresh types. Hunks of pure white butter. She's sly, this Birdwell. She's got a little devil in her. Am I right, or what?"

Shaver's smile grew paler and more strained.

"God bless you kids today, with none of the hangups that plagued my generation. You do it in fuggin treetops if the wind's not too strong. Get yourselves some drinks. What are you drinking?"

We already had drinks and we were drinking them. Toby Scott came over to say hello. Kinross didn't let go of my hand.

"Toby, you little prick, thanks for coming. Where's that shit-ass Merle?"

"He's in the hospital. He may die."

"Yeah, well his voice will live on, like fuggin radioactive waste."

He hit the chair arm, laughing and coughing violently. "You two guys are something. Every time the opposition scores a goal, it's like the *Hindenburg* bursting into flames all over again. Were you actually weeping the other night, Toby, when that little jerk McLeod got beat up?"

"He's one of our guys," Toby said.

"The way he's been playing, they oughta run the Zamboni machine over his prone body. And you oughta do something about that squeal that comes out of your mouth, Toby. It's like listening to squirrels mate. This is advice that comes to you from a man who's gonna go home tonight and blow his own fuggin brains out, so you oughta consider it heartfelt and sincere. Have a drink. Get yourself a drink, Toby, you little bullet-eyed scumbag, God love you."

Kinross sat slumped there, red faced, sort of palpitating and out of breath, his free hand shaking—the other one still holding me in its grasp.

"Toby, what do you think of this Birdwell, an all-white woman like this? If we gave you a running start, it would still take you two weeks to lick her white body from head to toe. She's that tasty, right? You'd linger. You'd spread a second and third coat."

Toby looked down. Shaver gritted his teeth.

"Your tongue would never want to taste anything ever again. You'd starve to death inside a week. They'd find your shriveled body in the broadcasting booth, covered with cigarette butts and crushed paper cups. God love her, though, it'd be worth it, wouldn't it, to lick your way up and down that terrific torso. A man'd be content to spend his remaining days swallowing his own spit."

Kinross's mood changed when he saw Murray Jay Siskind come in. It was just like Murray to be the only reporter there, and to show up even though he'd often criticized the Garden management in print, and to be carrying in both arms the gigantic manuscript he took everywhere, even on the road, and which he referred to only as the Work in Progress.

Kinross yelled across the room.

“It’s the lunatic fringe of the fuggin terrorist media. He’s come to watch the corpse rot. He’s gonna squat over my grave to make sure I stay put.”

“Just wanted to wish you the best,” Murray said quietly.

Kinross still held me by the hand.

“Now that he’s got me dead in the snow, he’s gonna come and collect the entrails and take them home to his dog. Look, he’s carrying tomorrow’s column. I love your stuff, Murray. Very fuggin taut. Pounding excitement. It’s like watching eels migrate.”

He laughed and hit the chair arm and turned red and began coughing and spitting and gurgling. The crowd had parted so that there was a clear lane of confrontation between Kinross and Murray.

“I love your beard, Murray, where’s the upper half? No, seriously, I think pussy transplants are very attractive on a certain type of face. All kidding aside, you’ve got a big following, Murray, they use your stuff in remedial reading on Death Row, I hear. What are you drinking? Seriously, get yourself a drink. We’re all drinking people here. We came here to drink. Nobody came here to snoop around and sniff the remains. God love you, I know you’re just doing your job and I respect you for it, Murray, we’ve had some honest differences of opinion, you fuggin four-eyed media assassin, no hard feelings, it’s all in the past, God bless, drink up, what’s done is done. Did you ever catch the Chinaman who sold you those eyeglasses?”

While Kinross was coughing and sputtering, the crowd broke ranks and things returned pretty much to normal. A man went up to Tyrone Penny and asked him how the weather was up there. Tyrone spit on his head and told him it was raining.

I tried to pull away, but Kinross drew me even closer, telling me he wanted me to meet his son. He shouted across the room, and I watched a boy about seventeen make his way through the crowd. He had longish but neat hair, sport coat nipped in at the waist, plaid trousers, shirt collar worn outside the jacket.

“This is Jamie Kinross, my firstborn and best pal who puts up with me, God knows why. I embarrass him, but he knows it’s only

because I'm a crazy, unreformed drunk with no formal education. A terrific kid, Cleo, in all seriousness, and one of your biggest fans. He gets straight A's. He plays ball. He takes trumpet lessons. And he jerks off in moderation."

Kinross hit the chair arm and nearly fell off the chair laughing. Jamie looked at the floor. When Kinross started coughing, the phlegm sloshing around his throat made a sound like some radio broadcast from just out of receiving range. Jamie saw I was trying to break free, and while his father was preoccupied with choking and gasping, he gently lifted the fingers that circled my wrist.

We went and hid near the bar behind a dozen other people. Murray Jay was standing there with his manuscript.

"I've got to go, Cleo," he said.

"Okay."

"I'm doing a food piece. They need it in minutes. The paper's loosening up. Sportswriters doing food, food writers doing food, foreign correspondents doing food. Seriously, I'm delighted. Cooking is one of my passions."

"This is Jamie Kinross," I said.

"Hello, Jamie, what's it like?"

We heard Kinross across the room: "Who's not drinking? I'll open their fuggin heads."

"What's what like?" Jamie said.

"Being his son."

"It's all right. He provides. That's what the siblings expect of parents. We live in this super comfortable middle-class house in Long Island. When I was fourteen, I went through a stage where I hated it, I hated them, I hated comfort and security, I hated their cars, their TV sets, their burglar alarms, the way they talked, the way they walked. But now I know that was just a stage I had to go through. I'm going to be seventeen soon. I think I know enough to accept good fortune when it smiles. I like comfort and security. Who doesn't?"

While Jamie was talking, I had my eye on Shaver, who was diagonally across the room. He was standing alone. He shrugged his shoulders, jumped straight up in the air, and then did two deep

knee bends. A couple of people were looking at him. He lifted one leg back behind him and studied the bottom of his shoe. He did another deep knee bend.

“My peer group feels the same way,” Jamie said. “You’d have to be pretty immature not to. We have a preferred cabana at the Locust Valley Country Club. When I was fourteen, I thought that was the worst and most disgusting thing in the world. I never went. Now I go all the time. My father doesn’t go because they won’t let him in anymore. But the rest of us go. We go all the time. Why not? It’s a great place. There’s tennis, golf, and a really nice swimming pool. Everything is great except the french fries, which taste like the french fries you get in restaurants in state parks.”

“I really have to run,” Murray said.

We watched him leave. I wasn’t sure how to handle this. I was afraid even to look. I looked. Shaver was talking to Toby Scott. He was blowing on his ginger ale. Shaver was. Toby was busy talking. When he quit blowing on his ginger ale, he sipped it slowly and cautiously, as if it was hot, hot coffee. But it had ice in it. It was ginger ale on the rocks.

I smiled at Jamie and said something vague and stupid about having to get my beauty sleep, and then I went over and smiled some more and took Shaver off to one side and told him I thought we ought to be leaving.

Toby had sidled up in his pudgy, rat-eyed way, and overheard. “You can’t leave now.”

“Why not?” Shaver said.

“Mr. Kinross has a little speech he wants us all to hear. It’s something he’s worked on. Under all the bluster, Mr. Kinross is pretty sincere about things like friendship and loyalty. He’s a Christian and I’m a Christian, and aside from all the abuse he gives me in public and in private, we have a pretty solid common base of fellowship and love.”

What could I say? We stood around and waited until Kinross got up to address the group. A lot of people went “Sh, sh, sh” until they were the only ones making noise.

“This is what they call a soldier’s farewell,” Kinross said. “I’m

going out on my shield, with my fuggin brains all over the Einstein Moomjy rug. That's okay, it's only right and proper, I opened my share of heads in my time. That was the real combat—not this corporate horseshit of moving people in and easing people out. Nobody remembers the streets the way they used to be. We were the guys. Everybody stepped out of our way. Our own mothers were afraid of us. We walked the streets like Vikings. Hell shit, we used to grab alley cats, stuff them in burlap sacks and swing them against the light poles. Self-preservation. You could do things without people telling you you're ruining the environment. We used to build little wooden scooters with orange crates and skate wheels. You'd have the box standing upright on a single plank with the skate wheels under the plank and you'd put one foot on the plank and use the other to scoot along with. You'd nail V-shaped handles to the top of the crate. And you'd build a little shelf inside the upright box and you could put things in there, like the little wooden gun with the nails and the rubber band that shoots these tiny linoleum squares that can put out a fuggin eye if you aim it right, and your little bag of marbles, your immies, your puries and so on, and the ball of tinfoil from cigarette packs that you were saving for the war effort—stuff like that. I loved my little wooden scooter. We owned the fuggin streets. We used to play Buck Buck, which in faggy neighborhoods they called Johnny on a Pony or some shit-ass thing like that. Every now and then we used to stoop over and let some guy come tear-assing across the street and go leaping into the air and then we'd all scatter out of the way and the poor bastard would land on the concrete and break a wristbone or two. Fuggin nuns got out of the way for us. We used to play football wearing combat boots. We stomped the shit out of each other. We played in the street, on actual concrete, blocking, tackling, stomping, no such thing as penalties, and when the street was full of ice we played on the ice, guys getting hit and skidding right along on their backs, guys skidding under parked cars, moving cars, Mack trucks, station wagons with real wood on the sides, cars with running boards, Packards, DeSotos, LaSalles, Hudson Hornets, guys stomping and trampling each other, forgetting all about

the football to stomp, to trample, to kick, guys swinging cats in burlap sacks against the light poles, in the fuggin ice and snow, in the freezing twilight, turning purple with cold, in combat boots.”

He sat down, all red and trembling and out of breath. We were standing around stiff-legged like mourners lost in thought. Shaver whispered to me, “Immies and puries?”

I shrugged.

“Station wagons with real wood?” he whispered.

What could I do but shrug again?

Later that same night, Shaver sat up in bed eating Ralphies, with little Ralphie crumbs all over his bare, blondish chest. I sat next to him reading about myself in *Hockey News*.

It was a sub-zero night and cold in the apartment, but Shaver had just undressed as usual, walked around in his boxer shorts, brushed his tongue, and acted pretty much as though it was summertime down south. I guess those winters in Red Deer had hardened him and toughened him.

I had a feeling we were both going to need all the hardness and toughness we could muster.

“Don’t we have something to talk about, Shaver?”

“What’s that?”

“The things you’ve been doing. You know.”

“What things?”

“You know. Looking at the bottom of your shoe. Deep knee bends.”

He took a Ralphie out of the bag, then dropped it back in.

“Ridiculous, isn’t it?” he said.

“How long have you been doing these things?”

He looked away from me, toward the bathroom door.

“Close to two years now.”

“How often does it happen?”

“Comes and goes.”

“You mentioned a doctor once. I want to talk to him.”

“Won’t help, Cleo.”

“What’s his name?”



“Sidney Glass.”

“Is he an authority on this thing?”

“There are no authorities. The only authorities are track coaches, high-jump coaches, coaches of looking at the bottom of your shoe.”

“It’s unlike you, Shaver, to be bitter. Depressed and mopey, yes, but not bitter. Are there other people who suffer from this?”

“Untold thousands, in every walk of life. That’s what Dr. Glass says. He says it’s the great medical secret of our time.”

“What’s this thing called?”

“Never mind what it’s called. The name is worse than the dumb disease. Even if they cured me of the disease, it would still take me years to get over the name.”

“Might as well tell me. I’ll find out anyway.”

“Jumping Frenchmen.”

I couldn’t help laughing. I didn’t want to laugh, but out it came.

“See?” he said.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s no worse than we deserve, people who have it. It’s the name a dumb disease like this ought to have.”

“Okay, with a straight face I have to ask, why is it called Jumping Frenchmen?”

“It’s not very interesting. About a hundred years ago, a neurologist identified the condition in some French Canadians who lived in northern Maine and Quebec. It’s a multiple tic syndrome. There’s a hundred variations. These Frenchmen acted as though they were jumping away from a kicking horse. For a while the syndrome was called Kicking Horse. But I guess somebody decided that wasn’t colorful enough. I don’t know what else to tell you, Cleo. I’m not one of those people who gets all caught up in the progress of his own disease. I don’t go to libraries or write letters to doctors in Switzerland. I’m not that fascinated by it. I just wish it would go away.”

“At least we’re getting somewhere.”

“Where are we getting?” he said.

“You’re talking about it. That’s got to help.”

“How does it help?”

“Doesn’t it make you feel better, talking to me about it, getting it out in the open?”

“No.”

“It’s not like you to be contrary, Shaver.”

He curled up under the covers, his back to me.

“Talking about it makes me feel worse,” he said. “Getting it out in the open makes me feel even worse than talking about it.”

“Well, they’re one and the same, aren’t they?”

“Let’s not split hairs, Cleo.”

“All right.”

“With a sick man, you don’t split hairs. You give a sick man the benefit of the doubt. He needs that leeway or he’s liable to crack. You don’t use logic or common sense on a sick man. There’s only one way to treat him—like a child. You let him have his way every time. He needs more than compassion. Compassion is available just about anywhere, from anyone. Phone companies establish special lines for people who need emergency compassion. All you have to do is pick up the phone and a trained counselor will show all the compassion you could ever want or need. What a sick man really counts on is getting his way, every time, right or wrong. When you have a sick man on your hands, you have to forget about your own life, your own needs and wants and fulfillments. That’s why I didn’t want to talk about it or get it out in the open. I didn’t want you to feel you had to sacrifice your own life on my behalf. But now it’s out. It’s in the open. We’ve talked about it. I don’t feel better and you don’t feel better. It doesn’t make me feel better to know that you now realize how much care I need and how much you will have to sacrifice in order to let me get my way, right or wrong, I should feel better, but I don’t. I guess that’s how sick I am.”

He was asleep in a short time. All you have to know about the rest of that night is that I found it pretty hard getting back to the magazine I’d been reading even though the major story was about me, even though the face in the picture was my face.

I've always tried to have a sense of humor about my life. I've tried to see the humor in difficult, weird, or outright insane situations. I laugh at myself whenever I get the chance. This is what we grow up believing is a good way to go through life. It is smart, easygoing, noble, American etc. And I still believe it, and I hope I'll always believe it.

But I have to report, as a factual matter, that my confidence in this belief was, as they say, badly shaken and sorely tested many times during the next few weeks.

First, during the Conference on Jumping Frenchmen, arranged and more or less presided over by Dr. Sidney Glass. Then, during the Rangers' longest road trip of the season—a period I would come to think of as Fifteen Days in the Land of the Lost.

But first I took the Ralphies into the living room so that I wouldn't wake up Shaver, munching.

# 6



*S*IDNEY GLASS lived in a sprawling apartment that overlooked the East River. Houses are rambling, according to my mother. Apartments sprawl.

Living along the river is something they kill for in New York. Someone will have to tell me why. Constant noise and auto fumes come sweeping up from the Drive. The river is ugly and full of unspeakable stuff pumped out by nearby hospitals. There's nothing on the other side but factories, cemeteries, barrenness, grayness, industrial haze, and PEPSI-COLA in neon.

Anyway, Dr. Glass ushered Shaver and me into the living room, looking a little amused at the fact that I'd insisted on meeting him and finding out more. He was a mild-looking man with glasses who seemed totally ordinary in every way except that he had a blond streak in his hair and wore a fancy neckerchief.

On all the walls, everywhere, were dozens of paintings. Mostly

abstract. The real thing. Just lines. Just squares. Just circles. All black. Practically all black. Huge, powerful, looming canvases.

"Friends and relatives have every right to find out all they can about this condition," Dr. Glass said, looking more amused than ever. "When time allows, I'm happy to answer any and all questions."

He winked at Shaver—a sort of Nelson Rockefeller wink. Hi, fella.

"What causes it?" I said.

"We don't know."

"Is there a cure?"

"None that we know of."

"Is there any treatment whatsoever?" I said.

"That's the most intelligent thing you can ask. That's a super question. We are experimenting with major tranquilizer groups, with megavitamins, with insulin, with electroshock, with acupuncture, with prolonged sleep. We've also done surgical experiments. We've severed facial nerves, for instance. We've gone into the brain. We've gone way in, and right out the other side. We've tried psychotherapy, group therapy, family therapy, gestalt therapy, scream therapy, and hypnosis."

"And?" I said.

He winked at Shaver.

"We're compiling data. That's all we can really do right now. It's a curious disease, obviously. All disease is curious in a way. We don't really know what disease is. When I go on the Carson show and say, 'We don't really know what disease is,' I feel a kind of warming interest in the studio audience. People respond to human qualities. How intriguing, they think. All those instruments and machines and minds and years of fund-raising and decades of research, and we don't know what disease is. People like hearing that. We're all grappling together with the mysteries of life and death. They're reassured to learn they're not the only ones with no answers. No one has the answers. There probably are no answers."

His daughter Mona came in, all bundled up against the cold.

She was a dark and moody-looking girl. Dr. Glass gave her some money and she went back out. She was ten years old, he said, and had her own apartment. It was right around the corner, in a large and well-managed building. He said he and his wife agreed that Mona needed special rearing. She tended to be too reliant on her parents and had come up hazy on some tests for ego reinforcement. It was also good for him and Natasha, he said. It gave them more time for their own work and enabled them to *channel* their affection to Mona instead of sort of slobbering it all over the place twenty-four hours a day. They wanted to give her quality time, not quantity time. Whenever they were dining in, without guests, they invited Mona over. They talked on the phone every day. Besides, she had a roommate. Her younger cousin Stephanie. Steph's parents were involved in messy divorce proceedings, and it was felt she'd be better off living with Mona for a while.

"Can it strike at any time?" I said.

"Another super question. Yes, it can, without warning. One day you are walking along window-shopping. The next, you are attempting to scrape your eyeball with a fork."

"And can it vanish at any time, without a trace?"

"It never vanishes," he said. "The only thing that can make it go away is God. Once you get it, as far as we know, you're stuck with it."

He winked at Shaver.

"At very best, all we can do at the present level of technology is reduce the number and duration of the symptoms. The thing's been around for hundreds of years, but we're really just beginning to separate and classify the many, many variations. Our friend Shaver has a mild form. Root symptoms only. The worst sufferers tend to imitate other people's sudden motions. This is called a startle response. There's a conference in the Bronx day after tomorrow. You're welcome to come along."

As we were getting dressed to leave, Dr. Glass's wife Natasha came in from the next room. She was a tall, long-striding woman wearing a black jersey, black pants, a lot of necklaces and chains, and dark, bold makeup, especially around the eyes. When she

was still three-quarters of the way across the room, she extended her arm to shake hands.

Dr. Glass explained that Natasha collected art. All the paintings in the apartment were things she'd picked out, tracked down, commissioned, discovered, lucked into, or outbid someone for.

We shook hands. She had a nice, toothy smile. Little primitive persons hung from some of the chains around her neck.

"I'm so glad I could say hello before you left," she told me. "I think it's such fun."

I wasn't sure what she meant by that, but I figured it must be hockey. Before she had a chance to say anything else, Shaver pointed to one of the larger canvases in the room. It was white and green with several broad, thick, jagged streaks of black.

"Explain the spoon," he said.

At first I didn't see it, but when I looked more closely, there it was, at the bottom right-hand part of the picture, attached to the canvas by glue or epoxy or whatever they use. A soup spoon. A real one. With little dribbles of green paint on it.

"What's it doing there?" Shaver said. "Explain it."

"Must I?" Natasha said.

Dr. Glass shrugged.

"Well it must be there for a reason," Shaver said. "I was brought up to believe people do things for reasons."

"You simply accept it for what it is," Natasha said.

"What is it?"

"A spoon. It is a spoon. You accept it as such. For some people, I suppose this requires a leap of faith."

Dr. Glass looked amused.

Shaver said, "The painter didn't just put it there because he had too many soup spoons around the house. It's not something he stuck there, meaning to come back and get it later when the soup was hot."

He sounded mad.

"Once upon a time," Natasha said, "these pictures may have been difficult. But we have gone way beyond their difficulties. We now know they are simple. The canvas is canvas. The paint is

paint. We respond to it as paint. And we respond to the spoon as a spoon. It is a spoon.”

“But what’s it doing there?” Shaver said.

I’d never seen him so mad. The veins in his neck were popping.

“But it’s so simple,” Natasha said. “Once upon a time, we might have worked and fought and struggled to come up with suitable explanations for the spoon. We might have searched for metaphors and images. We now know this isn’t necessary. It is a spoon. This is all we have to say, and it is almost too much. I can easily envision the day when it will be too much. The paint is paint. This is how we have learned to respond to it. And the spoon is a spoon.”

“The other paintings don’t have spoons,” Shaver said. “Explain that. If you can’t explain the spoon, explain no spoon.”

Dr. Glass winked at his wife. Hi, fella.

“But imagine every painting with a spoon!” Natasha cried, and she whirled, her arm sweeping the room. “How could we respond? Nothing but spoons! Intolerable!”

The both paused for a moment, probably to adjust mentally to the other person’s line of argument. We were all standing. I had one arm in my coat, the rest of the coat hanging behind me. Shaver had on his big, yellow snow hat.

“I still don’t know what it’s doing there,” he said.

Dr. Glass said, “What’s your nose doing in the middle of your face?”

“Shitty analogy, Sid,” his wife said. She shook her head. Took a long look at Dr. Glass. Shook her head again.

Shaver put his coat on.

“All right, why a spoon?” he said. “Why not a knife or a fork?”

He was furious.

“But don’t you see?” Natasha said. “Isn’t it obvious? You might as well use a knife or fork to slash the canvas. Where’s your eye? If my husband can learn to see, anyone should be able to. When it came to pictures, this man was a mutant. He was a butcher, visually. But when I saw what he was able to accomplish in his



own field, with no particular talent or special ability, and the man knows I feel this way, I was sure I could teach him to look at pictures. To be open and frank, and I love and respect the man, the man is not exceptional in any way. Sid is the epitome of average. All he did was latch on to a funny disease. I mean let's be brutally candid, that's what he did. And the man is famous in his field. He travels all over the world, and the man knows I say this openly to everyone, but he makes a career out of telling people that nobody really knows what disease is, and he goes on television all the time, late at night, mind you, very late, between roach poison commercials, but he gets on, he is there, this man Sid Glass, with that blond streak in his hair, telling America we don't really know what disease is. If this man can learn to see, anyone can."

Dr. Glass winked at me.

"What is there to see?" Shaver said. "All I see is a painting with a spoon stuck to it."

"Good, excellent," Natasha said. "We're finally getting somewhere. We now know this is precisely the way to respond. A painting with a spoon stuck to it. How simply, incisively put. We've never seen a spoon used this way. This is its power. It is providing us with a new way to look and see."

This really got him mad. He swept his hat right off his head. I could see a vein throbbing in his temple.

"How could that be well put? What's incisive about saying a painting with a spoon? That's the only thing you *could* say."

"In the past there were many things we might have said. We were seeing something different then."

"We were seeing a painting with a spoon!"

"We were seeing something wholly, entirely different," Natasha said very softly.

"It was a spoon then, it's a spoon now!"

"We responded to what we thought was *expressed* by the spoon, was *expressed* by the paint," she said in a whisper. "We didn't see the spoon itself. We didn't know how. We had to learn."

"How could anyone have to learn to see a spoon? What kind of

people don't see a spoon when it's right in front of them? Ten years go by and they finally realize it's a spoon. What kind of people?"

Little Mona came in, all bundled up.

"The toilet won't flush," she said.

I took advantage of the distraction to put Shaver's hat back on his head and get him started toward the door.

"You'll just have to cope, won't you?" Natasha told her little girl.

"Well, it won't flush and Stephanie's gotta go."

"Did you call the maintenance man?" Dr. Glass said.

"They said they couldn't come till four this afternoon. I told Stephanie to hold it in, but I don't think she can."

"She can go now and flush later," Dr. Glass said. "Did you ever think of that? We have guests, Mona. We can't interrupt every time you and Steph come up with some problem."

"We were just leaving," I said. "We're on our way."

Natasha disengaged herself and came with us to the door. She looked at Shaver.

"Don't make it harder than it is," she said quietly. "The paint is paint. It comes out of a tube, a can, an old milk carton. This is what we respond to—the fact that it is paint and that we now know it is paint. If Sid Glass can look at pictures, anyone can."

I took Shaver's arm and pulled him out toward the elevator.

Sanders Meade called.

"Cleo, it's good to hear your voice."

"Well, same here, I guess."

"I've wanted to talk to you, but I don't think we ought to be seen together, especially now."

"What's up?"

"It's official. I'm the new Garden president. Hughes Tool is announcing it at a press conference right now as a matter of fact."

"Why aren't you there?"

"They don't want me there. They're saying I'm snowbound in Boulder, Colorado, where I've gone on a pressing family matter. All morning they had people checking weather conditions all

over North America so they could find a place for me to be snow-bound on a fairly extended basis. For a while they actually wanted to *send* me to Boulder, but there are no flights in or out because of the snow.”

“Why don’t they want you at the press conference, Sanders, or is that none of my business?”

“They think the announcement will create a bad enough uproar in itself. If I’m there, I might try to be *too* bland, *too* non-committal, in order to offset the uproar caused by the announcement, and this in turn may arouse and provoke the media to say and do all sorts of things. I might be *so* colorless, *so* lacking in impact that they’ll start a crusade to bring back Kinross as much as they loathe and despise the man. They’re trying to ease me in. Hughes Tool. When can we get together, Cleo?”

“You just said we shouldn’t be seen.”

“In public, in public. We can get together quietly for dinner at my place or in some out-of-the-way restaurant. I haven’t forgotten Toronto and I’m pretty convinced you haven’t. I’d like to do it again. All of it. Or at least most of it. Much of it.”

“I’m kind of worn down, Sanders.”

“I can accept that.”

“I’ve had a lot of distractions lately and very little time to call my own.”

“That’s perfectly reasonable.”

“My brother’s birthday is coming up. I always get him something. He counts on it.”

“Absolutely. No problem. I understand completely.”

“Really?”

“Sure, sure, sure, sure.”

“And you don’t mind?”

“No, no, no.”

“Sanders, no fooling, best of luck in the presidency. I hope it works out the way you said it would.”

“What did I say?”

“You’d grow into the job. You’d be strong, not weak. You’d become your own man.”

“I said eventually.”

“I’m not putting a time limit on it.”

“I know, Cleo, but eventually can mean one month or ten years. It’s a pretty nebulous kind of word.”

“That’s probably why you chose it.”

“That’s probably why I chose it.”

Shaver and I were sitting around watching TV. He’d gotten over his big mad. Some people just have to stay away from modern art. They owe it to themselves. It makes them insane with rage, trying to figure out *why* someone would want to paint such a thing, or buy such a thing, or put it in a museum, and it could probably take years off your life if you spent enough time looking at these pictures. “Explain the spoon.” It could kill you faster than a California mudslide.

I knew Shaver was getting half-horny during some dance routine on the Puerto Rican channel. TV never does that to me. It is such a little staticky box. There were two dancers and they wore skimpy tops and had these long skirts down their flanks with big gaps front and back, and glittery briefs underneath, and they both had enormous bottoms, which is a thing in the warmer cultures, and I could tell Shaver was getting a little itchy because he started yawning, he went into a whole routine of drawn-out, mouth-twisting yawns, and this is what he does when he wants it.

“Let’s have a boob,” he said.

“What?”

“I want to heft some titty in my hand. Let’s throw one this way, okay?”

“Shaver, you creep.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can go along with all the hefting, fondling, and stroking you can come up with, but I’m frankly tired of having my parts referred to in that baby talk way of yours. Those are the words men invented for woman’s parts. I happen to be touchy about my parts in terms of how they’re referred to. Men use strong, virile words for their own damn parts, like *cock*, *prick*, *tool*, and *balls*. You know these words, I know these words. These are heroic words, practically, that you can imagine characters out of my-

thology using. It sounds to me like men were pretty careful picking these words for the slangy parts of their own bodies. Our parts all come from the Latin, but once they're put into slang, yours come out heroic and mine come out silly and demeaning. *Tit, twat, nookie, boob, pussy*. These are men's words for women. You know these words, I know these words. *Quiff, jum jums, bazooms*. These are the words handed out to women. The only one worth anything is *cunt*, and probably some woman came up with that one."

"I don't think *balls* is so heroic," he said.

"Compared to *nookie*? Who wants to be *nookie*? Who wants to have a *nookie*? *Balls* is tough. A ballsy guy is somebody you watch out for. I've been called ballsy myself for going into the corners, for standing up to guys trying to intimidate me. I'll take ballsy over tit and twat any day. Those are insects. Tits and twats. They hop around on top of dogs."

"Boy, sensitive," he said.

"Damn right."

We watched the set in dead silence for about forty-five minutes.

"Who do you wuv?" he said finally.

"Shut up."

"Do you still wuv me? Come on, who do you wuv?"

"We'll talk later."

"Just tell me who you wuv."

"I wuv you."

"And I wuv you," he said.

The Third Annual Conference of the North American Study Group on Jumping Frenchmen was held in the Trocadero-Starlite Ballroom in the West Farms section of the Bronx. A pretty sinister part of town. Shaver and I went up there on the subway, which was a Journey Into Fear in its own right.

Shaver told me that the Trocadero-Starlite, which was due to be razed, was owned by a man named Cristobal Guzman, whose teen-age daughter was a "jumper"—someone afflicted with

Jumping Frenchmen. Mr. Guzman had offered the use of his place rent free, and Dr. Glass quickly accepted since funds were a constant problem. Shaver bitterly pointed out that Dr. Glass hadn't been able to translate his TV appearances into cold cash in the form of public contributions.

The ballroom was a large, dusty place with sunlight streaming in through dirty windows and a bunch of folding chairs set up in front of a small bandstand. I guess they don't make places like that anymore. The ceiling must have been fifty feet high and there were murals of tropical beaches on the two longest walls.

About eighty people were in the ballroom when we arrived, and it still seemed empty. At first I couldn't tell the patients from their friends and relatives. But after a few minutes of strolling around and pretending to check out the architecture of the place, while shooting stealthy looks at this and that cluster of people, I realized the relatives and friends were the ones who were discussing the condition with lively interest—symptoms, medication, rumors of new cures. The patients usually stood at the edge of these animated groups, studying their own hands or just looking off into space.

It wasn't until I was in the place about five minutes that I noticed the first actual symptom. A middle-aged woman over at the far end of the ballroom started running in place. No one paid any attention. Then a man—*right near me*—put one pinky in the left corner of his mouth, one pinky in the right corner of his mouth, and he sort of raised up on his toes and puffed up his cheeks as if he was about to whistle through his fingers. Except he didn't even try to whistle. He just stood there with his pinky fingers in his mouth.

The woman stopped running in place. A teen-age girl—it might have been Ms. Guzman—took two steps back, four steps forward. A man touched her on the arm and she jumped back in fright. The man who touched her also jumped back, imitating her reaction perfectly, down to the last muscle twitch, it looked like.

I was a little stunned by this. I wanted to nudge Shaver and point these people out to him. But of course he knew all about it.

He was one of them. That's when the full impact hit me. *He is one of them*. It made me feel guilty, sad, ashamed, and dumb. It also made me feel like getting the hell out of there.

I couldn't understand how the other relatives and friends could be so animated and talkative and interested. It was as though they were standing around in a theater lobby just before the start of a world premiere. They were *enjoying* themselves.

On the other hand, why shouldn't they be interested? They were friends and relatives of people who needed to feel they weren't being neglected. Their interest was healthy. My desire to get out of there was awful—the exact opposite of enlightened.

The man with his fingers in his mouth did a deep knee bend.

If everyone felt the way I did, these poor people would be locked in attics and basements. I felt guilty just noticing the symptoms. No one else noticed. The other friends and relatives knew how to deal with this. I was an outsider, a superstitious fool from the Middle Ages.

Shaver and I took seats in the last row, like schoolkids afraid of being called on by the teacher. Judging by what he'd said, Shaver's feelings weren't too different from mine. He might have half preferred being locked in a basement room somewhere. We had to figure out a way to enjoy this thing.

What saved me from my own meditations was Dr. Glass walking in. There was a little gasp of joy from the friends and relatives, who immediately surrounded him, oohing and aahing. The patients stayed where they were.

Dr. Glass made his way through the crowd, as they say of candidates at political conventions, and went bounding up the stairs to the bandstand. People began filling the rows of seats.

A pigeon flew down from a roost somewhere in the ceiling and landed on the floor at the rear of the ballroom. There were sirens in the distance.

Dr. Glass wore a sober business suit and looked pretty anonymous, if you forget the blond streak. He nodded to this or that person in the crowd, and gave little waves to show people he recognized them. He spotted Shaver and winked.

The place quieted down.

"It's a nice turnout," Dr. Glass said. "This is gratifying. Last year at the Holiday Inn, we had a bomb threat to contend with and a lot of people never returned after the police cleared the hotel and cordoned off the area. But here we are and I'd like to extend a warm welcome both to jumpers and to their families and well-wishers, and at the same time to express the thanks of all of us to Señor Guzman, whose generosity and concern are a source of joy."

Dr. Glass peered into the audience, looking for Mr. Guzman.

"He does not come," a voice said. It was Guzman's daughter. "He is going up to Miami, Florida, to buy some unpainted cars."

"Miami is down, Maria, not up," Dr. Glass said. He looked amused.

"Up, down, a car is a car. My mother is here. She want to stand up."

A woman next to the girl stood up. Nobody knew why she was standing up. Finally Dr. Glass clapped his hands lightly, there was a smattering of applause from the crowd, and the woman sat down.

"Thank you," Dr. Glass said to her. "Our felicitations to the señor."

Someone was still applauding.

"My opening remarks will be brief," Dr. Glass said.

I realized he was palming an index card in his left hand. He shot a quick look at it.

"In a fifteenth-century Malay manuscript, we first come across mention of a condition whose symptoms are not unlike those which characterize Jumping Frenchmen."

The person still applauding was a woman about forty-five, expensively dressed and kind of stocky. The sound she made, of slowly clapping small hands, was poignant and lost and haunting in the vast ballroom.

A man sitting in front of us started clapping. No one paid attention. Dr. Glass went on with his opening remarks, never even glancing at the people applauding.



He finished the historical background and looked at his index card.

“What about the clinical picture?” he said. “Well, as I said on the Carson show last week, I said, ‘Johnny, we don’t know what the clinical picture is.’ ”

We heard a police siren right outside. Dr. Glass paused until the sound faded away.

“I said, ‘John, we have fright neurosis, we have startle response, we have the whole kit and caboodle of hysterical features, psychic contagion, and so on. But the fact remains there is no good reason on God’s green earth why people should have this disease, or any disease for that matter.’ ”

The doctor paused. His eyes swept the audience.

“I know from your comments earlier that a lot of you stayed up to watch the show. You heard me say, ‘John, disease is abnormal. Nobody knows why people get sick. This is one of the great, great mysteries.’ ”

The pigeon flew back up onto a ledge.

“Next Tuesday,” Dr. Glass said, “I’m taping a segment for Armed Forces Radio.”

We were down to one person applauding, the original stocky woman. Dr. Glass looked at his index card. The hall streamed with winter light.

“What I like to tell interviewers is that untold thousands suffer from Jumping Frenchmen. People in all walks of life. Every social station. Every income bracket. Many won’t admit there’s something odd about the way they behave. Many don’t *know* they’re jumpers. How many times have you seen someone in a public place bend over for no apparent reason, or raise an arm in the air, or walk at a rapid pace. Normal gestures? Or symptoms of Jumping Frenchmen? It is not always easy to tell.”

Maria Guzman stood up and started running in place. Her mother kept her eyes on the bandstand.

“Aren’t we all jumpers in a sense? Don’t we all lose our sense of motor control, for a split second, now and then, during our waking day? I think we have to recognize that the clinical jumper is

different in degree, but not in kind, from the rest of us. In line with this, and to foster a sense of togetherness, I'd like all of you to turn to the person on your right and say, 'I am a jumper, I am a jumper, I am a jumper.' All of us, friends and relatives as well as clinical jumpers. Come on. 'I am a jumper, I am a jumper, I am a jumper.' "

We all turned to the right and saw the same thing. The back of someone's head. The only exceptions were people at the far right end of each row—they saw nothing but a dusty mural. On the bandstand, Dr. Glass was swaying rhythmically and repeating, 'I am a jumper.' Finally he realized what was wrong and he had some of us turn to the right and some of us turn to the left, so that most of the people were face to face with someone.

Everyone was chanting, "I am a jumper, I am a jumper," and clasping hands, and embracing sitting down.

"Let's get out of here," Shaver said.

"I am a jumper," I told him.

"He did the same thing last year. We all turned to the right."

"I think we ought to give it a try."

"I hate these people and I hate myself," Shaver said.

"They're just trying to express solidarity. It's a little like hockey. You stick up for your mates. When Jeep goes over the plastic, we all follow."

"That's the dumbest thing you've ever said, Cleo. 'It's a little like hockey.' I wish Dr. Glass would go over the plastic."

"I am a jumper," I said.

"I'd really like to leave. If the streets around here were a little safer, I'd go find a phone booth and call in a bomb threat."

Everyone was chanting joyously, "I am a jumper, I am a jumper." It was very emotional, with a lot of embracing, and tears of joy, and release of pent-up feelings. Against my better judgment, I felt myself getting a little swept up in it all.

"I am a jumper," I said again.

"Will you please shut up?" Shaver said. "If you don't shut up, I'll walk out and leave you here."

"I'm just giving it a try," I whispered.

“Well, it’s stupid, so stop it.”

“I know it’s stupid, but you have to do something.”

“You have to stop acting stupid, that’s what you have to do. You’re not a jumper. All those relatives aren’t jumpers, either.”

Dr. Glass dipped his knees and swayed. He used his right hand to sort of orchestrate the chanting.

“I am a jumper, I am a jumper.”

Finally the thing began to peter out. Two pigeons flew around just below the ceiling. People stopped embracing, and gradually the hall grew quiet.

Maria Guzman ran in place. She’d been running in place all through the chanting episode. No one had tried to embrace her. The relatives knew how to deal with this thing.

“That was gratifying,” Dr. Glass said. “Next time I do the Carson show, I’d like to try it with the studio audience. The Los Angeles area is rich in jumpers. It’s just a question of getting the producers to let me sprinkle the audience with local jumpers and then to do the whole thing just as we did it here.”

He flashed a look at the index card.

“Now, some big news. You’ve all heard me talk about new techniques in the freezing of brain cells. Well, today, we have the great good fortune of having with us, in just a short, short while, as he makes his way up from the Plaza where he always stays when he’s in New York, and I can tell from the shiver of anticipation running through the audience that some of you have already guessed who I’m talking about—that’s right, from Johns Hopkins University and the ‘Today’ show, we’ll hear in minutes from Dr. Raymond Posey, the world’s leading authority on cell-freezing.”

There were oohs and aahs from the audience.

We heard fire engines nearby. There was another police siren and the sound of screeching tires. The winter sun streamed through the large, dirty windows. You could see tons of dust swimming in the weak beams of light.

The clapping woman was still at it.

“What we hope to hear from Dr. Posey is an analysis of ways to use cell-freezing in the fight against Jumping Frenchmen. It should be a fascinating presentation.”

A man stood up, one of the relatives.

“Specifically, doctor, how are brain cells frozen?”

“Specifically, we don’t know. No one knows. We don’t understand the mechanism well enough. The brain is a marvel of engineering, but of course we didn’t engineer it, so a lot of mysteries remain. We know that we *can* freeze cells in the brain, but we’re not sure *how* we do it, specifically. There are some general rules of thumb, however, and I’m sure Dr. Posey will be happy to go over these with us. Ray Posey’s your man on that.”

A woman sat with her pinkies in her mouth and her cheeks puffed up. Maria Guzman sat down. The man behind her touched her arm and she jumped in fright. The man himself then jumped in fright. No one paid attention.

Dr. Glass looked at his watch.

“While we’re waiting for Dr. Posey, it might be a good idea to take a short break and just do a little visiting. I know the relatives and well-wishers like to mingle and compare notes, and of course I try to make myself available whenever we have these get-togethers for any and all questions. So why don’t we do that?”

The stocky woman still clapped hands.

Dr. Glass came down off the bandstand and was immediately engulfed by relatives with comments and questions. Other people got together in small groups all over the ballroom. Shaver and I just stood by our seats, stretching and yawning. Five feet away, a tall man lifted one leg back behind him and studied the bottom of his shoe.

“Seen and heard enough?” Shaver said.

Maria Guzman took two steps backward, then four steps forward in order to join a small group of well-wishers. No one noticed her means of arrival.

I was finishing a series of yawns and stretches that were practically acrobatic when I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. It was a roach, and it was crawling right up the boot on my left foot. I shook my leg, but it kept right on climbing. I used the other foot to kick it off, and then I stomped it to death.

“Well?” Shaver said. “Seen enough? Want to go?”

The tall man nearby started shaking his left leg.

"I think we ought to hear what Dr. Posey has to say," I told Shaver. "Not that I think it applies to your situation."

The man kicked himself in the leg, then started stomping on the floor.

"Why doesn't it apply to my situation?"

"Your situation is mild. Dr. Glass said so at his apartment. Nobody's going to want to freeze your brain cells."

Four jumpers in various parts of the hall were shaking their left legs. Several others had already done this and were now kicking themselves. The tall man nearby was ending his second cycle, stomping again.

Pigeons flew through the dying light.

"I have root symptoms," Shaver said. "This means I'm not subject to other people's sudden motions. It doesn't mean they won't want to freeze my brain."

I counted eleven people kicking themselves in the leg. None of the relatives paid the slightest attention. We heard more fire engines.

I had the impression that most of the relatives were pretty excited about these cell-freezing techniques. I took Shaver on a little reconnoiter around the room. No doubt about it. The relatives were *thrilled* by the idea that their sons, mothers, sisters etc. might soon be undergoing this terrific freezing of brain cells.

I know it's wrong to say they were thrilled, but that's what it seemed like to me. They were more than interested, they were more than excited. They were thrilled. They *wanted* it.

We were down to nine kickers and stompers. Only one dead roach as far as I could tell.

Well, why shouldn't they want it? It might be the cure everyone's been waiting for. By saying they were thrilled, maybe I'm just trying to make up for my own unenlightened attitude.

But why did the relatives seem to *thrive* on this disease?

I tried to see it from their viewpoint. All they were doing was getting excited about a possible cure. But wasn't it possible to get *too* excited? Wasn't it possible to be *too* enlightened?

The jumpers just stood around—those who weren't still kicking

themselves in the leg. It was only the relatives who were involved. Were they *too* involved?

Shaver veered off to talk to a young couple he apparently knew.

One thing was sure. The relatives had learned to pay no attention to the jumpers. They'd learned well. The jumpers could have been in Miami with Cristobal Guzman, buying unpainted cars.

Were the relatives *using* the jumpers? What were they using them for?

Was it possible that the sicker a jumper got, the healthier the relatives got? Is this why they seemed to thrive? Is this why cell-freezing was such a thrill?

I must have been crazy to think such things. They were just relatives. They were well-wishers. They wished to see the jumpers get well.

But what if Dr. Glass had said that Dr. Posey had come up with a possible cure based on vitamin C? Would the relatives be *this* thrilled, *this* excited?

They wanted frozen brain cells.

It was wilder, it was more dramatic, it was sexier. It gave them something to get really involved in. It gave them something to talk about. It brought them to life. It made them live and breathe.

The lone clapper applauded in the semidark.

I looked around for Shaver. He and the other couple had drifted over near the bandstand. I went over there. Shaver introduced them as Nan and Thad. He introduced me as Cleo Birdwell.

I realized, in thinking back over the afternoon, that whenever I heard a jumper address another jumper, it was always by first name only.

A kind of shame? A kind of cult?

It seemed to fit in with the chanting episode that Dr. Glass had put into motion earlier. When you get involved in something like that, it's easier if you know only first names. First names give you a little freedom to let loose, to chant and embrace. Last names pin you to the earth. Once somebody knows your last name, and you know his or hers, it takes a lot of extra effort to look the person in the face and say, "I am a jumper."

It turned out that Shaver knew Nan and Thad from group therapy—something he'd abandoned in recent weeks.

"I hate hockey, but I know who Cleo Birdwell is," Nan said. "It's really great to meet you. When Shaver told us who he was *living* with, I just about had kittens."

Nan was a friendly-looking, raw-boned woman with a long jaw and big hands, kind of a homesteader type.

"I hate hockey, too," Thad said.

"Hey, we'd like you guys to have dinner with us," Nan said. "You have to come along, okay? Shaver's so real. I don't know what we'd do if we hadn't met him."

"We met him in group," Thad said. He was a clear-eyed, lanky fellow with a deep, earnest voice. "That's where Nan and I met. Dr. Glass says as far as he knows, we're the only two jumpers having a relationship."

We heard ambulance sirens.

"You ought to see the people in group," Nan said. "None of them are real. All they do is sit around passively. Dr. Glass acts like it's a talk show."

"He sits there and *chats*," Thad said.

"What this disease needs is a national chairperson," Nan said. "We have rotten PR."

"He goes on TV and *chats*," Thad said. "We need somebody hard-nosed who'll go out into the marketplace and compete with the leading diseases."

His voice was so deep and earnest that no matter what he said, it came out sounding adolescent. I pictured him singing in a prep school glee club and having long, grown-up discussions about business ethics with his oil-billionaire dad.

"No kidding, you guys have to come along to dinner," Nan said.

Shaver and I looked at each other. It was one of those situations in which each of us was willing to do what the other person wanted to do, but neither of us knew what the other person wanted to do.

Great moments in living together.

Anyway, we mumbled and stumbled and finally said okay. Just when I was feeling so warm and favorable toward the jumpers, as opposed to the relatives and friends, I was afraid this friendly-looking but slightly aggressive and hard-nosed young couple might begin to erode my sympathies.

The kickers and stompers had more or less turned themselves off. Dr. Glass went gliding by, and Shaver, with his short, powerful arms and low center of gravity, sort of unobtrusively seized and detained him. Seeing this shift in the action, I decided to follow along, indicating to Nan and Thad that we'd see them a little later.

"What about Dr. Posey?" Shaver said. "Is he coming or not? We'd like to start on home."

"I've been assured he's on the way," Dr. Glass said. "Of course I didn't tell him we were in the South Bronx, or he'd never have left the Plaza. I just gave him a street name and a building number. We'll have to pin our hopes on the cabdriver."

We heard the frenzied wail of police sirens. A woman lifted her leg back behind her and studied the bottom of her shoe. The shadows of three pigeons moved across the floor.

Dr. Glass looked at me.

"I've got a program for our young friend here," he said.

Shaver looked at me.

"I knew it. He wants to freeze my brain cells."

Dr. Glass listened, looking amused.

"He wants to open my skull and go in there with his damned ice technology of the future."

Dr. Glass turned to me.

"We don't use ice," he said. "Who said we use ice? We don't use ice."

"What do you use?" I said.

"Ray Posey's your man. He'll be here before too long. He's never let me down yet. Of course you never know what kind of driver you're getting."

Shaver looked at me.

"I knew he'd want to freeze my cells. The last few weeks, he's



been telling me how mild my condition is compared to other people. I knew he was leading up to something horrible.”

Dr. Glass listened to him.

“I wish somebody would lock me in a room somewhere and throw away the key. That’s the only way to deal with people like me. I’m a drain on society. An emotional burden.”

Dr. Glass looked at me.

“The program I’ve laid out for Shaver doesn’t include cell-freezing.”

“It doesn’t?” I said.

“It’s a much simpler program, a much easier program. I think it’s a super way to deal with our young friend’s special situation.”

He looked at the index card he was palming in his left hand.

“I want to put him on a sleep program. I want to put him to sleep.”

“That’s all?” I said. “As simple as that?”

I wanted to hug both of them.

“I’ve got a program all laid out. Sleep. Sound sleep. The body sleeps, the brain dozes. It’s our simplest program. It’s designed to avoid even the smallest complication.”

Shaver was listening carefully. He turned to me.

“He hasn’t said how long.”

“How long what?”

“How long I sleep, dummy.”

I looked at Dr. Glass.

“It’s the standard five-month program,” he said.

He winked at Shaver. A pigeon landed on the snare drum at the back of the bandstand.

“Is that all-inclusive?” I said. “In other words, he goes into a training program to get ready for the sleep part. Then he sleeps a while. Then there’s a long period of postsleep recuperation and therapy and rehabilitation. Right?”

They were both looking at me.

“I think he means I sleep for five months,” Shaver said. “He gives me an injection and I pass out for five months. A hundred and fifty days of my life. Slow, wasting sleep.”

I looked at Dr. Glass.

"It's our standard five-month program," he said, a little defensively. "This period of time isn't arrived at arbitrarily. Five months may seem a long time to disappear from the world, or vice versa, but this is what it takes. We're not dealing with a *wen* on our young friend's *index* finger. He happens to be afflicted with one of the strangest maladies known to science. I think if you take any jumper in this room and tell him that all he has to do is go to sleep for a while, you'd find yourself face to face with a pretty darned happy person."

I looked at Shaver.

"Who pays for this?" he said. "Who pays for five months of hospital care in a private room with a nurse around the clock?"

I kept looking at Shaver.

"We don't need a hospital," Dr. Glass said.

We both looked at him.

"Hospitals are outmoded. I recommend hospitals only when surgery is indicated, and even then only in extreme cases. We don't need hospitals. We already have the most ideal unit for treatment, care and recovery. The American home. All our sleep programs are designed for the home. Familiar surroundings, minimum expense, a loving family."

They were both looking at me.

"No hospital can match the American home," Dr. Glass said. "If a patient can't get well in an American home, maybe he just doesn't deserve to get well at all."

Well, that was the gist of it. Dr. Glass wasn't sure exactly when he would put the program into effect, but he said he'd give us plenty of warning, so we could make whatever arrangements have to be made when somebody goes to sleep for five months. We mumbled our goodbyes and went looking for Nan and Thad. Shaver saw them standing near the door.

It was late afternoon and almost dark on the floor of the ballroom. But there were still rays of gorgeous, dusty pink light striking the upper walls, the upper sections of one of the murals—a huge sky full of clouds and birds. In other words, the real sky was

pouring delicate, late, winter light onto the painted sky on the wall. It was a small moment in a day crowded with impressions, but the sight was so glowing and full of unexpected poetry that I had to stop in my tracks and just stand looking at that twice-made sky.

All around the hall, small clusters of jumpers and relatives stood talking. Somebody turned on the lights, and a dingy, streetlike glow fell over the gathering. People stood around rumped, in long shadows, waiting for Dr. Posey.

I hurried toward the door. The clapper still hit her hands together, making haunted applause.

The four of us went out into the street to hail a cab. Instinctively we stayed close together, all of us bunched up and waving our arms at anything that resembled a moving vehicle.

I counted eleven unpainted cars parked outside the ballroom.

Finally, with a total of about six of our combined arms waving, we flagged down a checkered cab and piled in for the trip downtown. From his position in one of the jump seats, Thad directed the driver to a Chinese Cuban restaurant in the west nineties.

While he was doing that, Shaver and I conversed in semicode about Dr. Glass's program. We didn't know whether to be elated, depressed, miserable, or what. We agreed that the nature of the treatment was all right. What made us nervous was time. The time factor. The time element. The time *span*.

"What was all that stuff about the American home?" Shaver said. "Doesn't he know I'm Canadian?"

"He meant North American."

"Doesn't he think other people have decent homes? Does a house have to be in Tennessee before the surroundings are familiar to the people who live there? People all over the world have familiar surroundings in their homes. It's pretty universal. You walk into your house and you see familiar surroundings."

"He knows that, Shaver. He was just trying to emphasize the importance of a certain kind of atmosphere. Dr. Glass *knows* that."

“Doesn’t he think Pakistanis have loving families?”

“He knows that. There’s no reason to get upset by one dumb little phrase. He meant your home, my home, anyone’s home.”

“Hey, what are you guys talking about?” Nan said.

We replied vaguely, and before too long the driver let us out on a street full of growling dogs.

The restaurant was empty, since it was still so early, and Thad went walking in there as if he expected a terrific welcome from the staff. The odors from the kitchen were pungent and sort of ethnic beyond belief. If an odor like this ever wafted down Bank Street in Badger, they would have called out the National Guard

We were seated about ten minutes when an old Chinese man came padding out of the kitchen on slippered feet. Thad wanted to order for all of us, which he did by pointing to items on the menu and shouting at the Chinese man, “One this. One this. Two this. A little this. One this no beans. Four glass water.”

I got up to go to the bathroom, but Nan reached out and grabbed me by the elbow.

“You don’t want to go in there,” she said.

I looked from her to Thad.

“You really don’t want to go in there,” Thad said. “That’s the one thing about this restaurant. You don’t want to go to the toilet.”

I sat back down.

“Should I tell them what I did?” Nan said. “I feel I’ve known you guys forever, so I think I’ll tell them, Thad, or not? Maybe I shouldn’t. Maybe that’s presuming on people.”

“She peed in the sink. She went in there and the toilet was such a disaster that she climbed up on the sink and peed in it.”

“Should I have told you?” Nan said. “Or no?”

“I’ve peed in sinks,” Shaver said. “I peed in a sink in Oklahoma City once.”

“I peed in a sink in Del Rio, Texas,” Thad said. “When I was real little, I peed in a sink in Wilmington, Delaware.”

“I’ve peed in sinks all over the Banff area in Alberta,” Shaver said. “I worked there one summer. I peed in a sink at the Banff

Springs Hotel. I peed in a sink at the Voyager Inn. One night I crossed over into British Columbia and peed in a sink there.”

“I’ve peed in Mexican sinks,” Thad said. “You pretty much have to.”

“Mexico you don’t even count,” Nan said.

“I peed in a sink in Yellowknife,” Shaver said. “That’s the northernmost point I’ve ever peed in a sink in.”

Our food came.

“Shaver’s so real,” Nan said. “That’s the thing about group. Nobody’s real. Dr. Glass doesn’t even try to resolve basic conflicts. Nobody’s even supportive. It’s all, ‘Look at me, I’m a beautiful person underneath all these multiple tics.’ ”

“Unreal,” Thad said.

“Thad and I at least are supportive.”

“We’re the only two jumpers having a relationship.”

Nan began blowing into her glass of water. Then she sipped it, slowly and cautiously. She blew some more and took another sip.

The others went on eating.

Nan took the paper napkin off her lap and stuck it in one nostril. She left it there, hanging from her nose. In order to eat, she had to guide the fork around the hanging napkin.

Shaver went on eating.

Thad blew on his water. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and put it around the glass. He picked up the glass with both hands, the way people hold steaming mugs of cocoa at ski resorts in movies made for TV. Then he slowly, carefully sipped the ice water.

The Chinese waiter, the Cuban cook, and a small Chinese girl came out of the kitchen and stood watching.

Nan guided her food around the hanging napkin.

I saw something out of the corner of my eye. A roach. A crinkly brown roach. Another roach. The day of the roach. It moved slowly across the floor. It circled my chair. I kept one eye on my food, the other on the roach. It was a typical brown, probing, long-bodied, horrendously ugly, moist-looking, disgust-provoking, crinkly New York cucaracha.

I considered the options, weighed the consequences, and decided to let it live.

In the taxi heading home, I grabbed my gloomy man and pulled him toward me and kissed him passionately on the mouth.

He looked at me a little sidelong, hopeful of an explanation.

“I am a jumper,” I told him.

7



*A*LL I wanted to do was play hockey.

It was the day before the team left for Philadelphia, and then Boston, and then Buffalo, and on into the schizy, dark heart of America. I was sitting around wondering how I'd manage things once Dr. Glass put Shaver to sleep.

He'd need to be fed and cleaned. Someone would have to shave him every so often. I wondered how I'd gotten myself into this. Then I thought, What a selfish thing to wonder about. Then I thought, But everyone expects so much of me. Athlete, friend, celebrity, lover, woman. Do they really think I can play nurse, too?

As if privy to my reflections, Shaver came padding in, wearing just his boxer shorts, and said, "Maybe I ought to go back to Red Deer. That might be the best thing for all concerned."

"Why are all the best places named for animals?" I said. "Red Deer, Badger—name some more."

"Whitehorse," he said. "Maybe I ought to go to Whitehorse. It's in the Yukon. When they get tired of taking care of me, they can put me out in the snow. They can expose me to the weather. That's how you solve problems like mine up in the Yukon."

He went into the bedroom. I knew he wasn't serious about going to Red Deer. He wanted me to say, "Don't be silly. Don't be crazy and dumb. You'll be fine right here. I'll take care of you. Don't go talking about Red Deer. Your place is right here."

But I hadn't said it, had I?

I heard him jumping up and down. Then he clapped his hands. The phone rang. I hurried to get it, almost desperate for some kind of distraction.

It was Glenway Packer. He said he had news about Battle Creek. He wanted us to meet for a fast, tidy, efficient business dinner.

I had a million things to do—packing for the trip, talking to Dr. Glass, talking to Shaver, sending a get-well card to the Ranger announcer Merle Halverson, who was reportedly on the brink, the very edge, hovering, and all the things you have to do when you're going to be away from home for two-plus weeks.

"Okay," I told Glenway. "What time and where?"

We met in a small, charming, intimate, boxlike kind of place—very woody, very French, very upper Madison Avenue. Glenway was attentive and showed his usual beautiful manners. The little bit of Southern drawl he normally had was a shade more pronounced, I thought, and pleasant and charming to hear.

"They want you," he said. "It seems everyone does these days." He raised his wineglass. "Hurrah, hurrah. To Cleo and Kelloid. A long, joyful, prosperous union."

"But what am I going to do about Ralphies?"

"You've forgotten that by now."

"They were in *New York* magazine."

"You've realized you were tapping the wrong deposits of stupidity. It is all over. We'll have no more tedious and boring objections." He raised his wineglass. "Ralphies: to the memory of."



"I sincerely hope it turns out to be that easy."

"Cleo, acts of conscience are moments we reserve for war, love, business, and other disasters."

"I know, I know."

"Eat your buttered asparagus tips."

"Any word from Floss?"

"A big, round zero," he said. "Love your overalls."

"French suede."

"*Love them.*"

Aside from his shaved head, which was spectacle enough for one person, Glenway Packer had the palest blue eyes I've ever seen on a human. In fact they were husky-dog eyes—clear and extra pale, full of northern light, full of sky. I'm not being corny-romantic and it wasn't the wine, but I've taken a lot of long, searching looks at men's eyes, and Glenway's, for a human's, were probably the most beautiful I've ever seen.

My old dog Bowzer back home had terrific, deep, mournful dark eyes for the mere puddle of hair and paws that he was. Husky dogs and birds of prey probably top the animal kingdom, cats being overrated, with very little substance beneath the famous gleam, and snakes being uncomfortable to look at for very long, and Glenway's eyes I would put close to the huskies with their lake-blue morning light.

"Cleo—money. You haven't once inquired."

"You mean the Kelloid deal. Okay, what kind of money are we talking?"

"It depends on how you want to be paid. A lot of athletes, film stars, and so on are insisting they be paid in Japanese yen or Swiss francs. The deutsche mark is also popular. Archie Brewster likes rupees, for his own whimsical reasons. If you want Yankee dollars, well and good, but as your agent pro tem, I advise against it."

"Where is Archie these days?"

"Caracas, I believe."

"Is he alone, do you know? Aside from Venezuelans."

"I don't know Archie well. We don't keep in close touch."

“Do you think he’s happy?”

“He calls me Green Bay Packer.”

“Of course, who knows what happy is? What is happy? Who’s happy today?”

“Have you two met?”

“Once,” I said.

“People aren’t happy when they don’t like themselves. That’s the current thinking.”

“Archie liked himself. But I don’t think he was happy. What’s happy?”

“Eat your carrots Vichy.”

“Why do you shave your head, Glenway?”

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s the wine.”

“Lord, what a question. Why don’t you ask me about the commercials you’re going to do for Kelloid? They plan to saturate the market. Why don’t you ask about front money, or deferred payments, or how I’ve coordinated location work with the Ranger schedule so that you don’t miss a single practice and never have to travel more than a hundred miles.”

“That’s nice, Glenway. I mean it.”

“Well, it’s good to have one’s work commended. It’s frankly refreshing in a nasty business like ours.”

“If you could do something else, what would you do?”

“Good Lord, what would I do? Well, Mother has a place down in Georgia. A leafy, low-key, eight-hundred-acre neoplantation, I guess you’d call it. I think I’d like to go back to Shalizar and just read—spend years and years just reading.”

He laughed—a pleasant, charming, light, clear, metallic sound.

“What would you read?”

“Lord, I don’t know. Something in hard cover. I suppose I’d begin with the classics. One usually does. Then the neoclassics. I’d like to work my way through the German romantics. I know Mother would endorse that. She dotes on the Germans.”

Glenway was probably fifty-two years old. I didn’t know for sure whether he was gay, straight, or what. A lot of men are just

so gracious and urbane and impeccably turned out and physically glossy, and have such a fatigued, drawling, high-strung kind of wit and such beautiful manners, that a little neon tube goes on in your head and you think nobody like this can possibly be straight because only homosexual men take such time and care with their clothes and appearance, and lavish such attention on their overall bodies, and have such a glossy, high-strung style about them, whether it's a shaved head or a cigarette lighter that belongs in some Swedish crafts exhibit, and then you find out it's a Wall Street heterosexual you've been talking to all this time, and you wonder what's *wrong* with him, being so well mannered and urbane and handsomely turned out.

Glenway told me all about Shalizar. Magnolia and honeysuckle and groves of swamp cypresses. A big, Greek-revival main house, a working water mill, a little, swampy, abandoned parish church etc. etc. He called it reliving the past in good taste.

"That's an unusual name, Shalizar, for a place in Georgia," I said. "Is there a story in that?"

"A small story," he said, looking at me with those pale, cool, lake-blue eyes. "It's the name of a lost city in some desert in ancient Persia. Mother found it in a book I gave her as a gift some years ago, and she wasted no time, let me tell you, changing the name of the place from Grouse Hollow to Shalizar."

He laughed that light, clear, metallic laugh.

"A book by a romantic German?"

"Lord, no, a book by a mystical North African."

"Called what?"

"*The Barefoot Rose.*"

I sipped my filtered coffee. I paused. I raised my eyes to look at him.

"By Wadi Assad," I said.

Glenway stared at me.

"I thought I was one of the few. The very, very few."

"You are," I said. "And so am I."

"I thought no one else knew his work. I never mention his name, for fear he'll suddenly come into vogue. Even the smallest

attention would diminish his luster. He is a private pleasure. This is remarkable, Cleo.”

I figured I wouldn't tell him that most of the Rangers were reading Wadi Assad and about half the NHL. I didn't want to be responsible for diminishing his luster in Glenway's eyes. I was pretty sure Glenway had mixed feelings about this thing. He was probably convinced that he, his mother, and a handful of desert monks were the only people who knew these books.

“You continue to amaze me,” he said. “Why don't we take brandy at my place?”

For a second there, I thought we were supposed to pick up two glasses of brandy, walk out the door, and take them to his apartment in a taxi. I was kind of intrigued by the idea of brandy at Glenway's place, no matter how it got there. An older person. Eskimo-husky eyes. Beautifully dressed and groomed. High-strung and glossy, with a plantation. Not that I especially wanted to see Shalizar, or meet his mother, who was probably alcoholic and creepy. It was just the idea. So different, so far removed from New York or apartment-dwelling or Madison Square Garden. Let's be honest, Shaver Stevens walking around the house in his boxer shorts, as much as I loved the guy, was a far cry from Glenway Packer at Shalizar. It was like a magazine article about a famous person in his isolated retreat. *Glenway Packer at Shalizar*. He'd probably turn up all in white with snappy creases in his pants despite the heat.

He paid the bill and helped me on with my coat, glidingly and with no wasted motion, so that I barely knew he was there behind me. His own coat was impeccably tailored and had a fur collar. He had nothing for his head.

His apartment was in a brownstone in the east, east fifties. I was surprised at the size. It was quite little. But it was also flawless, and I figured he was after a certain effect. The place was almost bare, but being small it did not give the visitor a sense of empty space so much as order and near perfection. The furniture, what little there was of it, was low and kind of angled into corners.

"I thought the space had possibilities, so I took it," he said. "It's a cunning space. It's very deft. What I'm after is a kind of minimalism."

He took my coat and bag, and I sat on a little Formica cube. The place looked more like a photo of an apartment in some decorating magazine than like a place where someone really lives. It was all light and shadow, all geometry. The colors were shades of white and shades of gray. All well and good. It had a character all its own, and as a neutral observer I was glad I'd seen it. It was the kind of place you were glad you'd seen, like Edwards Air Force Base, just to know you'd seen it.

Glenway came back with our brandy.

"I was after a *realized* look," he said.

"I think you've realized it, Glenway."

"It was a space which I felt spoke to my own needs and predilections. I spent fortunes on it. Floss hates the place. She took one look and ran right out. An eighth of a second and she was out the door."

He laughed, his head well back—a gay, delightful sound.

"She went running back to her Venetian museum," he said. "Lord, I hope she's well. Dear, sweet woman. Don't put the glass there, Cleo, please."

"Where can I put it?"

"It just doesn't go there. You see what I'm after."

"What about this table?"

"Nothing can go on that table. It took me the better part of a year to find that table. It's the perfect table for that quadrant of space, and nothing can go on top of it."

"What can I do with my glass, then, Glenway?"

"Can't you just hold it in your hand, as you've been doing?"

"I guess so."

"You see what I'm after."

"I do see what you're after, yes. I wouldn't *leave* the glass there, Glenway. I would just put it there for a moment while I went to the bathroom."

"Can't you take it with you?"

"If I went to the bathroom. I'm not actually going. If I felt

pains in my chest and a stiffening in both arms, with loss of breath.”

“You’re a very attractive woman. But I suppose you know that. One doesn’t overlook something like that.”

“Great body, subpar face.”

“I *like* your face,” he said. “It speaks to something missing in the American landscape these past decades. It gives me a whole new sense of things. It could be big.”

“What could be big?”

“Your face,” he said. “Once the Kelloid campaign hits the home screen, it could explode. You know how trends work. People could be ready for a hometown look. Nothing’s too crazy, Cleo. There is a great deal of crazy out there. We make our living on crazy. Every time I pick up the phone, I hear crazy, I speak crazy, I deal in crazy.”

“Well, I like my face, too, but it misses greatness, and there’s no such thing as near great when it comes to faces.”

He dismissed greatness with a heightening of the brows and a little motion of the head.

“Everything misses greatness,” he said. “Nothing has been great since Bette Davis in *Deception*. If we saw greatness today, we wouldn’t recognize it. I *like* your face. We may be ready for something just like it.”

“I like your eyes, Glenway.”

He threw back his head and laughed—a tinkling, high-strung sound.

“Cleo, is this a seduction?”

We both laughed. He sipped his brandy, not taking his eyes off me, which wasn’t easy because the brandy was in a giant snifter that he had to peer around with one eye.

He reached over and pressed a button, and music poured softly from some hidden system. Dry, elegant music. Flutes, oboes etc. Probably composed by some nineteenth-century master known only to musicologists and a few others.

I had a picture of myself slipping and sliding all over Glenway’s shaved head. His shaved head between my thighs. I was feeling half-horny, thanks to the wine and brandy. It was the

kind of mood where you don't really want to know the fellow very well. Maybe you know him to say hello, but that's it. You want a *type*, that's what you want. A tousle-haired poet. A Jewish furrier. A Jehovah's Witness knocking on your door with his copies of *The Watchtower*. Glenway was a type. He was a shaved head. He was a shaved head with a plantation who might be homosexual. A whole new type. A prototype, I believe is the word for Glenway Packer in the kind of mood I was halfway in.

He got up and went quietly out of the room. He more or less slipped out of the room. Despite the softness and the gliding quality of his exit, there was a sense of purpose, I felt, in the way he moved, so smoothly and effortlessly. No wasted motion.

Seduction was in the air, all right. I wasn't sure who was doing it to whom, but that didn't matter. The feeling alone was worth sitting on a Formica cube for. What I'm saying is how rare this feeling was in my life. The sense of enticement, allurements, temptation. A performance, with little rules and rituals. I guess that's why I'd come to Glenway's place. It *had* to be different from knocking heads with Shaver, or dragging Archie Brewster down the hall on a rug, or practically wearing myself out trying to get Sanders Meade in an erectile state.

What we had here was a cunning space, dimly lighted, with shadows and angles, and two people sipping brandy out of expensive snifters, and this wonderfully soft-toned, elegant music flowing out of a perfect sound system. And the two people didn't know each other very well, and were different types completely, and had normal curiosity about what it would be like, speaking for myself, hopping into bed with a prototype, to oboes.

Atmosphere, mood, lighting. The sense of being led slightly astray. These things were both new to me and somehow strangely familiar, as though some deep female memory was functioning down below my personal fund of experience. A soft, throbbing memory. Pleasant tensions, silky anticipations. Music, lighting, mood.

I looked up from my memory pool to see Glenway Packer standing eight feet away, naked except for a loincloth.

This was not an underwear, I don't think. It wasn't something a person like Glenway would wear under his pants. This was for *occasions*, and I guess this was the kind of occasion it was for.

He looked as though he'd just invented nudity. He stood there more or less posing, there's no other word for it, and the whole thing was so studied and realized and *statuesque*, if you can say that about a man, that he didn't even glance my way to see what kind of effect it was having.

I was fascinated by the loincloth. The loincloth knocked me out. This was no abbreviated underwear, believe me. With all the locker-room time I have logged in my life, I've seen the male undergarment in all its contours, guises, and appearances, from crotch-bulging Jockey shorts (that's why they wear them), to ballooning, big-seated trunks, to trim boxer shorts with little slits on the sides, to woolly long johns with sagging ass-sections, to the bright, snug, plunging bikini, to some poor kid in Hershey, Pa., when I played there, who had to wear hand-me-downs that were floppy, white cotton things with buttons on the sides.

This loincloth of Glenway's was definitely for occasions. It was briefer than Tarzan's. It was almost square, I'd say, a little more long than wide, and it was attached to him by a string that circled his body a couple of inches below the hipbone.

At first I thought the loincloth was solid black, as if to blend with the other colors in the apartment, yet be bolder, a little stronger, a natural focal point. Then I noticed some tiny gray lettering in the upper right corner. Just for fun, I duck-walked over on my knees and read what it said, which was *Bill Blass Breechcloth*. I went back to my cube.

Glenway, ever the sophisticate, was in no special hurry to get the sex part of the seduction off to a rousing start. He stretched his long frame out on the floor, propped on an elbow, facing me. Gracefully, without mishap, he sipped his brandy, and if you think that's easy with your head at an angle, it's anything but, and only someone with Glenway's quota of poise should even try it.

Two funny things about his body. First, there was no hair in



sight except for his eyebrows and eyelashes. His chest, belly, legs, and so on were smooth and white. We already know about his head.

Second, his nipples stuck straight out of his chest. By that I mean they didn't rest on mounds. There was no sign of pectoral muscles. His chest was white and flat, and the nipples jutted directly from this utter flatness. It was stranger than you might imagine. These little brown rubbery things seemed to be a mistake in all that white space. And they were long nipples. They weren't conelike at all. They were long and pointy.

"There's something I want you to know," he said. "You ought to know this about me. It's only right and proper that people communicate these things to each other in moments such as this."

"What is it, Glenway?"

"I'm afraid to be tender," he said.

The music grew more elegant.

"In my early affairs, I showed a great deal of tenderness and sensitivity. This was no more than natural to me. In the South, manliness has always been tempered by a soft, bruised, fragile, delicate quality. But I've been hurt, and hurt again, and hurt yet again. I don't ever want to be tender, or sensitive, or vulnerable anymore. I no longer believe in these things. Sex is hardware. It is stimulus and response. I believe in gratification *now*."

The music leaped and soared, but in a bare, dry, reedy way, which was all the more appropriate to the setting. Music, mood, brandy, atmosphere, lighting.

"Glenway," I said, "why don't you show me to the bedroom? We'll stimulus and response each other."

"There is no bedroom, Cleo."

"You went somewhere to change."

"That was the bathroom," he said.

"All right, where's the bed then? Show me to the bed."

"There is no bed. I don't have a bed. I could never countenance a bed in a space like this. A bed is like a major appliance except that it doesn't *do* anything. It does nothing to streamline the way we live. A bed is like soft plumbing. It intrudes, it doesn't belong, it isn't minimalist. I'm after something minimal, Cleo. A

bed would be shattering. Really, I think the whole concept of beds and bedding needs rethinking. The best new designers have no use for beds. I use a pallet. I think a pallet is so *right* for this space.”

He got up and went over to a little seating unit and reached down under it. The pallet was concealed under there like a life jacket under an airplane seat. Glenway got it out and unrolled it, his back to me for the first time since he'd changed. Except for the string that went across his upper buttocks, he was visually bare-ass. Still no hair in sight. Not a strand, not a bristle.

I stepped out of my shoes and took off my shirt. Glenway turned to look, but only briefly and glimpsingly, although not without a flash of mature appreciation as those cool, blue eyes moved across my Badger Beagles T-shirt.

I took off my blue suede overalls. The phone rang. I didn't see any phone, but the sound was unmistakable. Glenway lifted the flat ultramodern receiver out of a small compartment in a wall unit. The phone device was designed to offer the least possible resistance to air flow as you moved it to and from your head.

Glenway talked softly for a moment. The phone had come out of the lower part of the wall so that he had to bend way over to talk into it, and he didn't seem to have any second thoughts about flaunting his ass to the room at large.

He turned and extended the receiver.

“For you,” he said, a trifle piqued.

“Impossible. No one knows where I am. Not a single, living soul.”

“The man said Cleo Birdwell.”

I took the phone.

“I thought it was about time I talked to my favorite niece.”

“Uncle Billy!” I said.

Phone in hand, I got down on the floor in a modified lotus position, ready for a lengthy chat, and at the same time I whispered over to Glenway, who was stretched across the pallet with his head at that sharp angle, sipping brandy: “*It's my Uncle Billy.*”

“Where are you?” I said into the phone.

“Caracas.”

“Any word from Aunt Glad?”

“She turned up at my hotel in Colombo, in Sri Lanka. There was a message at the desk. I hightailed it right out of there. I went to Hong Kong. The next morning, I went down to breakfast and who do I see checking in at the desk but our own Floss Penrose? She looked like *The Last Days of Pompeii*. I hid behind a potted palm and eventually made my way to Caracas, where I’m entered in a major tourney. Of course, Floss knows this, and any minute now her plane is due to land and she’s going to come sweeping into the lobby of the Hilton, wearing those poison rings and darting wild, frightened looks in every direction. She’s the only person I’ve ever known who frightens people by being frightened.”

“You realize you are being a bastard about this. Uncle Billy has his bastardly side and I think we are seeing it in action.”

“Cleo, what can I do? We’d agreed it was over. We’d agreed I would never be an adult as long as I had an Aunt Glad to play Monopoly with. Now here she is, chasing me to the ends of the earth. She uses her fear to frighten.”

“All right, I understand your wanting to get free and clear. But you mustn’t hurt Aunt Glad. She is a decent person under all those layers of neurosis and fear.”

“Well, I know that. Don’t you think I know that? That’s what makes it so difficult. That and the fact that I’ve been emotionally locked in to this Monopoly game with her. It is an unbelievably sexy thing.”

“Better than incest. She told me.”

Glenway arched a brow.

“What are you doing there anyway?” Archie said.

“Going over contracts. I’m signing to do a junk food saturation campaign on TV.”

“Get paid in rupees,” he said. “And learn how to travel. Travel is not only the name of the game, it is the game itself.”

“Never mind that. How did you find me, Uncle Billy?”

“Villagers with lighted torches.”

“Seriously.”

“There is something unholy going on in that castle, Professor, and I think it’s our duty to investigate.”

Glenway was tapping a cigarette on the top of his expensive cigarette case. He put the cigarette between his lips and reached for his lighter. It flared soundlessly.

“All right,” Archie said. “It went like this. First I called Floss’s place, thinking you might still be staying there. No answer. Then I called New York City information and asked for your number. Unlisted, they said. Emergency, I cried. The operator turns me over to her supervisor. This Pearl Bailey voice comes on, saying, ‘It better be good.’ Emergency, I cried. Earthquake. Buildings crumbling all over Caracas. ‘Honey, there may be an earthquake over there, but it’s damn steady on this end. I need an emergency right here before I let you talk. We protect our unlisteds. The unlisted is a holy person. You’re gonna have to do better than an earthquake in Caracas.’ Then I called the Ranger offices. A cleaning lady answers the phone. I hear this Thelma Ritter voice. I tell her it’s urgent and she gives me the Garden president’s home number. Some guy named Sanders Meade. I call the number. I take the precaution of disguising my voice. A man answers, and it is obvious that he is disguising *his* voice. I ask for Sanders Meade. In a strangled voice that is supposed to sound like an old Irishman, he says he is the building’s handy man and he is just in the apartment to bleed the radiators. He says Sanders Meade is snowbound in Boulder, Colorado. Then I call Floss’s office on the odd chance someone will be there and know how to contact you. Another cleaning lady. Butterfly McQueen. She says why don’t I call Mr. Packer, and she’s nice enough to look up his home number for me. Of course. Green Bay Packer. And that’s where you were.”

“And still am.”

“What are you wearing?”

“Never mind, Uncle Billy.”

“Your Uncle Billy is depressed and lonely. He’s been staying in rooming houses along the Boston Post Road, living on Cracker Jacks and Spam. He is down to his last pair of aerated wing tips.”

“Why did you call, Billy?”

“I called because I’m going to be in the States in a week or so to

play in one of those humongously vulgar tournament-of-champion events that the networks like to arrange. Any chance we can get together? I'd really like to see you, Cleo. If it's mutual, say, 'A box of biscuits, a box of mixed biscuits, and a biscuit mixer.' Real fast."

I giggled.

"You have to say it."

"A box of biscuits, a box of mixed biscuits, and a biscuit mixer," I said.

"The tennis is in Dallas-Fort Worth. The week of the second."

"Uncle Billy, that's fantastic. We'll be there on the third for an off-day after we play Detroit, and then on the fourth for a game. We don't leave till the morning of the fifth."

"They play ice hockey in Dallas-Fort Worth?"

"It's a new franchise," I told him. "The Painted Ponies. Horrible bunch of hockey players." I couldn't resist adding, even with Glenway only six feet away, "How are those great-looking shoulders of yours?"

To which Archie replied, "Cecily darling, the fields are full of heather and the bells ring out: *England, England, England!*"

I put down the phone, trying to stifle my laughter and thinking what a crazy, delightful guy is Archie Brewster, and a tennis legend to boot.

Back to Glenway, who is still stretched the length of the pallet, his head thrown back sort of wantonly, as if he expected a slave to come along with a bunch of grapes. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised to see that the pallet was wide enough for only one. I don't imagine they sell double pallets in the hushed, padded, soft-sell kind of place where Glenway undoubtedly shops.

I stayed where I was, cross-legged, and pulled and clawed at my T-shirt to get it over my head.

"Love your teddy pants," Glenway said.

He was the first man ever to call them by name.

"They're a wintertime thing."

"Do you indulge your body?"

"What do you mean—warm baths?"

"Do you buy things for it? Do you pamper it?"

"I play hockey, Glenway. Whatever pampering I might do

would be canceled out every time I got rubbed into the boards by some hulking kid trying to impress the coach with his bloodlust.”

“Do you like to show your body?”

“I sure don’t hate it,” I said.

“I like to show mine. That’s why I keep fit. Diet’s so important.”

He blew moody smoke into the air. His eyes narrowed and their clear light seemed to dim a little. A kind of drugged, half-sexy look moved across his face. Still reclining on an elbow, his head resting on his right hand, he handed me the cigarette to dash out in a nearby ashtray and then he pulled off the loincloth with his free hand to get completely naked.

Always a big moment.

His penis was brown. Sure, a lot of men have penises that are a shade darker than the rest of the body. But Glenway’s was surprising. It was quite, quite brown. I wouldn’t even say light to moderate brown. I would just say brown. I didn’t know whether I was supposed to comment or not. Maybe in some circles this darker color was considered outstanding, very much in demand, the “in” thing. If so, Glenway probably expected me to know that, and to show by some sign or other that I was awed or impressed.

What could I do? Say, “Wow, it’s brown”?

Also, there was some hair in the area. I’d half expected a totally shaved body. But while there *was* hair, there were also signs of snipping. I guess he wanted hair, but not too much, or hair of a certain kind—cropped hair.

I wondered if this was some kind of tough homosexual thing. Cropped pubic hair. It’s very hard to tell about these things. Even walking on the street, you can’t tell the homosexuals from the people who beat up homosexuals. You used to be able to tell. I don’t know when it happened, this blending of looks, but I think our civilization made a tremendous shift in that moment.

The way Glenway was looking at me, I realized it was my turn to finish undressing. To do this in a sitting position, I would have to uncross my legs and do a lot of maneuvering that would be anything but gracious and elegant, so I just stood up, sucked in my

gut, and jiggled out of my teddy pants. Then I gathered up all my stuff and put it on the Formica cube where I'd been sitting. I realized I'd left my brandy glass on the floor. Bad girl. I picked it up and put it on top of the clothes.

"Lord, you're bruised," Glenway said.

He was staring at my thighs, hips etc. His voice was full of awe and reverence.

"Hockey, Glenway. What'd you expect, a rose tattoo?"

He spotted the big, fresh, purplish contusion on the inside of my right thigh.

"Why do you *play* this game?"

"Glenway, this seduction could lose its momentum if you don't shut up."

He threw back his head and laughed. Actually he sort of *tossed* his head. Not too many men toss their heads. Traditionally women have been the head-tossers because it created an interesting effect with their hair swinging partway across the face. But I guess because of changing hairstyles as well as deeper social reasons, women don't toss their heads anymore. This was the one thing Glenway did that missed being perfect, realized, and urbane. You need some hair flying to bring off a toss of the head, and you also need youth on your side.

"Can we skip the foreplay?" he said.

He was kneeling on the pallet with his pointy nipples and brown penis, extending a hand to me. I took it and then knelt facing him, inches away.

"Foreplay is tedious and boring," he said. "I don't like to insist on one method over another, but I think you'll find the most efficient way to go about this is to put yourself in my hands, literally. I've had large and varied experience. What we're after here is gratification. There's no point surrounding our efforts with a lot of archaic busywork. I tell people if they really want gratification *now*, I can virtually guarantee it. But you have to want it."

It turns out that Glenway was talking about nothing *but* foreplay. It wasn't foreplay to him because it wasn't followed by anything. I guess he also considered intercourse tedious and boring. In other words, his penis stayed exactly where it was, a few inches

away from me. I don't want to go into a routine about cocks and pricks. Some men are sensitive and I'm not writing this memoir to offend. Besides, just getting a look at his brown penis was novelty enough.

Glenway didn't have much prowess, but he had plenty of expertise. They're not the same. Expertise is specialized knowledge that you get from making yourself tremendously familiar with a thing. Prowess is the application of this knowledge in an erectile state. Prowess is skill, imagination, ability, durability.

Glenway used his hands to a terrific extent. His hands were the instruments of his expertise, you could say. They were certainly good-looking hands, long and white, with gleaming, well-shaped fingernails. He went right to work, fingering, feeling, thumbing, flicking, knuckling, fluttering. He worked silently, with total assurance. I was pretty impressed. No one had ever shown such expertise with my Latinate parts before, and I was kind of fascinated in a neutral way, just observing him in this whirlwind of creative foreplay, although this is exactly, of course, what he thought it wasn't.

Obviously he'd done this stuff four thousand times, and after a while it began to seem he was more or less performing a gall bladder operation for all the personal interest involved. His brown penis went nowhere, did nothing. About ten minutes into the routine, I tried to reciprocate and get involved and be a participant. Not efficient, according to Glenway.

The music went into a lilting phase. I thought I heard a string.

"Glenway, let me wrap my legs around your head. What do you say?"

"That's not in the catalog, Cleo."

"Well, that's just it, you see. This isn't an antiques catalog and I'm not an old highboy you're restoring."

"You have to *want* gratification," he said.

"I want that shaved head, Glenway. That's what I want. I want to rub against it."

He ceased all activity.

"That's not the way to accomplish what we both want to accomplish," he said. "Hands are efficient. They are lovely tools



when you examine them and study them. They set us apart from the lower forms. The current thinking is that sexuality comes from within. The mind is the sexiest part of us. Use your mind, Cleo. I'll use my hands."

"How often do you masturbate, Glenway?"

He let a weary note enter his voice.

"Cleo, dear, all mammals masturbate."

"You just said our hands set us apart from the lower forms."

"The mammal isn't a lower form. I meant tree slugs and carrots. It's natural for the mammal to masturbate. Go to a zoo sometime."

"Whales? How could whales?"

"A zoo, not an aquarium."

"I want your hands on my buttocks and your head in my crotch. Is that asking too much? This is sex we're supposed to be having, Glenway."

"Hands are my thing. I do hands."

"I want to rub against your shaved head," I said.

This was a philosophical difference. I had nothing against the man personally and I believe it was mutual. We discussed it a while longer, Glenway on his knees with his cropped pubic hair and that dark penis of his wagging whenever he gestured vehemently in the course of his argument, and me on my back on the pallet with one knee raised and the other leg crossed over the raised knee.

"You don't want to do oral, you don't want to do genital," I said.

"I am doing genital. I am doing your genital."

"You are doing manual. That's all you are doing."

"It is manual-genital."

"There is no genital unless both genitals are involved."

"Manual-genital by definition is both manual and genital. Therefore I am doing genital."

"You are doing manual. I am doing nothing. It is not even manual-manual. It is not even pure manual. It is half-manual. It is manual-nothing."

“If it is manual-nothing, you may as well say it is nothing. By definition, something times nothing is nothing.”

“I’m not saying it is nothing. You are bringing in arithmetic. I’m saying it is manual on one side, nothing on the other.”

“There are someone’s genitals involved. By definition, what we are doing is at least partly genital.”

“It is half-manual.”

“It is half-genital.”

“In Badger, Georgie Schlagel and I used to have fantastic manual sex. *That* was manual sex. We used to pull and grab and squeeze and rub like the future of the planet depended on it. He used to wiggle his finger inside me like a hummingbird’s wings and I’d practically rise up off the sofa and just hover in midair because the earth wasn’t good enough for this kind of pleasure—only the air was, the sky. Back in Badger, *that* was manual, Glenway. I used to pull on Georgie’s prick morning, noon, and night until the kid was half-insane with wanting more and not being able to take any more. I used four speeds on him. By the time I was in passing gear, he had both legs up in the air and I had to move back out of the way so I wouldn’t get kicked in the head. I kept my hand in there, though, no matter how dangerous it got with the flailing and kicking. That was manual sex when it meant something, when it was daring and dangerous and you half believed it could make you crazy.”

“What about *my* finger?” he said.

“It was all right.”

“I take care of my hands. Hands are my thing.”

“Glenway, I respect your expertise. It *is* sophisticated, all the stuff you do with your hands. But I don’t think it’s an end in itself.”

“Nothing has been an end in itself since Garbo in *Camille*. You can’t expect to find ends in themselves in contemporary life. Everything is geared to means. We no longer recognize ends. We wouldn’t know an end if it rose up out of the East River and started eating the Queensboro Bridge.”

“Well, we’re both stark naked, and we’re here, and we’re to-

gether. We've had an honorable difference of opinion and we still have mutual respect and so on. What do we do, Glenway, just get dressed and forget the whole thing?"

"In my own way, I pursue a life of pleasure," he said. "It is low-key, it is minimal, it is manual, but it is pleasure nonetheless. I say let's fuck."

"Do you mean it?"

"Let's fuck and be done with it," he said.

"Genitals?"

"If that's the way it's done, that's what we'll do. You'll have to refresh my memory, Cleo. It's been nearly three decades."

He was skittish at first, but after a while he let me touch and fondle him. Everything worked more or less the way it's supposed to, except the pallet could have been softer and Glenway could have let me rub against his head.

I guess he liked it, though, because he invited me to Shalizar to meet his mother.

In Philadelphia the next day, I kept thinking about the shape of events. People talk about the shape of events. Political columnists and commentators, mostly.

Things kept happening. It was hard for me to find a shape for them. It is still hard. Events and people keep crowding the page. It is like a two-dimensional Japanese subway.

I thought this would be a little book of meditations. All along I'd planned to use Wadi Assad's slim volumes as guides and inspirations. I didn't exactly want to be pithy. I know I don't have the discipline for that. But now and then I'd like to develop a theme or find a shape for events. I didn't think major thematic material would be this hard to turn up.

When I was ten, I never went anywhere in Badger without my copy of *The American Girl Book of Sports Stories*. My mother used to ask me to find a theme in each story, and with a little prodding I could do it. Those stories had themes, every last one of them. The events were shaped.

That was Badger. This was Philadelphia, and the Spectrum was full of white-eyed, shining savages.

# **TWO**

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*Fifteen Days  
in the Land of the Lost*



8



*T*HERE is a short, gnarled man in every athlete's life. It could be an uncle, a financial adviser, or just someone we run into on an elevator. Often these short, gnarled men smoke pipes, and they spend a lot of time blowing into the stem. Sometimes they have digestive problems and suck noisy little tablets. Their mission in life is to remind athletes that we are playing mere games, that our glories are fleeting, that one day (sooner than we think) we will have to enter the real world and learn all about real problems, real pressures, and real defeats. This is when they point their pipe stems at us. The problems will be adult problems. The defeats will make us curl up on the floor, moaning softly. We will not know what hit us.

These short, gnarled men have never played hockey in Philadelphia.

Some nights you come onto the ice and you can hear somebody in row 17 tell his brother-in-law they ought to leave after the second period because the parking garage charges by the hour and they can beat the crowd. There is a hollowness in the building.

Other nights, for no special reason, the house is rocking and screaming, and the home team comes out like woodchoppers in some crazy German operetta. It's as though all the rage and frustration of a whole city is being released in one place at one time. It's mysterious, how this thing grips everyone, a secret electricity running through the night.

The unwary visiting player comes hobbling out of the runway and gets hit with a nightmarish din that just about melts the teeth in his mouth. Of course every hockey instinct tells you to keep chewing your gum and not to lose that dead-level look in your eyes. If anything, you overreact and get even more glazed-eyed and poker-faced than usual.

But you know that for the next two and a half hours, all the laws of civilization will be suspended and you will be part of a little drama of aggression, retaliation, and death under the smoky lights.

Your typical unique hockey night in Philadelphia.

Within five minutes, it dawned on me that a large amount of this aggression was being directed my way, and furthermore that every time someone took a run at me, the crowd went into a feeding frenzy so violent and bloody-sounding and high-pitched that you'd have to play the tapes outside the hearing range of your children or they'd enter convents for life, and that includes the males.

It's not that I'd been treated so gently in other games. It's just that somehow, by unspoken consent, it was now *all right* to try to maim and kill me. Who knows why? Those mysterious energies were in the air, and this was the night it became all right. It was like man discovering the laws of gravity or the secrets of the atom. A veil had been parted and the Spectrum crowd was looking into the clear, blue universe of a whole new idea.

It is all right to maim and kill Cleo Birdwell.

I'd bet anything there was no order given and no discussion among the Flyers beforehand. This was just the night. There are

always players who will be on the receiving end. Great scorers whose play suffers when they are intimidated. Rubbery-faced little guys who were just born to get beat up. Pretty boys with long, blond hair. Why not the first woman in the NHL?

In a way, you could call it a victory for the movement. While great minds theorized, however, I was being measured, labeled, and poleaxed, and the crowd was acting more mentally arrested with each passing moment, screaming made-up and never-before-heard obscenities, as though they were overwhelmed by a massive thyroid deficiency. J.P. caught the drift of things after a while and made the mistake of asking me if I wanted to come out. I'm a levelheaded person on the ice, but I do have a flash point and I almost reached it then and there. I gave him a look that nearly put him in traction.

He backed down fast, and I took my next regular shift, but this time I didn't have Fergie and Gord on my wings—clever skaters who knew how to blend with the environment when the going got extra rough. They were like chameleons. You could be looking right at them and not find them. They changed color. You couldn't pick them out of the background.

Anyway, Jeep put me on a line with Wayne Lassiter, a sleepy, apathetic, case-hardened, coldblooded, casual assassin, when he was in the mood, and mild-mannered but very huge Eric Torkleson, of Torkle fame.

The Flyers thought this was provocative, and it led to even harder checking, more elbowing, more slashing, the usual fights with hair-pulling, spitting, and making a tent out of someone's jersey with his head inside it.

I tried to see the humor in the situation.

In the second period, it was supposed to all die down. That's how these things work. You can't maintain such a high level of dumb, brute havoc for more than one period. But this was Kill Cleo Birdwell Night, and therefore an exception. Even more resounding and wholehearted than the players' discovery that it was all right to kill me was the crowd's delight in watching it. It was not only all right to watch it, it was all right to want it, it was all right to call for it.



Life can be beautiful when a whole bunch of people get together and agree that something that was not all right for three thousand years is suddenly all right. A veil has been parted. Men who wear lip gloss must know this feeling.

But that's all the wry philosophy you get out of me. What saved the night from total carnage was the fact that Jeep vaulted the Herculite panel once again, this time to battle a man who'd been shouting foul things about his wife and children.

On the bench we were all in such a high state of combat-readiness that we followed him automatically, about four players getting over the barrier even before Jeep did, and the whole thing eventually settled down into a relatively harmless pushing and shoving match. The crowd got such a bang out of having all those Rangers *amongst* them that soon after we were back on the ice, they grew weary and gluttoned and oversatisfied.

The game was played out routinely, and in the locker room afterward Murray Jay Siskind led the media out of their landing craft.

"What was happening out there, Cleo?"

"Good, clean body checks. You saw."

"This was special," Murray said.

"Happens every night all over the league."

"Bullshit, Cleo. That's the crappy joke code you're reciting. They were after you and they had no reason except one—the unavoidable and unalterable and age-old reason."

"That's right, Murray, I'm having my period and the scent of blood got them all worked up."

Everybody laughed, haw haw haw, and I went off to my Siberian cubicle to screw my left arm back on and take a good, long look at my lower set of teeth. About ten minutes later, I was sitting there, utterly drained, bushed, and beat up, wearing nothing but one hockey sock and a towel draped fetchingly across my loins, when I realized someone was crouching in the very immediate vicinity.

It is Murray Jay in his high-school toggle coat and 1957 desert boots, cradling the familiar eight-hundred-page manuscript.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be here. You’ve earned a moment of privacy if anyone has.”

I was too tired to raise my eyes any higher than his little Amish beard.

“Should I leave?”

“I don’t care, Murray.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be here. I’ll wait until you’re dressed. Maybe we can talk.”

I tried to nod.

“Did you see what they were doing?” he whispered.

“I was in the building, Murray.”

“They came from all over the ice.” His whispering grew fiercer.

“Do you have any idea what was going on out there?”

I looked up into his little circular glasses.

“All right, I shouldn’t be here,” he said. “You’re half-undressed and you want to shower and you want some time to yourself.” He started whispering again. “But they didn’t care about the game. Major penalties, game misconducts, fines, suspensions. Meant nothing. They were intent on one thing only.”

I tried to shrug.

“All right, I’m going,” he said.

He remained where he was, down on one knee in front of me, looking right into my nipples. One eye to each nipple. He looked like Ragnar the Sea Snail.

“Cleo, there’s something I want you to know. I think you ought to know this about me.”

“What?”

“I’m not afraid to be tender.”

We locked eyes, sort of.

“I used to be afraid to be tender. I thought it was something men weren’t supposed to do. I thought men were supposed to be strong, sort of laconic types. You can tell anything and everything to your best buddy, but never to a woman, even if you love her. We were lady-killers then. What was tenderness? What American male could be tender? Tender was calves’ liver. Tender was the center of a good, thick steak before going to a Knicks game with

your best buddy. Tender was the *night*. But I'm over that now. I'm a man at last, which means I'm not afraid to cry. As a boy, I never cried. I was afraid to cry. Now I cry all the time. Cleo, I'm old enough and mature enough to know I can express gentle emotions without the childish fear that my masculinity is somehow threatened."

Behind his little owlish glasses, Murray had velvety eyes. They were heavy-lidded, dark, a little bit sneaky, I would say, with long, curly lashes. His lips were cracked and puffy. He had thick, black, tight, heavy hair.

If there was such a thing as the Citizens' Committee for the Color Brown, they could have used Murray in their commercials. His desert boots were buff, his corduroy trousers were dark brown, his toggle coat was tan, his sweater was beige, and his shirt was light brown checks alternating with dark brown checks.

"I'd like to get my ass into the shower," I said.

"Oh, sure, listen, of course. I shouldn't be here. I have no right being here. This is your space on the planet, as the kids used to say."

I tried to smile.

He was still crouched there, almost in a pose, as if he were waiting for someone to come along, take off his clothes, fit him into a track suit, put a piece of wood under his foot, and fire a starter's pistol into the air.

"Any time you want to talk, Cleo, I'm available."

"Talk about what?"

"I am permanently available," he said.

He looked into my eyes and began nodding, as if he'd just made a major decision. Nod, nod, nod, nod.

"It's good to be with you right here, right now," he said. "These are the moments no one sees, even the people close to the club, the day-in, day-out people. The intimate, unguarded moments. I feel privileged, Cleo. These are the good moments, aren't they, despite the hurt and the pain? You are fully aware of your body. The hurt will go. The hurt always goes. The important thing is that you fully inhabit your body. This is what makes athletes different. This is why athletes are so revered today, such heroes and paragons and

champions. You inhabit your body and I don't inhabit mine. The rest of us have no bodies. Isn't that what the twentieth century is all about? People wandering around searching for their bodies. This moment is special, believe me. It is an existential moment, as the grown-ups used to say. You are inside yourself, and I am nowhere, I am wandering."

Nod, nod, nod, nod.

"You have a place *to be*," he said.

I tried to nod back. I was too tired. Finally he stopped nodding, and stopped waiting for me to nod, and got up and went away. One of our stick boys, Mr. Chicken, who was about a hundred years old and had no real name that anyone knew of, yelled out, as best he was able, that my shower was ready. I managed to put my stooped body under the water for a few minutes. Then I put on my clothes, wondering when the hurt would go, and went to the hotel to get some sleep.

First I called Shaver from deep under the covers.

"Did you see the game?" I said.

"I don't watch hockey anymore. If I can't play it, why should I watch it? I'm rereading *The Immortal Peacock*."

"Did you talk to our friend Dr. Glass?"

"Why should I talk to Dr. Glass? I don't have anything to say to him."

"He's only trying to help, in his own way."

"I'll talk to him in a few days."

"What did you do besides read?"

"Cleaned the apartment," he said. "That reminds me. Where's the Lemon Pledge?"

"In the cabinet under the sink."

"Last time it was in the bedroom closet. That's where I looked. If we can be a little more consistent, it'll be easier to keep the place clean. Where's the Miracle White?"

"What the heck is Miracle White?"

"It gets out stains. For years I've been lugging around a shopping bag full of clothes with stains. Now that I finally have some free time to get out the stains, I can't find the Miracle White."

"Look in the broom closet."

“Where’s the broom closet?”

“Behind the kitchen door.”

“Okay, thank you,” he said.

“Don’t mention it.”

“When are you coming back?”

“You know when I’m coming back. It’s a fifteen-day road trip. I’m coming back in fifteen days.”

“I’m not feeling all too well,” he said.

“Call Dr. Glass. In his own way, he’s a doctor. You’ll feel better, I’ll feel better, and he’ll feel better. I really wish you’d call him, Shaver.”

“Where do you go next in case I have to reach you?”

“You know where I go. I go to Boston.”

“Where’s the Automatic Dishwasher All?”

“Under the sink,” I said.

“It’s not. I looked.”

“Then we’re out.”

“If we can make lists of stuff we’re out of, it would help whichever person was trying to get the place a little clean for a change.”

I stuck my hand out from under the covers and put the phone back on the cradle. I was asleep in seconds.

In the middle of the night, more or less, I opened my eyes and listened carefully. I lay absolutely still, and I was alert, I was wide awake.

There was someone in the room.

Slowly as possible, I eased up into a semisitting position. Without moving my head, I let my eyes sweep the room, again and again. Gradually they were getting accustomed to the dark. It was only after ten or twelve seconds of doing this that I realized I’d been wakened by a sound, and that the sound had come from the right, between the window and the suitcase stand.

Do I turn on the lights? Do I jump out of bed? Do I start yelling? Do I grab something to defend myself with? What do I grab?

I did nothing. Instinct told me to do nothing. It is clever that way. I just kept my eyes on that one same spot until finally the outline of a low, hulking shape became faintly, faintly visible.

Then it spoke.

“Please don’t be mad,” it said.

I gazed into the shadows.

“Who is that? What are you doing here?”

“Don’t turn on the lights. No lights, Cleo. I want it to be dark.”

It was the voice of color commentator Toby Scott.

“I want a piece,” he said. “That’s the phrase, isn’t it? I want to tear off a piece.”

“You’d better be talking about paper, Toby.”

“I’m naked, Cleo.”

“Is that a threat?”

“There’s a naked man in your room and he’s looking to knock off a piece.”

“Toby, I’ll hit you so hard you won’t need a hand mirror to look up your own asshole.”

We both paused to think that one over.

“Well, I came down a whole long corridor naked and I’m not leaving until we do *something*.”

“We’ll do something. We’ll pick up the phone and call security.”

“I know you won’t do that,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“You’re a Christian and I’m a Christian. We’re both Christians, Cleo.”

I moved myself up to a full sitting position. Toby was still nothing more than a dim, crouching hulk.

“How do you know what I am?” I said.

“There were lots of Birdwells back home. All the Birdwells I’ve ever known have been real good Christians.”

“Religion’s a little bit beside the point right now.”

“Religion’s never beside the point. My life was a mess, Cleo. I was drinking, I was staying out, I had no purpose, no aim. Then I let Christ come into my life. Everything changed almost overnight. My life has a center, a focus. There’s a solid base of fellowship and love.”

“I don’t doubt it, Toby, but what are you doing naked in some poor tired person’s room?”

“I guess it’s the road, Cleo. You know what it does to people.”

"We've been on the road one day. This is only Philadelphia."

"It's Merle, too. I've been upset over Merle. You know how sick he's been."

"What happened? My God. Did he die?"

"He got better," Toby said. "He's coming back to work next week."

"I thought you two were friends. Why are you upset?"

"I was doing play-by-play while Merle was in the hospital. Now I'll have to go back to doing color. I'm no good at color. Color is hard. What *is* color, anyway? Besides, as soon as Merle gets back, he'll start getting on me. He gets on me all the time. He says he's trying to teach me the business, but he just likes getting on me. When there's a time-out, I say, 'There's a stoppage in play.' That drives him crazy. 'Why can't you call it a time-out?' he says. Merle's a real good Christian, but he gets on me something fierce."

"Why *can't* you call it a time-out?"

"Because it's television. In television, you say 'stoppage in play.' Merle started out in radio. He did his own color. He's the kind of person who wakes up talking. I'm an ex-goaltender, Cleo. I spent the first twenty-eight years of my life standing in the crease waiting for the other team to carry the puck into my end. I never said anything. Goaltenders can barely speak. They ought to let us finish out our lives wearing plastic masks."

"Are you sitting, Toby?"

"Crouching."

"I thought so."

"Squatting in the dark."

"Don't you think it's about time you went back to your room? We've had our little talk. You feel better, I feel better."

"How does it work?" he said. "Do you invite me into the bed or do I just get up and come over there and start doing things?"

I couldn't figure out how such a paunchy, ferret-eyed little person with a high-pitched, squealy voice could have raven-black hair. How many raven-haired men do you see? With hair that black and shiny, plus a cleft chin, which is pretty rare in and of itself, it was a shame that the rest of him was so awful. He was a

one-man slum. He was one of those totally washed-up *young* men who ends his career in hockey, baseball or whatever and then just physically comes apart, overnight. His body was dog-eared. His eyes were little swively iron balls.

Raven-haired Toby Scott.

If you read that in a magazine, you'd think the person was some kind of dashing figure, a Grand Prix racer or millionaire playboy, maybe the heir to a fortune in soft plastics, who produces his own big-budget movie, which is shot in six or eight mouth-watering European locales and loses a lot of money but was just a lark anyway with an international cast flying in and out mainly for tax-shelter reasons and none of the stars worrying about damaged prestige because it's the kind of movie that everyone knows in advance is going to be flashy, empty, and dead, and they know we know it, and it's one of the little indulgences we allow each other, or a famous society yachtsman whose wife commits suicide.

That's the romantic motor in my skull, running amuck. The image-making machine.

"Toby, you'd best go. This is how they speak in polite households. You'd really best leave. I am giving you every chance, which is a lot more than you deserve."

"What if we get into bed without touching?"

"I'm already in bed. I'm *in* bed. We're not touching now. Why would I want someone not touching me in bed if we're not touching now?"

"Well, I'm freezing over here."

"You should have worn clothes."

"It wouldn't have been the same."

"You can move away from the window, but only as far as the warm-air vent."

"I appreciate that, Cleo. The Birdwells are Christians. Everybody knows that."

I could spy his slouched form kind of skulking sideways toward the heating unit. Toby was no sooner settled than he commenced a forty-five-minute monologue on his life and times. I don't know what brought it on. The heat, maybe, or my Christian gesture in



letting him move over there. It was a boring story. I'd call it a rambling monologue except there wasn't enough material in his life to cause him to ramble very far. It was straightforward, direct, and dull. I catnapped two or three times in the course of it. By the time he was finished, the sun was up and there was enough light in the room to make him out, round-shouldered and sunken-chested and paunchy, the warm air flow causing a little cowlick to stand up at the top of his head.

A thought occurred to me.

"Have you ever done this before?" I said.

"Never."

"Never? Are you sure?"

"That's a sickening thing to ask."

"Never is a long time."

"What are you implying, Cleo?"

"Toby, never? At no time whatsoever?"

"Twice before," he said.

"How many times?"

"You really sicken me, Cleo."

"How many times?" I said.

"Eleven."

"Eleven times."

"This is the first time I've been caught."

"Where have you done it?"

"The road. Always on the road."

"And what do you do once you're in the person's room?"

"I squat in the dark."

"You squat in the dark."

"I always leave before they wake up. I slip quietly in and quietly out. I let myself in by inserting a credit card under the latch bolt."

"What do you do with the credit card afterward?"

"I secrete it on my person."

"Oh, God, no. You secrete it on your person? That could only be one place."

"You keep repeating what I say, Cleo."

I sank down into the soft pillow.

“Have you ever been in my room before?”

“No,” he said. “I always pick out a single woman in the hotel lobby and sort of follow her around or make discreet inquiries. Once I learn the room number, the rest is easy.”

“Why me, this time?”

“I couldn’t find another woman who seemed to be traveling alone. Believe me, I didn’t like the idea of entering the room of someone I know. If you think I looked forward to it, you’re way off base.”

“What was all that business about tearing off a piece?”

“Well, you brought it on by waking up. You’re the first one who ever woke up while I was squatting in the dark.”

“With a credit card up your ass.”

“I thought since I was caught, I might as well try for the brass ring. I thought if you were off guard enough, I might be able to turn the whole thing around.”

“Look at you, Toby. And you’re only about thirty years old.”

“My muscle tone is going all to hell.”

“You look like a panda, except not as cute.”

“Bad body or not, I was able to slip in and out of rooms without getting caught until tonight. That comes from all the years in the crease, learning how to move like a cat. Goaltenders all have bad bodies, in one form or another, but we all learn how to be cat-quick. That’s how a goaltender makes his living, with catlike moves, and that’s how I was able to slip in and out of rooms until tonight. I guess I never really accepted the fact that I was all through as an athlete until I made enough noise to wake you up tonight. So you did me a favor, Cleo. I now accept. If you weren’t an athlete yourself, you probably wouldn’t have been alert enough to hear me. That’s something I didn’t include in my calculations. The athlete’s hair-trigger sense of sight and sound.”

His cowlick fluttered in the breeze.

“I hope you won’t be judgmental, Cleo. This is my last squat. I promise.”

“*Why* do you do it, do you think, Toby?”

"I guess I'm overflowing with the Spirit. I never did it until Christ came into my life. The Spirit is just so strong in me, Cleo, that I have to manifest it somehow. Especially on the road."

He got up and walked to the door. The early light caught his face in a poignant way as he turned toward me, raven haired.

"I'm getting together a Bible-study group, Cleo. Some of the players are interested. So is Mr. Chicken. I thought we'd get together before and after each game and take turns reading the Bible and telling about how our lives got turned around once we let Christ come into our hearts."

"All I want to do is play hockey. That's all I want to do."

"You'll feel different after you come to one of our meetings. All the Birdwells I've ever known have turned their lives around. Your Birdwell is a real good Christian."

He went naked into the hall, softly closing the door behind him. There was a brief silence. Then I heard a chambermaid, right outside my door, saying matter-of-factly, "You better get to your room, mister. This ain't no Motel in the Woods. Keep your hands at your sides. I don't want to get involved, so as long as you keep moving and keep your hands at your sides at all times, I never saw a thing."

Early light poured softly into my room. Soon, everything was silent again.

The four seasons in Badger.

My mother made sure I knew the names of plants and flowers growing around the yard and climbing up the house. Lilac bushes, forsythia, wisteria, hydrangea, and the one I could never remember, which is spirea. This is an old-fashioned, small-town kind of bush—very large, with small, lacy, white flowers that come out in late spring and into early summer.

You knew it was midspring when you heard birdsong at dusk. The light at that hour had a soft, rosy glow that was especially pretty because most of the houses in Badger are red brick, and I would walk down the street hearing sparrows and thrushes and blue jays and seeing the rich, pink glow on the buildings and side-

walks, and it sometimes gave me almost a sad feeling, a feeling of longing and regret and separation. It made me feel I was missing something. Missing the whole point of something. But isn't this what spring usually does, the fragrances it carries on the breeze, the old maples coming into green, the way the river current, the Ohio, is noticeably swifter? It makes you feel a longing for something. You are home and safe, and the air is sweet, but there is something, some important thing, that is missing, and you never find out what it is.

Easter was pretty big in Badger. Forget Good Friday. That's not a Badger kind of day. Badger doesn't have the kind of temperament that really digs in and enjoys a day like that.

After I got out of bed on Easter Sunday morning, I roamed all over the house looking for my Easter basket, which my father usually hid in a fairly predictable place to spare himself the tension of my wandering off in the wrong direction. Inside the basket I'd find jelly beans, yellow marshmallow chickens, a dark chocolate bunny, and odds and ends.

I never ate black jelly beans. Nobody liked black jelly beans. As I recall, licorice was not generally liked in Badger.

Yes, and we dyed Easter eggs, my mother and I, Saturday night before Easter morning, boiling water and vinegar and using only primary colors—red, yellow and blue. The Easter eggs.

I almost forgot pussy willows. It was important to find the first pussy willows in bloom and steal them off whatever bush they were on and hide them in your bedroom. Don't ask me why.

And violets. They grew down by the river, in a big field. I always picked a bunch for Dorothy on Mother's Day morning. Holidays. Holidays were signposts of the seasons and carefully observed. (We've already seen Decoration Day.)

Basically, Badger was a lilac, pussy willow, violet, forsythia, maple tree town in spring. Nothing fancy.

Summer was heat, stillness, and shade. The peaceful look of the wide streets and wide sidewalks, and the wonderful smell of sweet grass up in the woods in the hills back of town. And swimming every day in Buck's Run or Snowy Owl Glen. And eating onion

sandwiches—sliced onions on white bread with butter and salt and pepper, day after day.

Almost every house had a front porch, and people sat on rockers or swings or gliders, talking. As small kids, we used to put those polly noses (maple tree wings) on our noses, and we also ate sour grass, which might have been sorrel.

What broke the stillness and peace were gigantic thunderstorms. About once a week, the sky would get dark, and then turn flat yellow and foreboding, and you'd see lightning shoot across the sky, and you'd hear loud thunder—great, whomping cracks of thunder. Everybody stayed away from windows, radios, telephones, TVs etc. But at the same time, it was *safe*. Assuming you were sitting in the middle of the house and the storm wasn't too violent, you felt the safety and security of a summer storm, a sweet-smelling familiar thing after all, which would stir up the air even before the heavens opened and which meant summer every bit as much as potato salad picnics on the Fourth.

The river was green in summer and flowed gently, with hardly any current to it. Hollyhocks were blooming, showy spikes of flowers. And the bumblebees were everywhere, buzzing around your head and walking on your onion sandwich.

On the Fourth, it would always be about a hundred degrees, and there were firecrackers and cap pistols and potato salad and bees, and people would start talking about summer being practically over, because Badger people were always early in that regard.

When summer was really over was when you heard locusts humming in the afternoon. This *definitely* meant the end of summer, even though they weren't locusts but cicadas and even though there were still plenty of hot, hot days ahead. It was a safe sound, the wonderful, hot buzzing of the so-called locusts, but it was also a little sad because it meant summer was ending and because the locusts sometimes fell out of trees onto your head.

Locusts buzzed loudest when it was hottest. We believed this and knew it to be true. It was one of about seven thousand things we knew to be true and which made Badger the beautiful, sad place that it was.

Labor Day was the saddest of all holidays. The end of summer. The last picnic. The final weekend before school. The last chance to swim in Buck's Run.

Sad picnics. All over Badger and the surrounding countryside, you saw groups of sad picnickers on Labor Day. Dorothy would get up very early, about 6:00 A.M., in order to get things really right, traditionally and totally and precisely right. By nine, we'd all be in the car waiting for my brother Kenny, who would be standing off on the edge of the lawn doing "walk the dog" with his yo-yo.

Then we'd go driving around, amid a lot of squabbling, looking for the Perfect Last Picnic Place. It was always ninety degrees on Labor Day. It was one of the things we all knew about Labor Day. It would be ninety degrees.

This was the holiday that led us into fall, when the light was soft and gold, and the leaves turned red, yellow, rust, winy dark, and amber. Not to get competitive about it, but it *did* out-Vermont Vermont, and the colors lasted longer than New England colors.

The cider mill up Cider Mill Road was turning out cold, fresh cider every day. All the stupid bumblebees were dead. And people raked leaves and burned them right in the gutter in front of their houses. My father raked our leaves into big piles and I would jump into each pile about up to my waist and then stand off to the side as he and my brother lighted the piles of leaves.

The smell of burning leaves would hang over the town. A lovely, safe, haunting smell. The leaves.

Football was very big in Badger. It outdrew the churches, the schools, the cemeteries. Days were still pretty warm, hazy-golden in the afternoon, and nights were crisp and cool.

The buckeyes had fallen by now and opened, and we collected the glossy brown nuts for luck. There were many vegetable gardens in town, so we'd see pumpkins growing right in people's yards. Halloween.

Sometimes fog rolled up from the river and was so thick you couldn't see across the street. Cars went by slowly, with headlights on, and mothers walked their children to school.

I could tell you about Indian summer in Badger, but maybe it's

enough just to say the words, and they're the two words my mother always said were the most beautiful in the language when put one after the other. Indian summer.

Then one grayish day you'd get up and smell snow in the air. Sure enough, about 2:15 in the afternoon, the first big, feathery flakes would come dancing down. At night, snow sparkled on the lawns and porch steps.

I think we can say Thanksgiving was properly part of winter, especially if we consider Groundhog Day the first chilly glimpse of spring.

In Badger, Thanksgiving was a gray day with a yellowish sky in the afternoon. Always. My mother had already made the stuffing the day before, as well as the cranberry relish and the mince pie and the pumpkin pie. The turkey was big, about twenty pounds, and the stuffing was bread and sage and parsley and onions and butter. No fancy chestnut or sausage stuff. Small-town stuffing.

And the traditional dinner. Fruit cocktail, turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, celery and olives, brussels sprouts, creamed onions, cranberry relish, and the pies.

White meat was very important. There is never enough white meat. During Tom Spencer Birdwell's carving of the turkey, there were earnest discussions about thigh versus leg, how many slices of white meat, who gets the outside slice with the skin. Unlike our squabbling over picnic sites in the car, there was a lot of self-sacrifice here. Maybe this was because my Christian Science uncle and aunt were usually there, and Kenny and I associated that whole religion, and them with it, with pure, weird, silent suffering.

That night we ate turkey sandwiches with lettuce and mayonnaise, and started planning for Christmas.

Our plane circled Logan Airport for about forty-five minutes. We found out later that a man had wired himself with dynamite and gone out on the runway to dramatize the fact that his dime hadn't been returned even though he'd gotten a busy signal in a public phone booth.

I spent the afternoon roaming the streets of Boston. It was gray

and slushy. I kept running into my teammates, traveling in small, morose bands.

I went back to the hotel. I tried to sleep. I tried to read. I tried to watch TV.

The game against the Bruins was what they call a lackluster affair. We lost, but no one cared. From my cubicle, I heard J.P. tell the press, "We don't play defensive. We take the body, no way that puck goes in the net seven times. What is worse, I left my cigarettes on the bench."

I went back to the hotel, where I called Shaver from deep under the covers.

"Cleo, you ought to start wearing a helmet."

"Why?"

"I read about last night's game. More than half the players wear helmets now. You don't have to feel a helmet means you're a sissy."

"Shaver, I know that. Don't you think I know that? I just go through phases. I've worn helmets four or five times in my career. I'm in a bareheaded phase, that's all."

"Is it vanity?"

"A little maybe."

"Is it bravado?"

"Sure, some of that, too."

"Is it stupidity?"

"Now you've hit on it."

We both laughed.

"Any mail?" I said.

"Nope."

"Did you talk to Dr. Glass?"

"Nope."

"How do you feel?"

"Lonely and depressed."

"That's the Human Condition," I told him. "Only proves you're human."

"Sure, be funny, but if something happened to me, I could be lying here dead or dying for two weeks, until you got back and



opened the door. You'll spend the rest of your life paralyzed with guilt because you didn't call. A simple phone call."

"I'll call. I *will* call."

"No one would miss me if anything happened. No one would care. No one would know."

"The doorman would know. Mr. Willie. He'd know."

"He's not here day and night."

"He's a twenty-four-hour doorman."

"That's an expression. The man has to go home and sleep."

"He sleeps right there. In the little office. He sleeps while you sleep. There's no overlapping. It's in the lease."

"Go ahead, Cleo, be funny."

"I'll definitely call."

"No, you won't."

"I will."

"You'll forget. And in two weeks you'll come home and call my name and there'll be no answer. You'll walk into the bedroom, white with fear."

"Shaver, I'm telling you I'll call."

"Why would you want to call someone like me? *I* wouldn't. I'd be too busy living a normal, happy, productive life."

On the plane to Buffalo next day, my stomach made funny little buzzing sounds like two cartoon characters talking to each other. Usually I hear these sounds when I've had too light a dinner and am lying hungry in bed hoping I'll fall asleep right away. It always happens on the road. Everything does.

Naturally there was a blizzard in Buffalo. The plane was like the scene of an airborne earthquake. Things kept flying out of the galley, and coats and blankets bounced down from the overhead compartments and filled the aisles. A spot of heavy weather. Passengers shot white-lipped looks at each other. To be accurate, it wasn't a case of shooting looks; it was a situation where you accidentally caught each other's eye. People never purposely look at each other in this kind of turbulence. You only look at members of the crew, hoping for some indication that the aircraft is *supposed* to be flying sideways. You look at people with eagles on their breasts.

Fear in airplanes is a terrific phenomenon. It is ripe for a giant statistical study. I'd like to see a study based on factors like race and sex. The deepest things. Although I guess you'd also have to consider national origin, religion, and income bracket. Age would be one of the things that's beside the point. In a plane flying through a blizzard, there are no adults.

I get the impression from all the air miles I've logged that poorer people do a lot of the worrying. This seems unfair, and it could simply be that they show it more. People who carry shopping bags onto the plane. People who don't know how to use the toilets. Just locking yourself into one of those stainless steel toilets can be a culture shock, I imagine, for someone who's never dealt with this kind of tightly packed efficiency—efficiency so compact and stainless-steel-like that a person could easily believe he is in there to be tortured or driven mad. How little we must think of ourselves, a person might conclude, to be able to jettison our waste so instantly and efficiently with a blue chemical chaser.

But maybe the darker people, the poorer people, are simply closer to the roots of their own fear than are well-to-do people, who have painted over their fear with graduate school and being able to order in French. That's why we need this study. To discover how much fear is lying buried in expensive Glen plaid and cashmere and crushed leather.

Religious people impress me with the maturity and ripeness of their fear. They don't have panicky fear. It is more a quiet trembling. Priests are good at fear. They are close to death. They expect it any time. All their training since childhood has given them a huge awareness of death, and when you mix in a little hell and a little eternal suffering, you have some tight-lipped, trembling men and you have some men who are listening intently to every shift in the engine noise for some evidence that things are about to get a lot worse.

People are always ultrapolite on planes. I think this is because our awareness of death is at a higher level than it is when we're on a bus or ferry boat. You don't push or shove when you're moving down the aisle of a giant, gleaming death machine. With a couple

of priests aboard, and all the mature death content they project with their shiny black suits and talcumed faces, we might find ourselves at an all-time high as far as morbid awareness is concerned. We don't feel the same way about nuns, I don't think. Nuns are cute and amusing, like Japanese.

Again, maybe religious people just show their fear more than others. It could be that the middle-aged, white businessman who flies two or three weekdays out of every five, all year around, who carries an American Airlines Admirals Club card close to his heart ("Guests are welcome only when accompanied by an Admiral"), who knows all the little tricks of air travel down to wrapping different items of small clothing in separate plastic baggies and how to get a bulkhead seat and exactly when to arrive at the so-called baggage carousel—maybe this man is simply a master of *hiding* his fear, and has learned over the course of four hundred thousand miles of flying how to appear crisp and businesslike in the face of burnt-out engines, jagged streaks of lightning, and ski-masked, religious-fanatical hijackers with explosives strapped to their crotches. You need people like this on a rough flight. They are Admirals, whether they're faking their crispness or not. I've never flown with a planeload of pilgrims going to Mecca, but I'll bet that a computer-parts salesman from Grand Island, Nebraska, couldn't help but settle that bunch down in a spot of heavy weather. The industrial nations still have a lot to impart. Sure, it may all be masterful concealment. The Admiral may be shaken to his very nerve endings, but as long as he imparts confidence and steadiness, he is doing the intelligent thing. This may be the whole point of Western civilization. How to be afraid intelligently. How to get more out of your fear than the other fellow gets out of his.

Martini drinkers are fearful people. They strike me as people who consider hysteria a form of self-expression. You see Scotch, wine, bourbon drinkers, and you can't be sure how they'll behave when the stewardess starts dropping words like *flotation device* and *fetal position*. With martini drinkers, you sense an inward cringing. They are hard-faced and fearful. There is something about the combination of gin and dry vermouth that points to cow-

ardice. If you sit next to a *woman* drinking martinis on a plane, you are definitely in the presence of fear. These days we are not supposed to use the word *hysterical* when we discuss women, but there is a certain hysterical element in the drinking of martinis by women on airplanes. I can't stand the drink myself, so I don't know firsthand what the connection is, but they are definitely a fear potion, martinis, and they are not meant either to calm hysteria or to induce hysteria. They are simply part of the *ritual* of hysteria that accompanies leaving the earth in a silver bird, in my opinion.

And this is why the airplane is the perfect laboratory for a study of fear. You are cut off from the earth, from all the things that console you or support you. Your fear is pure. It is pure fear. It is naked and isolated and pure. You sit there helpless and practically shining in the purity of your fear. It is a kind of sainthood. It is that pure.

Anyway, we went bucketing over western New York and I was wishing the pilot would just set it down anywhere and then *taxi* the final thirty-six miles to the airport. I was in a window seat, darting wild looks at the weather, and steady defenseman Nils Nilsson was on the aisle, pretending to read a magazine, with the seat between us full of debris from the overhead compartments, when who comes edging past Nils Nilsson's knees and onto the pile of blankets, coats and sweaters but Ranger coach J. P. Larousse, his eyes full of pure fear.

"You are not afraid?" he said.

"I am afraid."

"You don't look."

"I may not look, but I'm afraid. Any sane person would be."

"I have always hated this to fly. But it has to be. This is the world we have made, eh? It is foolish. It should be a game for kids with sticks on a frozen lake. What are we doing up in this white air, five hundred miles from home, stiff with terror? I am stiff with terror."

He shrugged and laughed, half boyishly. Steef with terrour, he said. I liked the way that sounded. He stroked his small, dark,

squarish jaw, and lit up a cigarette, although the no smoking light had been aflash for at least fifteen minutes.

As usual, Jeep was wearing a dark knit V-neck sweater under his suit jacket, which always made me think he belonged in a café somewhere in Europe, taking tiny sips out of a demitasse cup and arguing about politics with three other men in knit sweaters. He reached down under him and pushed all the blankets and things onto the floor. Next to him, Nils Nilsson continued to pretend to read, not realizing that he was crumpling the magazine in his effort to hold it steady.

“It is not easy for a man to tell a woman he is afraid,” J.P. said.

“There’s no one to practice on.”

“Being afraid is easy. Telling a woman, this is not easy. When you are my age, and French, and have three or four children, eh, and a house with so much snow on the roof that it is terrible what could happen, then it is not easy to express what you are feeling.”

He was a passionate smoker of cigarettes. You’ve seen these people. It is a performance. The way they light up. The way they inhale. The way they *hold* the cigarette. Every time Jeep blew out smoke, it was the French Resistance all over again. It was that dramatic. I thought the German tanks were making a left turn past his mother’s house. Between the sharp, dramatic gestures of smoking, and the smoke itself, and his genuinely soulful and half-world-weary eyes, I definitely had the feeling this was a life-and-death conversation, and every time the plane bounced and heaved this feeling grew stronger.

J.P. put his hand on mine, which surprised me. It’s not the usual coach-player gesture.

“This is the life we have chosen,” he said. “It is a nightmare life in many ways. I am sick to my body to think of my children without a father for eight, nine months of the year, and all that snow on the roof. Who can I get to come and shovel the snow from a pitched roof? You don’t mind that I talk to you this way, one of my players? It is the danger. It brings people close, eh? We spill our guts. All the lonely times on the road. The bad taste of defeat, eh? No one to speak French to, which you can’t understand, this disaster, for a French person, beyond belief. But I talk to you with

my heart, which none of the other players it can happen, because men do not speak this way with men. It is the danger.”

He looked at me with immense soulfulness, mixed with the saintly fear brought on by the blizzard. It is the donjaire, he said. I liked the way that sounded. I am steef with terrour. It is the donjaire.

He gripped my hand tightly.

“You hear this noise?”

“What?” I said.

“The plane, eh? It gets worse.”

I listened carefully.

“Very close to us,” he said. “You hear this? Like a crack in the hull. Or a piston is missing.”

“That’s my stomach, Jeep. It makes that sound when I’m hungry.”

“It’s not a piston, this noise?”

“It doesn’t rumble, my particular stomach. It sort of buzzes. That’s my stomach you hear. Stay calm.”

He eased his death grip on my hand, and shrugged and kind of smiled, and then a stewardess came along and asked him to extinguish his smoking materials, and the pilot on the intercom said we would be landing real soon, the Good Lord willing.

When it was over, and we were all filing down the aisle toward the nose exit, it was interesting to see how quickly we all forgot that we’d been stricken by the purest fear just minutes ago, all of us white-lipped and a little dry in the throat. We didn’t even show mild relief. That seemed strange to me. Were we concealing it, or had we truly forgotten? It seemed to me that if you experience intense fear for a period of fifteen or twenty minutes, your sense of relief on finding yourself safe and sound should last at least that long, if not for days and weeks afterward. But our relief didn’t seem to last more than half a minute, if that.

What was the big hurry to resume normal living? Shouldn’t we have had a four-day, hell-raising party to celebrate the fact that we were still alive? What was the special appeal of normal living that we should want to get back to it so soon?

At the exit, two stewardesses and a large, pink-faced, impecca-

bly shaven fellow, with eagles, condors, and ribbons all over his uniform and hat, stood smiling at the departing passengers, and wishing them well.

I felt an urge to talk to these people, to ask them human questions about fear, danger, and survival. But I knew it was useless. Why disturb their smiles? What could they say, anyway?

“Thanks for flying Condor-Eagle.”

“Have a nice day.”

“Enjoy your stay on the north slope of Mount Everest.”

After an hour and a half of tire-spinning, fishtailing, and terrific skidding, our bus went into a 355-degree slow-motion swivel, coming to a stop about five blocks from our hotel. We got out, got our luggage, and trooped the rest of the way through five feet of snow.

The game with the Sabres wasn't until the following night. There was a practice scheduled for this afternoon, but because of the weather Jeep decided we'd never make it to the arena and called it off.

In my room, I read a page or two of *The Desert Nectar of Wadi Assad*, a selection from his early writings. But either I wasn't in the mood or his youthful stuff was just too fortune cookie-ish, and I put the book aside and stood by the window watching the snow blow around in great, colorless, swirling masses that went in seven directions at once. Of course, what you want in a snowfall is a slow, even, regular rhythm. But I knew I'd get into an even worse mood if I started going into snowfall standards with myself or listing snowfall criteria or recalling the feathery Badger snows.

The phone rang, to my relief. It was Glenway Packer in New York, New York. He said he was trying to set up the first Kelloid shooting for Los Angeles the day the Rangers were scheduled to play there. He would let me know for certain in a day or two. He assured me that the script was acceptable and even offered to read it to me over the phone. I told him that wouldn't be necessary. No company that's located in a place called Battle Creek, Michigan, would ever allow suggestive lines to get into their scripts or show an athlete's cleavage.

“Have you heard from Floss?” I said. “Any word at all?”

“I received a telex from Hong Kong, two cables from Caracas, and a phone call from Acapulco. The Hong Kong telex simply said she was on her way to Caracas. ‘En route Caracas.’ The first cable from Caracas reported her arrival there. ‘Arrived Caracas.’ The second cable said she was on her way to Acapulco. ‘Due Acapulco.’ Then, just minutes ago, I received a phone call from Acapulco. Finally, I thought, we will find out what is going on here. We are not only associates, after all. Floss is an old and dear friend. Very dear.”

“What did she say, Glenway?”

“I don’t know. She was incoherent. She wept for two solid minutes. She was speaking as she wept, but I wasn’t able to make out a word. She was incoherent with grief, I suppose. I thought at first it was madness that was making her incoherent. But there was no rhythmic sobbing. She wept freely and incoherently, without pattern. This is cause for hope, I believe.”

“Poor Floss,” I said. “Let me ask you this, Glenway. I know you don’t personally handle Archie Brewster’s affairs, but since he is a client of the firm, I wonder if you happen to know where he is playing tennis right now.”

“Lord, you amaze me, Cleo. You are quicker than a massive migraine. I’ve just checked that very thing. Archie is entered in the Mexican Grand Slam, due to start today in Acapulco. What does it all mean?”

“It means poor little Floss, that’s what it means. If you hear from her again, and she’s coherent, I sure won’t hate you if you let me know what she says.”

There was a pause. But he wasn’t quite ready to say goodbye.

“Till Shalizar, Cleo,” is what he was ready to say.

“Till Shalizar?”

“We’re expecting you at Shalizar.”

“Well, that’s sweet, Glenway. You did say something last time, but I didn’t know it was as firm as all that. It’s really firm, I guess.”

“We’re expecting you.”

“Who’s expecting me?”



“Mother and I, of course. The family.”

“You realize I play hockey. I play hockey, Glenway. People tend to forget. We have a fierce, demanding, split-second schedule. Games, planes, practices. This is modern hockey. We’re not talking about a game of shinny outside some prairie school in Saskatchewan.”

“All taken care of, Cleo. All seen to. Between Los Angeles and Vancouver, the team spends two days in Atlanta, just forty short miles from Shalizar.”

“Well, good, I guess. That’s sweet, Glenway.”

“I will arrange transport.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “Shalizar. I’ll probably need a break about then.”

We said goodbye, and I went back to the window to look at the swirling snow. I tried to read. I tried to sleep. I tried to watch TV.

Ferguson, McPherson, McLeod, and McCall came by to see if I wanted to go to a movie with them. There was a theater right around the corner and if we formed a human chain, we might get there with minimum loss of life. A costume epic was playing, one of those things which is based on a clash of ideas and which the entire British film industry takes part in, all in cameo roles. An intelligent costume epic. Well, good. Under the circumstances, this was an outstanding suggestion, a movie, and I put on several layers of clothes and we went stamping out into the snow. We made it to the theater in about twenty minutes of hard trekking in zero visibility, and went down the aisle, just seconds before the first showing, and piled our coats in the row in front of us, and waited for Bruce McLeod to come hurrying back from the candy counter with popcorn and soft drinks and disgusting, treachery, artificial-nut-filled chunks of brown chemical waste, and settled back in terrific anticipation as the house lights dimmed and the plastic curtain disappeared into the roof, when what comes on the screen but the most amateurish, jumpy, unsynchronized, beige-tinted pornographic feature in the whole history of Cinematic Sleaze.

*The Open Kimono* with Seymour Hare.

Brian McCall goes strolling up the aisle to the manager’s office,

returning a minute later (as a colossal orgy unfolds aboard a houseboat) to tell us the costume epic is next week. This appears to be Sleaze Week in the Niagara Frontier.

There I was in the mood for a clash of ideas. Royally garbed fellows with four-foot-wide puckered shoulders and one or two middle-aged women with deep cleavages, because this is a well-researched movie down to the smallest detail of Elizabethan footwear. And long, talky, literate scenes in which the major conflicting ideas are presented. And excellent character portrayals and a lot of clear pronunciation, as only the British know how to do. And trumpets.

I don't like pornography in the best of times. When I'm in the mood for something that's frankly a little high-toned but all the more absorbing because of it, you can't blame me for being upset when the management dishes up this series of beige-tinted orgies.

Anyway, I announced I was leaving in a voice well above a whisper, and no sooner are the words out of my mouth than I see something up on the screen that just about rivets me to my chair in a state of total, profound shock. Shock that won't go away. Shock that I carry around to this day like some awful, furry thing living in my handbag.

It was unmistakable. My brother Kenny. Kenny Birdwell, my brother, who is supposed to be a microcomputer technician in Sunnyvale, California.

His face is sticking out of the middle of this writhing mound of bodies, this massive pileup, this multiracial, bisexual, extended family of people doing nameless things to each other inside a foundering houseboat at high noon.

*No, no, no, no, no.*

But it was him all right. I'd know that smirky little smile of his anywhere. And the rimless spectacles. He was wearing his glasses in the midst of all that fleshy upheaval. Clean shaven. He'd shaved his Whole Earth Catalog beard. His dolphin-obsessed, macrobiotic, Vermont-commune beard. But definitely unmistakable, all the same. My brother Ken. From Badger. Dorothy Birdwell's boy.

I practically staggered out of there. I was numbed by the impact

of it all. I don't know how I got back to the hotel. All I remember is spending the rest of the afternoon flat on my back looking past my own chin at a bunch of nitwit local newscasts about the storm, most of them featuring a man standing waist deep in snow, in a live report, shouting, "I'm standing waist deep in snow! Look how deep! It's up to my waist!"

I ate a quiet dinner in my room. Then I called Shaver. We had the same conversation we'd had when I was in Philadelphia. This probably meant that when I called him from Chicago, we would have the same conversation we'd had when I was in Boston. With luck, we'd start a new cycle in Detroit.

I didn't realize I'd ordered dinner so early. It was only seven when I finished. Five hours before I'd be able to fall asleep. Twenty-five hours to game time. Nineteen years before I'd forget the sight of my brother in that festering mass of bodies.

The phone rang and I pounced on it.

"Cleo, are you alone?"

Sanders Meade.

"If someone's there, it's all right. I understand. You couldn't know I'd call. Just say, 'Wrong room' or, 'No, we didn't order banana splits' and I'll know someone's there and the person will think it was just an errant dialer and I'll hang up and take a book or magazine down to the corner coffee shop and sit at one of the small tables out in the open because you have to be two or more to sit in a booth, and I'll read quietly while I wait for my order to arrive, and then I'll eat fast because I'll be out in the open, alone, not bothering to linger over coffee, and I'll come back here and make myself some hot chocolate."

"No, we didn't order banana splits," I said.

"Someone *is* there. I knew it. Male or female, Cleo? If it's female, say, 'Where's my dry cleaning?' "

It was Sanders Meade weather, wasn't it? A Sanders Meade night, wild and howling. I thought back almost nostalgically to the simple carefreeness of that episode. And the good food and wine. And the early, grinding aspects of our lust.

"I'm alone, Sanders. It's all right."

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“I’m tempted to fly up. We need to have a good talk. I’m not sure I know where our relationship is going and I think we ought to sit down and kind of thrash it out, don’t you, over some good food and wine.”

“There’s nothing to thrash out. It was one night, Sanders. That’s life on the road in big-time sports. You know that, I know that. What’s to thrash out?”

“I don’t think our night was born out of desperation or restlessness or the kind of fast living that goes on in the pro ranks.”

“What was it born out of?”

“Lust.”

“Well, lust, okay, so what’s the difference?”

“The air was crackling with it.”

“It was still one night.”

“We were lonely, too. That’s a potent combination.”

“There is no relationship, Sanders.”

“There’s something. Call it what you will. Relationship, attachment, lingering memory. Call it sight, call it sound. Are you sure you’re alone?”

“I’ll look again if you’d like.”

“You’re speaking in short sentences.”

“It’s been a rough day, that’s all. I don’t have much to say, I guess.”

“The weather. It’s the weather.”

“It’s hard sometimes. That’s all. It’s just hard.”

“Hey, you really are upset.”

“We sit in these rooms. Four walls and a bed. You can’t go out because of a blizzard. You can’t watch TV because it’s so depressingly awful. You can’t go to the movies because they show your brother having an orgy. I can’t even read Wadi Assad. I can’t even do that.”

“You can’t read Wadi Assad?”

“My one comfort and solace. I can’t concentrate. Or maybe I’ve read too much of his stuff and I’m just sick and tired of it.”

“Hey, I don’t like the sound of this. I think I will fly up. Good food and wine, Cleo. A blizzard. A hotel in a distant city.”

“You can’t fly up. They’ve closed the airport. Even if you could, it would attract attention. The Garden prexy doesn’t travel with the teams.”

“No one will know. We’ll meet secretly. It’ll add a whole new dimension. There’s nothing that intensifies a relationship like the element of secrecy.”

“There is no relationship. There are just two people bound together by a night on the road. That’s all it was. A night on the road. Torkle versus the Sex Fiends. That’s the name of our relationship and the extent of our relationship. The Night of the Living Torkle. Escape of the Torkle People.”

“All right, Cleo.”

“Gone with the Torkle.”

“I get the idea,” he said.

“How Green Was My Torkle.”

“That’s not funny. I refuse to respond. It’s cheap humor.”

“King Solomon’s Torkle.”

“You could use that word with anything and it would *seem* funny.”

“The Loneliness of the Long Distance Torkle.”

“But it’s *not* funny. Not really. And I’m frankly a little surprised to be hearing such shabby attempts at humor from someone like you.”

“Torkle of Arabia.”

“I think you’re surprised, too. It must be the mood you’re in.”

“Torklin’ in the Rain.”

“It’s the mood you’re in. It’s made you destructive. This is how you manifest it.”

“The Torkles Karamazov.”

“You’re compromising your own sense of humor. You’re destroying your standards.”

“Separate Torkles.”

“You’re reaching for catharsis. You want to get rid of your tension and depression by bringing all this cheap humor to the surface.”

“Torkles Aweigh.”

“It’s a purging. That’s what it is. Now I begin to understand.”

“Far From the Madding Torkle.”

“Sorry Wrong Torkle.”

“The Day the Torkle Stood Still.”

“I see what you’re doing. Meet Me in Saint Torkle.”

“Wuthering Torkles.”

“The Maltese Torkle. It kind of cleanses, doesn’t it?”

“Inherit the Torkle.”

“I’m definitely coming up there. It’ll be good for me to get out. Hughes Tool is telling people I’m still in Boulder. They’re not ready to have me come into the office yet. I don’t go anywhere except to the corner coffee shop. I want to come up, Cleo. The weather won’t stop me. I’ll find a way to get there. Isn’t it about time I *acted*?”

There was a knock at the door. I told Sanders it would be a mistake to come to Buffalo, but down deep I guess I wasn’t really against the idea. It would have been something to look forward to in a way. I pictured him showing up in a sheepskin coat, a pair of partly buckled, flapping galoshes, and a low, furry hat with collapsible sides to protect the ears, looking like some derring-do commuter who makes it in from the suburbs during the worst storm in years. Only Ivy Leaguers make it in on days like that.

I hung up and went to open the door. It was J. P. Larousse. The pure fear had left his eyes, but he still had that life-and-death manner about him as he walked gravely in, a little hunched over, gesturing with the ever-present cigarette.

“It is a big risk we take,” he said.

“What risk?”

“I don’t like it. I am in the room of a player who is also a woman. This is foolish, eh? It is not a smart way to run a hockey club. The media finds out I am in the room of this player, she is a woman, they send me to my death. It is a great danger.”

He walked across the room, shaking his head slowly, and sat leaning well forward in a low chair by the window. It is a great donjaire.

“But I must come here, you see. I put it in their hands, the

media, if to send me to my death or if to make me live. It is no longer a choice of my own. I have fought in my heart to stay away. For three, four days, I don't know how many, this battle of the heart goes on. Tonight I wave the white flag. I give up to my heart. I say, 'I lose, you win.' "

He shrugged shamefacedly and gave me a half-boyish smile.

"For a French person, on the road, alone, eating sliced bread, this is a tragedy, with children, three or four, I cannot begin to explain, without a language, month after month, in these tempests of snow, flying through the air in a seven hundred and seven. I cough when I am smoking, I cough when I am stopping to smoke. We lose another game, I will have to wonder when I will fall to sleep. The Negroes drive cabs. It is the only way I can relax, driving with the Negroes in or out the arena, in or out the airport, with the playing, the flying, the soft white bread, and no one to speak a language to, so I talk only with my mouth, I talk only grammar and words, eight, nine months of the year, I talk with the front of my mouth. There is no communication from the heart or soul, they are absolutely not in touch with the mouth. The team is not playing. The team is standing around. Everyone is out for a skate. They do not chop the man's ankles. Before I know it, I am once more stiff with terror in a seven hundred and seven. My children, at least they have a language, they speak, they talk the words, and a roof over their heads, which it is full of snow, the winters in Quebec that are fantastic beyond belief, to make me worry some more, sitting in a Negro cab."

With his knuckles, he stroked his tough, darkish, day-old beard. Jeep's beard always looked a day old. It never changed, morning or night. I liked the sandpapery sound his hand made, rubbing the beard.

The only other chair in the room was right next to his chair. I wanted to find out what he had in mind before I made any moves one of us might regret. So I remained standing, because the only other place to sit was on the bed.

This is the thing about hotel rooms. The bed tends to dominate. Of course, beds are the whole point. You can't deny that. But there

ought to be a way to make the bed less conspicuous and all-absorbing. Some sort of Glenway Packer cunning space. I don't mean the radical extreme of pallets. Just a more minimal bed, a cleverer bed. Anyone who has opened a hotel door to a member of the opposite sex knows what I mean. The room is all bed. People are always bumping kneecaps as they try to skirt the bed. Depending on who's involved, there's either a slight embarrassment or a kind of dirty smirk in the air.

Although I have to admit I didn't feel either of these with J.P. in the room. Maybe it was his life-or-death manner. Or maybe it was just that he was French, or at least French Canadian, and therefore somewhat European, and lent a mature presence, a world-weariness even, that was grown-up enough to ignore the bed, or to accept the bed for what it was, to take the bed on its own terms, to feel at ease either with the bed or without the bed.

"So what's on your mind, Coach?"

He reached behind him and turned the three-way lamp down to its lowest wattage.

"I want to speak French with a woman."

He got up and walked past me and double-bolted the door. I looked at him a little wide-eyed. He twisted the extra lock on the knob.

"That's it? You want to speak French with a woman?"

He went to the window and pulled the curtains together.

"It is impossible to understand the travail of this condition if you do not speak French, or write French, or read French, or hear French."

He went to the adjoining window and pulled the curtains together. Then he picked up the phone, dialed room service, and ordered two cognacs.

"That's probably true," I said. "I do not understand the travail. I probably do not. But since I don't speak French, how can we do this thing you want to do?"

"I will speak," he said.

"All right, you will speak. But I won't know what you're saying. I do not hear French."



He turned a dial on the low cabinet near the bed, and soft, stringy, hard-to-describe music came out.

"I do not write French, I do not read French, I do not hear French."

"It is not necessary," he said. "You will know what I am saying. This is the fantastic thing about my language. You will know. You are a woman, eh? What am I?"

"A man."

"You will know."

He closed the bathroom door, maybe to shut out flushing sounds from nearby rooms. Then he went and sat back down, and this time he motioned me to sit in the chair alongside. Well, the man wanted to speak French. It was obviously a deep need. And the man didn't want to raise his voice. I could understand that. Some languages lose something when they're hollered. You could probably holler in German all day and nobody would know the difference. If you were speaking Swedish, you'd want to keep it down. I've known seven or eight Swedes in my hockey travels and I've never heard a Swede holler. Not in Swedish, anyway. I don't think it's possible to holler in Swedish.

Anyway, I went and sat by Jeep. He was hunched well forward, making dramatic gestures with his cigarette, and I was wondering what he was going to say now that he'd arranged this whole thing.

He started right in. The man didn't waste any time. I'll give him that. He looked at me with deep expressiveness, and his left hand started revolving in the air, and he talked and talked and talked. It was kind of interesting. Obviously the man needed to talk. And it was dramatic, flowing, heartfelt talk. It was good talk. I could tell it was. I nodded to show him I knew how much it meant to him and how interesting it was to hear.

After a while I began to feel I was getting the drift of what Jeep was saying. It was mysterious, it was almost magical, but I really felt I was starting to understand. Of course a lot of the words were close to English words. That helped. I heard the French pronunciations of *tragedy*, *folly*, *melancholy*, *disenchantment*, and *suicide*, and also the adjectives *difficult*, *intolerable*, and *miserable*, all three of which I think we both got from the Latin.

He talked with smoke coming out of his mouth and the cigarette in his hand, with the cigarette in his mouth and smoke in his face, with smoke coming out of his nose and tobacco on his tongue, with his hand in the air and smoke in my face, with the cigarette in his hand, tobacco on his tongue, smoke in his face and my hand in the air.

The waiter came with our cognac.

Jeep talked about feelings between men and women. I caught *compassion*, *grace*, *suffocation*, and *combat*. Later I caught *bizarre*, *mauve*, and *plateau*, which made me think I was losing the drift. I sat back, relaxed, sipped my cognac, listened to the music, and let the words flow over me, not even trying to understand.

The words flowed over me. His rhythm went from rushing and dramatic to a softer, soothing, easier pace. I felt he'd probably gotten the most urgent stuff out of the way, the things that were crushing him and paining him, and he was beginning to embellish at his leisure, to develop themes, to search out psychological niceties, to savor the rich, sweet, orangy centers of his words and phrases.

I didn't try to understand. I let it all flow. I slipped out of my shoes and stretched my legs straight out so that my feet rested on the end of the bed. I noticed Jeep interrupt himself ever so briefly to glance at this little stretching thing. He sipped his cognac, glancing. I realized it was the bed that had caused him to pause. I had reached out to touch the bed, and even though it was a perfectly natural thing to do, with no other piece of furniture handy to rest my feet on, it was significant, he probably thought, in the sense that it introduced a new element into the combination of music, cognac, soft lighting, locked doors, drawn curtains, and French.

He blew some smoke through his nose in a particularly dramatic and foreign-seeming way. Then he started talking again. He spoke with wonderful feeling. For a while, I watched his face, and even when he was caught up in a torrent of words, and was gesturing, and was practically lost in smoke, I could see a shyness in his face and eyes. I believed he was a tender person, a little withdrawn, a little retiring, who normally kept things pretty much to himself. I

was sure he loved his children very much, and missed them terribly. He was the kind of man who liked playing with children, I felt, who genuinely liked fooling around with them, playing little tricks on them.

When I come across a man who kids around with children, I feel my defenses melting.

I stopped watching him and sat way back and closed my eyes. The words flowed over me. It was like a bath in words. I was floating in perfumed French. I think I did some soft writhing. I felt so warm, so good. The brandy caused a pleasant heat all through my face. I knew he wanted to touch me. Even with my eyes closed, I was pretty sure. It was in his voice.

His voice grew softer, more personal. I could tell he was talking about me, but I didn't want to know what he was saying, I didn't care, it made no difference. I wanted only the flow, the pure French.

Then he was silent. I opened my eyes. We looked at each other.

"You do not know what this has meant to me," he said. "It is only my life that you have saved."

He shrugged in that shy, boyish, half-amused way and picked some tobacco off his tongue.

"Do you feel better, Jeep?"

"You must call me Jean-Paul."

"All right. Jean-Paul it is."

"I feel better. The whole world feels better."

"Can I rub my knuckles on your beard?"

He moved his head closer, and as I rubbed my knuckles on his chin and listened to that terrific, sandpapery sound, he began speaking French again—intense, urgent, soulful French. The whole world feels better.

I began to shift and writhe and feel so good.

He began unbuttoning my blouse, talking softly all the while, softly but urgently, his cigarette hanging from a corner of his mouth. Soon I was more or less naked in the chair, quietly writhing, feeling liquidy from the sound of his voice, my eyes closed as I listened, listened—his life, his whole being, floating out in French.

I rubbed my knuckles on his beard. I couldn't get enough of that sound.

It was pretty nippy in the room, and he undressed quickly and got into bed and waited for me, showing a hairy chest—tight, dark, curly hair. I took a last sip from my cognac. I was feeling practically drugged from all that French. It was a languorous feeling, not at all a cold weather kind of thing, but I guess all that talking of his had done it. I wanted to stretch and curl up and then stretch again.

It took me about five minutes to get out of the chair and rise to my full height. The cold didn't bother me. I looked at Jeep, barely able to see him in the smoke-filled room. That added to my languor. The hanging smoke.

I was pretty sure I wanted him. I went over there and got under the covers and curled up against his body. He was tender, and spoke French into my ear, and blew into his own cupped hands to warm them before he touched my body, and his voice became part of the stringy music, a single, soft, unhurrying sound, and I closed my eyes and listened, feeling sleepy and dazed by smoke, moaning *oh, oh*, content to let him part my legs, to caress my breasts with his strong, warm, professional hands, and then I stretched my limbs, *oh*, feeling all liquidy, opening my body to him, and he calmly, neatly, firmly entered, speaking French all through it, as I rubbed my knuckles on his gritty chin.

The whole world feels bettaire.

# 9



*I*'VE never outgrown the thrill of getting a window seat. This applies even on airplanes, despite the fact that you get to see little or nothing for most of the flight. Regardless of means of transport, I am always disappointed when someone beats me to the window seat. I always feel the window seat is mine. I deserve the window seat. What good is a seat if you can't see anything from it?

Window seats may be the only way that remains for adults to stay in direct touch with their own childhoods.

We still want that seat. At least I do. There is still a whole world that beckons to us, that is worth seeing. It is one of the unresearched pleasures of our time, looking out the window of a moving vehicle. When I don't get a window seat, I feel a tiny, crushing

sensation deep inside. It would not be overdramatizing the matter to say it is a spiritual loss. The world we see from a moving vehicle was made for children, and being deprived of that streaming view of color and light brings back my childish hurt.

I had a window seat on the 707 that was heading for Chicago as a tremendous storm came barreling down off the Great Lakes and just about sent our sleek aircraft into metallurgical convulsions. It was about two in the morning—I'd been scanning for meteors—and we'd come dragging aboard after a dull, losing effort against the Sabres, which came at the tail end of a quiet, reflective, snow-bound, stir-crazy day.

Anyway, the overhead compartments came banging open, and dozens of blankets, coats, and jackets flew down amongst us. Next to me, Lars Larssen twisted in his seat and asked the stewardess if she thought we'd have to divert to another city.

"Please extinguish your smoking materials," she told him.

It was a quick, hard-hitting, high-volume blizzard. Fortunately we were close enough to O'Hare to make it in before they shut down. But because of previous storms as well as this one, what we found was a paralyzed city. An immobilized transportation system. A silent, ghostly, subfreezing metropolis. In the middle of the night.

Naturally there was chaos at the airport. People running around trying to get some kind of transportation out of there. People sleeping in chairs. Babies crying. Dogs barking in crates. Fistfights by the telephones.

My teammates and I sat around waiting until arrangements were made, and eventually I found myself getting into the back seat of a taxi with Murray Jay Siskind and sportscaster-on-the-mend Merle Halverson. The driver was a black fellow wearing combat fatigues.

We went skidding off into the night, a sad caravan of Rangers, media and hangers-on—about seven cabs, three limousines, a pickup truck, and an ordinary four-passenger sedan with six feet of drifting snow on the roof.

3:05 A.M.

We head toward town. Snow everywhere. Whole houses buried. Our windshield wipers rapidly freezing up.

The cab *leaks* cold. Murray, on my left, says, "Don't you love it?" Merle, on my right, says, "I got out of a hospital bed for this?"

Between them, I am silently resentful. They have the window seats.

"Why *did* you come back so soon?" Murray says.

"Toby's after my job. He doesn't want to do color anymore."

"I thought Toby was your friend," Murray says.

"A man with a swimming-pool-shaped kidney has no friends."

3:18 A.M.

The cab in front of us goes skidding into a nine-foot drift. Our driver sticks his head out the window and shouts obscenities at their driver.

3:25 A.M.

I ask Murray to ask our driver to shut the window. Murray says, "Tell Merle to ask. He's the voice of the Rangers." I tell Merle. He looks tired and sad. His long, sagging, jowly face half disappears inside the collar of his coat. It is as though I have asked him to put on hip boots and bring me back a fistful of piranha.

I ask the driver to shut the window.

He turns way around in his seat. Way around. He gives me an incredibly long-suffering look. It is a combination of boredom, impatience, superiority, and long, long suffering.

3:31 A.M.

I ask the driver to shut the window.

He says, "We need to defrost. Don't you understand nothing?"

Murray says to me, "Ask him to put on the defroster. Or tell Merle to ask him. Either way's okay by me."

3:55 A.M.

The city looms. Exhilaration!

The driver of the pickup truck tries to pass us. Not smart. Our driver sticks his head out the window and curses freely. He tries to run the pickup off the road. Both vehicles are skidding all over. I realize that Jeep is sitting in the passenger seat of the pickup. His eyes are full of pure fear.

Murray clutches his manuscript.

4:05 A.M.

Snow is blinding. I notice Murray Jay has been sort of nodding for the past ten or fifteen seconds.

I look at him.

"I am permanently available," he says. "Any time you want to talk. Day or night. I know what your life is like, Cleo. I know it's not the Saturday Morning Rodeo Parade people make it out to be. Remember what I said in the locker room at the Spectrum."

"What?"

"I'm not afraid to be tender."

Nod, nod, nod, nod.

4:11 A.M.

I am still upset over the window seats. I vow to do better, be grab-bier, get there first next time.

4:20 A.M.

Our driver lights up a joint. He sits twisted away from the steering wheel, his body curled in on itself, in order to keep the gale-force winds from obliterating the pretty, pinpoint glow. He is more or less steering with his left elbow. Occasionally his hip.

Murray asks if he can buy some grass. The driver turns way around. He gives Murray a look that is too glassy-eyed to register the contempt, scorn, and suspicion he wants it to have.

Murray doesn't really want grass. He is trying to promote a spirit of camaraderie. We are making a daring entrance into the city of Chicago in a howling blizzard at four or five in the morning and there is no camaraderie in our vehicle. He says he bets the other vehicles are full of people drinking, laughing, telling jokes,



horsing around, smoking grass. He describes vivid scenes of tremendous, lighthearted rapport. It is like a Dutch painting of rosy-cheeked men in an alehouse.

4:37 A.M.

We go into a spin. Merle is very still. All through the spin, he is motionless. He is actually spinning, of course, but only to the extent that we are all spinning, that the vehicle is spinning, the planet is spinning, the solar system, the galaxy etc. Merle *himself* is motionless, his head sunk into his coat.

I wonder if he is dead.

4:55 A.M.

Either the caravan is so spread out or the snow is so heavy that it is impossible to see the other vehicles. It is also hard to care about the other vehicles.

Am I becoming insensitive?

5:01 A.M.

A major street. Is it Michigan Avenue? Hard to tell. Everything buried. Abandoned vehicles turned every which way. Whole buildings icing up.

A pack of wild dogs follows us for two blocks, loping alongside the taxi—hungry-looking, silent, a little crazed of eye.

Monster chunks of hard snow fall from tall buildings, landing all around us.

Still no hint of camaraderie.

5:04 A.M.

Somewhere behind us, we hear the dogs barking and growling. Murray thinks they have found a stray human, a straggler. Someone old and slow.

“What a human interest story,” he says. “Eaten by wild dogs in the middle of Chicago.”

This gets to the driver. We see his eyes watching us in the rear-view mirror.

“You think they might be stalking someone?” he says.

“I don’t think dogs stalk,” Murray says. “Dogs hunt in packs. Cats stalk. Semantics aside, I think they’re hungry enough and wild enough to do something pretty antisocial.”

We see the eyes watching us.

The driver slams on the brakes, puts the vehicle into reverse, and goes skidding back toward the sound of the barking dogs. He is going much faster than he’d been going when moving forward.

I wonder if I should tell Murray that Merle might be dead.

5:10 A.M.

We are still looking for the dogs, backward. The chance of seeing this primitive scene played out has sort of galvanized the driver. He is doing tremendous things, automotively. Cornering flawlessly, driving on the sidewalk, coming out of skids with added momentum, flinging the wheel around in great, violent arcs as if it is a ship’s wheel and he is maneuvering through a minefield—all this in reverse.

Is that a lake out there? Or is that a park?

“In tomorrow’s papers,” Murray tells me, “they will say the city was hushed. The city is not hushed. There are wild, baying dogs. There are tons of snow falling off buildings. There is a careening taxi with three hysterical passengers.”

His manuscript is nestled in his crotch, as much as you can nestle eight hundred pages in that kind of space.

5:14 A.M.

The driver can’t find the dogs and gives up the chase, cursing quietly. He takes it out of reverse.

We breathe more easily.

Icy puddles have formed under our feet and we have to ride with our legs raised slightly. I imagine we look foolish sitting this way, but there is not much chance a passing news photographer will capture it on film. I tell Murray his foolishness is safe with me.

Tremendous icy blasts come sweeping off the lake. The driver, with his window still open, has moved to the passenger seat to

avoid the full force of these new winds. He is huddled against the door, his left arm extended toward the wheel. He is driving with the fingertips of his left hand and the heel of his left foot.

Murray says, "Tell him a little fogging of the windows is acceptable."

5:25 A.M.

Our hotel is in sight. Exhilaration!

Something stirs inside Merle's coat. It is Merle. He says, "Where are we?"

Great sheets of ice and snow come crashing down from the tops of buildings.

Murray and I look at each other, trying to come up with a fitting answer to Merle's question in light of the avalanches all around us.

The driver says, "Warm Springs, Georgia, fuck-head."

Murray and I stop trying.

5:32 A.M.

We go into a spin and crash into the canopy supports in front of our hotel. No one comes out to complain. We pile out of the cab on the street side, since the canopy has collapsed, and after getting our luggage out of the trunk and paying the driver, we walk on top of the canopy into the hotel lobby.

A short, pipe-smoking man stands behind the desk, watching us trudge crookedly with our suitcases across the lobby. He knocks tobacco out of his pipe as we register.

"You the hockey people?"

"That's right," Murray says.

"You people are strewn all over the county. You know that? I've been getting calls for two hours. No traction. Or lost in drifts. Or can't get off the expressway. What do they expect me to do? You're the only ones who made it in."

"Can we have our room keys?" Murray says.

"You play hockey with that little beard?"

"It comes off. My whole mouth and jaw come off for the games. I wear a hinged, steel support. It's like a jock for the lower face."

"Funny fella."

“Can we have some keys?”

“Enjoy it while you can is what I tell you people. We get all the major sports staying here. Before you know it, you’ll be out there in the real world.”

He points his pipe stem at us.

“It comes at you from all sides out there. Either way you turn, you get stiffed. Believe me, what you got to look forward to, I wouldn’t envy a dog.”

5:40 A.M.

We get our keys and trudge into the elevator.

“That’s a funny little twisted sort of face that man has,” Merle says.

“Knotty pine,” Murray says.

My floor.

“We call it gnarled,” I tell them.

I woke up at 8:30 with a staticky stomach. Simple, outright hunger. I tried to go back to sleep, but it was no go. I got dressed and went down to the hotel coffee shop and had breakfast. Then I stood around the lobby and watched them coming in.

They were still coming in, the weary, the bent, the shaken, the defeated.

J. P. Larousse, Toby Scott, Gordon Fraser, Brian Fraser, Nils Nilsson, Lars Larssen, one reporter, two reporters, three front office functionaries, Bruce McLeod’s mother, on and on, the stricken, the cramped, the drawn, the sleepless, the hollow.

I went to my room. I realized I hadn’t yet checked the weather. I parted the curtains. Snow flurries. A more or less hushed city.

I called Shaver and told him about the ride in. We had a nice talk. That made me feel better.

I sat around a while, half envying those people who are always running around saying, “I have to get organized, I can’t seem to get organized, there’s so much to do.” People who run around waving lists. People who set personal deadlines.

I had nothing to organize. Nothing to list. Nothing to set a deadline for.

Which world is the real world?

I think people make lists because they like crossing the items out as they're taken care of. This is one of those pleasures like sitting in window seats. No one talks about it or makes studies of it, but it is a giant pleasure for a lot of people. Crossing things off lists.

I missed Shaver. I missed Floss. I missed my mommy and daddy.

I won't go into detail about the rest of the day. It was similar to the previous day in Buffalo—quiet, dull, stir-crazy. There are times when so little happens it is actually fatiguing.

The game was on. Very little snow fell during the day and the team bus got us to the arena with only a couple of detours around unplowed streets. Some of us dozed off on the bus, others in the dressing room, others on the bench during the game.

The place was only one-third full. All over the Snow Belt, people were saying the hell with it.

Near the end of the game, little Dougie White got in a scrap with one of the littler Black Hawks and they went up and down the ice pummeling and clutching for about four and a half minutes. I was on the bench at the time and had that schizy feeling you get when you know someone is watching you. I turned around. It was Jeep—Jean-Paul—looking at me with a fair amount of tremendous intensity.

I smiled briefly, reflectively, and turned back to the ice, where the two fighters still feebly mauled, sliding together into one of the nets.

In the dressing room, there was another fight, this one between teammates. Big, sleepy, blondish Wayne Lassiter taking on stocky Jack Ferguson. It was a terrible brawl, and because they weren't on skates they were able to get a lot more leverage and force into their punches. Teammates broke it up three times, and each time Jack and Wayne started hammering again. I watched a little awestruck. These guys wanted to kill each other, and when two big men go at it bareknuckled with all they have in a relatively small amount of space, it practically changes the molecules in the air. Everything jumps to a higher level. Things seem more real, more

true. The remains of Ferguson's uniform were mostly ripped off him and he stood there throwing punches with his slangy parts hanging out. About four guys formed a flying wedge and tried to get between them, and I felt a pair of eyes across the room riveted on me, and I looked over there through the mass of half-naked, tangled, sweaty, grappling bodies.

Jean-Paul, Jean-Paul.

We got back to the hotel. As I dragged my tired body across the lobby, the short, gnarled man at the front desk rang his little bell at me.

Messages galore.

A phone call from Archie Brewster. No word, no number. Thanks, Arch.

A phone call from Glenway Packer. L.A. CONFIRMED. My first big-name-brand commercial.

A phone call from Shaver Stevens. WHO DO YOU WUV? Sweet but dumb.

An unsigned, handwritten note. I AM WAITING IN YOUR ROOM. COME TO ME NOW, MY DARLING.

First I get these long-drawn-out soulful looks from Jeep. Now these bits and pieces from four other men. What's going on here? Am I letting things get out of control? Are these men starting to *back up* on me?

In the elevator, I tried to figure it out.

Maybe I was purposely complicating things. It was a way to survive the road. I wanted to balance all the make-believe with complicated human contact. Touch, feel, see, hear, speak. Mostly touch and feel, I admit.

Or was life on the road the true complication, the true *life*? Maybe these brief, grasping, captured moments, these reckless encounters in the night—maybe *they* were unreal, the stuff of webby dreams, lacking texture and graininess.

(Either way, it is possible thematic material, at least for now.)

I got out of the elevator, went down the corridor, put the key in the lock, opened the door, and who do I see in his broad-sashed, wide-sleeved kimono with matching sandals, looking like a dehydrated sumo wrestler, but Sanders Meade, reading a copy of *Time*.

“Who let you in here? This is my room. The short, gnarled man let you in? That little jerk, I’ll kill him.”

“Anything for a price, Cleo. This is Chicago. Stormy, husky, brawling. You know that.”

“Sanders, what are you doing here?”

“Well, I tried to get to Buffalo bright and early yesterday. An incredible saga of human endurance. I started by flying to Montreal. Conditions being what they were, the only way to get from there to western New York was to take a train to Toronto—our city, Cleo—and hop a bus or something to Buffalo.”

“Who cares?”

“Well, to make a long story short, I got to Chicago an hour ago via Butte, Montana.”

“I’m tired. Shut up. Who cares?”

“On Air Montana,” he said.

“I play hockey, Sanders.”

“Missed Buffalo completely.”

“Who cares? Shut up, you jerk.”

“Cleo, we need to thrash things out. Sit down, get comfortable, I’ll call room service. I haven’t eaten in ten hours. Air Montana hands out Chiclets.”

“Well, you’d better start licking the excess sugar off your teeth because you’re not eating dinner in this room, or breakfast either.”

“You look tired and drawn,” he said. “You have no color.”

“I have white. I’m a white person.”

“Wait now, hear me out. I know what you’re going to say. You’re a hockey player. Good enough. I understand that. And it’s hard. A hard game. In a sense, we’re all hockey players. We’re on the road all the time. We all play hockey in a very real sense. And it’s hard. The pressure is intense. Sit down, Cleo. Hear me out. Let me speak my piece.”

“I’m so tired.”

“We’re all tired. We’re a bunch of tired hockey players. I know how rough the game can be. And you’re the only woman. I understand that and I empathize with it. It’s hard. I know it’s hard. Being a woman is damn hard. I know how hard it is to be a man,

so I think I'm in a unique position to appreciate how hard it is to be a woman."

I decided to stop letting my fatigue get to me, irritate me. I threw my coat down, sat in the chair at the right side of the bed, and gave Sanders a look of genuine, unaffected sincerity. He was sitting in a chair at the left side of the bed.

"I'd really like to get some rest," I said. "That's simple enough, isn't it? That's a fair request. That's plain, that's fair, that's simple."

"We'd all like to get some rest," he said. "I've been traveling steadily for almost two full days. I don't think I've had an hour and a half of sleep in all that time. I'm tired, you're tired. But we have to go on."

"Why do we have to go on?"

"Because that's life, that's existence. We can't just fold up and collapse. I've been living on Chiclets and warm water. But I'm here. I'm ready to talk. I said I'd be here and I'm here."

"You didn't say you'd be here. You said you'd be in Buffalo."

"Buffalo is wherever you are, Cleo. From now on, that's Buffalo to me. There are still ten or eleven days to this road trip. It's all Buffalo as far as I'm concerned."

"You don't plan to follow me, Sanders, I hope?"

"I'll do whatever I have to do. I'll go on. People go on. I'm like a homing missile searching out a heat source."

"That makes me a tail pipe, doesn't it?"

"It's always been physical between us, Cleo. We both know it. We have a thing for each other. We may as well try to understand that and accept it."

He got out of the chair and began crawling across the bed toward me. I could see down into his kimono to his navel and beyond. He had an earnest, half-determined look on his face.

"Nothing's been the same since Toronto," he said. "Our lives are indelibly changed. It would be great if this thing between us were more than physical. It would help us put our animalness in perspective. But we have no choice. It's there. I feel it, you feel it."

"You feel it," I said.



"I feel it, you feel it."

"I don't feel it, Sanders. You feel it."

"That wonderful urgency. We ran for the elevator. Remember how we ran, Cleo? That sense of *Now, oh god, now.*"

He reached out and put one hand on each arm of my chair. His upper body was right above me, balancing. His knees and lower body were still on the bed.

"I feel it now," he whispered. "I'm so ready. I'm here. I'm *now.*"

"I'm not now. I'm then. What else can I say?"

"But I sense it. People *sense* these things. We're both ready. I feel it. The air is crackling with it."

His face was right above mine, inches away.

"I felt something once upon a time. Something fleeting. I don't feel it now."

"*Try.*"

"It's not an uncommon situation between a man and a woman. Someone feels it, someone doesn't. People just work it out. It happens all the time. People work it out."

"How do they work it out?"

"Someone leaves," I said. "One of the parties gets up and leaves."

"Cleo, our lives are woven together, whether we like it or not. We have a thing. That's the message of Toronto."

"One of the parties stays in her room. The other party gets dressed and leaves."

"Try harder," he said. "I'm not getting a clear picture of someone really trying. There must be some erotic stuff you do, mentally, to get in the mood. Would it help if I turned on the radio?"

"Sanders, you can't recapture that fleeting moment we had. Be sensible. That was a different place, a different time."

"Granted, this is a different place. Bareheaded, shoveling, wrecking. Toolmaker, stacker of wheat, half-naked, sweating. But do you realize what it took for me to get here? It's like a Norse saga. Wild dogs attacked my cab on Wacker Drive."

His nose was in my hair.

I could look right down his kimono. His erection was so earnest

and pronounced I thought it might cause his kimono sash to come untied.

He was taking big whiffs of my hair.

Then his face was in front of me and he was kissing me—a big, quivering, thrusting kiss. I kept my eyes open. I knew as long as I kept my eyes open, I'd remain objective. I'd also stay awake.

He was wriggling closer and putting so much passionate body English into this kiss that the bed was moving with him, inching across the floor toward my chair. To do that, a man would have to be exerting tremendous pressure with his knees, digging in fantastically. This may be a testimonial to the energies that sex can unleash in a person.

He kept pressing in on me, maintaining the kiss while at the same time beginning to change from a kneeling or crawling position to a sort of push-up stance, his hands still balancing on the arms of my chair, his body at an incline, his whole face practically in my mouth.

I reached up with my right hand and grabbed the hair at the back of his head and just jerked the whole mass of hair, skull, and flesh back out of my face. It was like pulling a toy arrow with a rubber suction cup off a wall.

It made a noise that sounded like *Platt, Utah*, although I don't know if there is such a place.

He looked at me a little dazed and panting. He had the stupefied look of an adolescent who's been kissing his girlfriend for four and a half hours on the living room sofa, and someone turns on the lights. It's like emerging after nine months on a nuclear sub. Any kind of daylight's too strong.

I was wondering if I'd waited too long. The man had a pretty good head of steam up. He may have felt he'd come too far to be turned back. His hands were still on the chair arms, supporting most of his weight, and his feet were on the bed. His hands and toes were the only parts of him in contact with solid objects. He was sort of in mid-push-up, in other words, and the strain was beginning to show in his face, and I was wondering if he felt that the awkwardness and embarrassment of disengaging himself from this position between the bed and the chair was even more costly

than the risk of going on ahead, of letting his animal momentum carry him toward the brink, with the chance that I'd really get mad, that I'd call hotel security, that the press would find out, that Hughes Tool would leave him in "Boulder, Colorado" forever—or that I'd submit.

It wasn't impossible, mathematically. Hopping into bed with a fellow is sometimes heads I do, tails I don't. It just depends.

Our faces were six inches apart.

"Despite everything you say and do, Cleo, I'm pretty convinced we want each other. I *do* sense something. The air is heavy with it. Sexuality, chemistry, electricity, particle physics—whatever you want to call it."

He started coming in again, moving the bed with him. It was incredible. Just his *toes* were touching the bed, and he was able to pull it with him, quarter inch by quarter inch, making little screechy noises, closer and closer to the chair I was in.

He maintained the push-up stance. Our noses were almost touching.

"Being a man, I understand the roots of your deep fatigue," he said. "You're a woman who lives among men. You're always on display. Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes it's subtle, but you're always at center stage, Cleo, always in the smoky lights, never allowed to just fade into the background. It's hard for you to be yourself, just blend in and be yourself. People expect certain things from you. After a while, your reactions become programmed. You begin to drift away from the real center of yourself, the core, the person you really are."

"Sometimes that does happen," I said, not intending to put such sadness and vulnerability into my voice.

"Of course it happens. It happens to you, it happens to me. In a very real sense, we're all women. We all live among men. We all lose sight of the persons we really are. We're all women. We all play hockey. We're all tired. We're very tired."

We looked at each other. I was trying to feel it. I didn't feel it, but I was trying, I was making an effort.

Sanders seemed to realize that for the first time all night, I was doing a little wavering. He lunged for another kiss. I heard the bed

screech along the floor. His arms were so tired from maintaining the push-up stance that they started trembling with muscle spasms. My whole chair was shaking as a result. It made for a physically dangerous kiss. But Sanders wasn't about to let anything stop him at this point, not muscle spasms, a broken nose, the media, or Hughes Tool.

My lids were growing heavy. When the bed hit my knees, I realized we'd been kissing for quite some time and also that Sanders was practically in my lap, most of him anyway.

Was I beginning to feel it?

Still interlocked with me in this windswept, teen-age kiss, Sanders began backing onto the bed, taking me with him, little by little, first by seizing onto my lip with his teeth, and then, once he had one hand on the bed, for balance, by pulling on my shirt front with his other hand.

I ended up stooped over the bed, my body wedged between the chair arms. Sanders started climbing into the kiss, enabling me to straighten up a little ways. Finally, he was on his knees on the bed and I was more or less standing erect, my shoulders hunched over, and my head lowered, and my arms at my sides, in a sort of limp finale.

Sanders broke off the kiss and crawled backward on the bed, quite, quite fast, and then undid the kimono sash and whipped the whole garment right off his body in what you'd have to call an impressively fluid motion. It was almost as though he'd been in rehearsal for this gesture in four out-of-town locales before bringing it in to Chicago.

Well, there he was and there it was. I guess I didn't need a word-picture. The way these events usually work, it was my turn to disrobe. Sanders sat cross-legged on the bed, watching me, his hands on his knees, his stiff thing aimed up out of the middle of him. He looked like Swami Ramaputra doing the Wheel of Supreme Bliss.

I got my shirt off, but being wedged and trapped as I was between the bed and the chair, with the chair lodged against the wall, I couldn't get my pants past my hips. Sanders sprang backward onto the floor and then scrambled around to the foot of the

bed and lifted it off the floor and sort of swiveled it a foot or so in a northeasterly direction, or whatever, so that I was able to get on with the disrobing.

He stood in a semicrouch, watching. Being able to survive that push-up business was making him feel athletic, I guess, and I half expected him to do some sit-ups holding a floor lamp behind his neck.

I was down to my red flannel long johns.

"While you're up and about," I said, "maybe you ought to check to be sure I locked the door."

He padded over there, sort of swinging his arms tribally. The man was ready. No doubt about it. He was primed for some all-out displays of prowess. If he'd thought of oiling his body beforehand, he could have gone into a series of body-builder poses, grappling with his own limbs, flexing his body as if to prevent warping or cracking.

"Check for tape on the door," I said. "Maybe somebody's hired some ex-Watergate burglars to come in and bug the room."

Harmless little joke.

Slowly, Sanders turned away from the door. He had a strange, crooked look on his face. He stood hunched over, erect, looking at me.

"What did you say?"

It was a profound whisper. I didn't know what to make of it. There was an element of tremendous, hoarse drama in his voice.

"I said check for tape. Just a joke, Sanders. What gives?"

"What else? You said more."

"I said somebody might be trying to bug us. Not very funny, but it's about two in the morning. You can't expect a monologue that has them wetting their pants."

"No, no, more, more. You said more."

I stood there in my long johns. His voice had the desperate, whispered urgency of some doomed character in a Gothic horror tale.

"More?"

"You said more, Cleo."

"Watergate. I said Watergate. Is that it? I'm trying my best to

remember. It was just something I tossed out. I never expected an oral exam."

He stroked his jaw, nodding slowly.

"I knew something would happen," he said. "All through the kiss, I was worried about something like this. It never fails, does it? I was so ready. It was just too good to be true. It had to happen."

"What are you talking about? What did I say?"

"You know what you said."

"What? Watergate?"

"There it is. See? She said it again."

We watched his penis de-erect. It was like a flag-lowering ceremony. All we needed was a sunset and a blast from a yacht club cannon.

"Sanders, what's going on here? What did I do? I don't understand."

"What did she do, she says."

"What did I do?"

"What did she do?"

"I said Watergate. What's that?"

"See? There it is."

"Watergate, Watergate. So what?"

He shuffled over to the bed and put his kimono back on. He sat with his back to me, turning his head to speak over his shoulder.

"Why not bring in Vietnam?" he said. "Why not go all the way? Why stop at Watergate?"

"I still don't get it."

"Were you that sure Watergate would be enough? Am I so transparent? Or were you holding Vietnam as your trump card? If Watergate doesn't get him, Vietnam will. Am I that easy to handle, Cleo? God help us both if I am."

"Sanders, will you explain what you're talking about?"

"She doesn't get it," he said. "She wants me to explain."

"Yes, damn it, and fast."

He took a deep, audible breath and his shoulders sagged. His voice sounded terrifically hoarse. It was a possessed, haunted sound.

"Cleo, what do you think was stalking the male American

psyche all through the seventies if not the twin specters of Vietnam and Watergate? The eighties don't promise much relief. It's still there, stalking, haunting. It's caused untold damage."

"What kind of damage?" I said.

"The deepest."

"Watergate?"

"Vietnam, Watergate, Iran."

"Iran?"

"Late seventies. Iran. It carries us over into the eighties."

"Sanders, are you telling me that just because I said the word Watergate, you're not going to be able to function?"

"She doesn't seem to understand," he said.

"You're telling me it's that deep? The damage is that powerful and far-reaching?"

He turned his head to speak. Either he couldn't look me in the face or he was shutting me out. It was strange having a conversation with the back of someone's head and I was glad to see him swivel a little when it was his turn to speak. It gave him a sort of hooded aspect, his chin tucked in under the left shoulder as he whispered hoarsely into his armpit, the barely visible lone eye darting a hurt look my way.

"It's the central fact of the decade. No male American has emerged unscathed. We lost so much, in so many ways."

"But does it show itself so dramatically?"

"You saw for yourself, Cleo."

"That's true."

"I didn't make it do that. You made it do that." He shot a hurt look. "I'm surprised you didn't mention Iran. Iran would have completed the picture."

"But what about female Americans? We were around, too. What about the effect on us?"

"It's not mere happenstance that women made such great strides in the seventies. It's because Vietnam and Watergate were so debilitating to the American male. You saw an opening and drove a terrific wedge right in. You found an enfeebled male population, and you saw an opening, and you came pouring through, wedgelike. A classic battlefield maneuver."

He turned to look at me full face.

“We lost our manhood, our sense of pride and honor, our belief in God and Dick Nixon, our deepest dreams, hopes and ambitions. It’s no coincidence that God died in the late sixties, early seventies.”

First Torkle and now this. Vietnam and Watergate. Was the male organ as sensitive and moody as Sanders made it out to be? I didn’t know which development surprised me more, Torkle or Watergate. I guess the first time is always the most memorable.

“I was so ready,” he said.

“Sanders, go to your room. There’s not much point continuing with this. Just go to your room. Where are your clothes?”

“In the bathroom.”

“Put on your clothes and go to your room, so I can get some rest.”

“You look great in those flannels.”

“Strictly for warmth.”

“I know, but you look great. They’re a knockout. Fire-engine red. I get a Christmasy kind of feel. And with nothing up top. Sensational, Cleo.”

“Go to your room, Sanders.”

“I know, but wow.”

“We’re not going into the old dressing-undressing routine. That was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. We’re both more or less in a state of undress, but you’re the only one who has to get dressed because you’re the only one leaving. And you will dress yourself, Sanders. I will not dress you or undress you, and you will not dress or undress me.”

“I get the message. Loud and clear.”

“Go to your room.”

He turned to face the wall again, his back to me. He didn’t even bother swiveling his head to talk to me over his shoulder.

“Cleo, I don’t have a room.”

“Sanders.”

“Hear me out now. Let me speak my piece. I thought this would be my room. When two people have a thing going, and one of them travels back and forth across the country, overshooting his



target city time and again due to weather conditions, it's only natural that he'd expect to bunk with the other person."

I was beginning to understand that bland people aren't always shy people. A lesson in human relations. That was the key to Sanders Meade. Bland gall. He kind of sneaked it in. He was so mild-looking and even-toned that you didn't realize what tremendously nervy things he was saying half the time.

How could a man so touchy about the mere mention of an event like Watergate just assume he could walk into a hotel room and put on a kimono and spend the next eleven days in intimate contact with the occupant as she moved from city to city, hotel to hotel?

"Call the gnarled man," I told him.

"Oh, great. So he'll know I didn't spend the night. So he'll know I struck out."

"Who cares?"

"I guess you'd have to be a man to understand. It's all right. Doesn't matter. No problem."

"He's just a desk clerk."

"Sure, that's all. Doesn't count for anything. Just the man who let me into your room. Just the one person in the whole world who'll know I didn't score."

"I'll write him a note saying you scored. You write it, I'll sign it. Say anything you like. 'The bearer of this note is the most exciting sex find in years.' Signed Cleo Birdwell. You've got a free hand, Sanders. Go ahead, come up with something."

"That's a cruel choice of words under the circumstances."

"Which words?"

"Never mind, Cleo. Doesn't matter. I've been down that road before."

He went into the bathroom and dressed quickly. I sat in the original chair with my feet up on the bed, watching him as he picked up the phone and talked to the short, gnarled man. I thought he might disguise his voice, but I guess he realized he'd have to go to the desk anyway to register and get his key. He hung up.

“Where’s your luggage?” I said.

“Luggage, right. Left it in the tub. Wait, I’ll get it.”

He came out with two enormous suitcases equipped with straps, buckles, pouches, diagonal zippering, tiny combination locks, little skateboard wheels for easy gliding—everything but windows and a hood ornament.

“Sanders, you’re not really going to follow me for the rest of the trip, are you? It’s not really all Buffalo, is it?”

“You can relax,” he said. “I have to be in New York day after tomorrow. There’s a press conference at the Garden. They’re announcing my replacement as general manager.”

“Who is he?”

“It’s not who is he, Cleo. It’s what is he.”

“All right, what is he?”

“A Saudi.”

“A sowdee? What’s a sowdee?”

“A Saudi. A Saudi Arabian.”

“The new Ranger general manager? How can he be a Saudi Arabian?”

“Hughes Tool has some kind of gigantic, secret deal brewing with the Saudis. It’s an accommodation. The fellow is somebody’s son-in-law.”

“Do Saudis play hockey?”

“A lot of them are educated in the U.S.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“When I don’t know something, I say what I do know. Most people know the same things. It’s reassuring to hear these things repeated. My father taught me that. It’s like Afghans. Everybody knows the same thing about Afghans. They’re good horsemen.”

“I thought they were little wool coverlets.”

“Well, then, everybody knows the same thing about Kurds. They’re fiercely independent.”

I was going to say I thought they were lumpy pieces of milk, but that would have encouraged him to keep going.

“Well, how does Hughes Tool expect to get away with something like this?” I said.

“They got away with me, didn’t they? They’ll do the same thing with this fellow. They’ll send him to ‘Boulder, Colorado.’ I’m absolutely certain he won’t be at the press conference. That’s why they want me there. Enough time has passed. It’s all right for me to appear now. I’ve blown over. They’ve gotten away with me.”

He stood at the door, kind of sweeping his eyes slowly across the room, as if we’d spent about eleven months there in constant sexual wonder and exploration, and the sadness of leaving could be relieved only by this slow sweeping of the eyes that would take everything in and store it in his personal treasure house of memories.

“Want me to move the bed back to the original position?”

“It’s all right.”

“No trouble,” he said.

“Go to your room, Sanders.”

He nodded and left, guiding the giant suitcases on their little wheels.

Two conversations in Badger.

1. My mother sat on the porch, gliding. She didn’t usually sit on the glider. It was strange to see her there. A small thing, but strange, off-key, askew. Just that little element of motion made things kind of inappropriate and giddy. It was like seeing your mother dancing or wearing a sweat shirt. One of those slightly off-key moments when a mother or father seems to step out of the skin of strict parenthood. You see them as independent people, and this can be shocking. They aren’t supposed to be people. They’re supposed to stick to the rules.

Anyway, we were alone on the porch and she was gliding. It was a hot, still night. I’d just come back from summer hockey school in Aspen, Colorado, and I was trying to figure out how to fix a zipper on my equipment bag. We listened to the insects. As we’ve seen earlier, Badger was very geared to smells, flowers, insects, trees, and holidays.

“Thought about college, Cleo?”

“Nope. That’s a long way off.”

“That Schlagel boy. Your off-and-on friend.”

“Georgie, we call him.”

“Has he thought about college?”

“He’s too dumb.”

“We agree on something. What you need is a hairpin.”

“Zippers are impossible. Who invented zippers?”

“Baron von Zipper.”

“That’s a daddy joke. You’ll have to do better.”

“Daddy would have said Warren Gamaliel Zipper.”

“That’s true. I forgot about old Warren Gamaliel everything.”

“You’ve been spending a fair amount of time with young Mr. Schlagel.”

Glide, glide, glide.

“I’ve been back two days, Mom. How much time?”

“If you think he’s too dumb to go to college, is he the right kind of company to be keeping?”

“He’s a hockey nut. There aren’t that many in Badger. We talk hockey. The kid knows everything. He knows players’ stats that have been dead twenty years.”

“Lovely syntax. Stats. Is that a word I’ve heard before?”

“Come on, about eight hundred times. Kenny keeps stats on UFOs.”

“Do you know Georgie’s father?”

“I’ve met him.”

“The absolute antithesis.”

“The what?”

“Antithesis.”

“Is that from the Latin, I bet?”

“That’s from the Greek.”

“It means you don’t think he’s such a swell guy.”

“I haven’t seen the Forrester boy lately. Or Bobby Eichenlaub.”

“I get the idea. You’re banning Georgie for life.”

“I’ll settle for twenty years if you agree to stop biting that metal. It makes my teeth shiver.”

“Is it because his father’s a sex therapist?”

“The man doesn’t practice in Badger. Let’s be thankful for small favors.”

Glide.

"Michigan Tech has a pretty good hockey program," I said.

"I thought you weren't thinking about college."

"I've been thinking hockeywise. Wait, I know I'm not supposed to say that. In hockey terms. There's North Dakota, too. And Minnesota-Duluth."

"You'll go to a good college. You'll play hockey, but you'll do it at a good school."

"How do you know those aren't good schools?"

"I *don't* know, but we'll make it our business to find out."

"They don't sound very good, do they?"

"Not very."

"They sound awful," I said.

Glide, glide.

"Have you met Georgie's mother?"

"Nobody's met Georgie's mother. She goes to the garage and drinks. She sits in the Ford wagon inside the garage, drinking Seagram's V.O."

"Does he seem upset by this? What are you saying, Dorothy? Of course he's upset."

"He doesn't talk about her much," I said.

"Well, maybe you ought to ask him to dinner. We'll ban him for life the day after he comes to dinner."

Insects.

"Did you ever wear a sweat shirt, Mom?"

"Why would I wear a sweat shirt?"

"I don't know, to paint the kitchen stool, maybe."

"No, I don't think I've ever worn a sweat shirt."

"Don't, okay?"

2. My father was sitting out back one day in an ancient wooden armchair that had sunk about four inches into the ground. The chair was just a bunch of wide slats nailed together. It was such a familiar part of the backyard that no one ever noticed how ugly it was until my father sat in it, which happened pretty often in the warmer weather.

Our old dog Bowzer was curled up at his feet. I was kind of

wandering through the house and around the yard, totally infested with spring fever and feeling a terrible, grand longing for something—a huge, sad, fragrant ache—when my father caught me during one of the outdoor segments of my meanderings and motioned me over, pointing to the grass near the old chair, where I sat crosslegged in the sun, squinting up at him.

He went into a lengthy business with his pipe and his pouch of Prince Albert, with Prince Albert's picture on it.

"I think it's time we had ourselves a talk. Father and son."

"Father and son?"

"Man to man."

"You already have a son. Kenneth Birdwell. You can visit him in his room. I think the hours are tacked up on his door."

"Kenny and I have talked about this as a matter of fact. I checked it out with him beforehand. He's all in favor."

"In favor of what?"

"Us having this talk."

"If he's in favor, I think I'll get up and leave if you don't mind. Mom needs me in the kitchen."

"Your mother's in Wellsville."

"They must have kitchens there."

"I didn't know I was raising a family of wiseacres. My own fault. I'll have to start a new regime. No jokes until the sun is over the yardarm."

"What's the yardarm?"

"Nautical. Ask your mother."

He seemed to like to puff on an empty pipe.

"So what is it Kenny's so eager for us to talk about?"

"Take it easy now. Let me plug this stuff in here. You can't have a real conversation until the pipe's lit. This is the first law of real conversations."

Sweet breezes blowing through the trees. I waited, squinting up at him.

"Ol' Kenny and I think you ought to be fully prepared. You're going to be dealing with bigger boys as time passes and your hockey skills develop. You'll be hearing all sorts of language.

Rough language. That's the nature of these things. Men talk that way to men. It's the language of men. Your brother and I think you ought to be ready. Simple as that."

We were sitting at angles to each other. I could easily see past him to the back of the house, and he sat facing the lilac bush and the old swing and a couple of stacks of firewood. My brother was up in his room. I saw him standing at the window, right above the back porch, gazing down at us. An evilly sly look on his face.

"Dad, I think I've already heard pretty much what there is to hear."

"Kenny said you'd say that. Local slang is pretty tame, Cleo." Puff, puff. "Take my word for it. I've done a bit of roaming in the gloaming in my day. Three years in the service of Uncle Sam can teach a young man a thing or two about the world. I've heard some doozies. I don't mind saying my ears have been properly scorched."

"Well, I'm not going in the army."

"Sooner or later, you'll hear an expression like 'fuck a rubber duck,' for example."

My hair practically stood on end.

"This is routine stuff," he said. "It's the language of men. You may as well get prepared. Fuck a rubber duck. 'Take a flying fuck at the moon.' These are old standards."

I couldn't believe my ears. This was my father. I just couldn't believe he was using that word. It was the shock of my life. It was inconceivable. Tom Spencer Birdwell. The nicest, kindest man around. Everyone said so. My dad Tom. Our dog Bowzer. Daddy sitting in the big, old wooden chair in the backyard. Giving off the pleasant, fatherly smell of pipe tobacco. Prince Albert. The dog at his feet, pawing sleepily at flies buzzing nearby.

"There's also 'Drop your cocks and grab your socks.' That's nautical, like yardarm. But you can hear it in other branches of the service, too. Drop your cocks and grab your socks."

I looked up at Kenny. He was standing there with his arms bent, flapping them like a chicken. Grinning from ear to ear. I wanted to kill him. Outright maim and kill him.

“Then there’s ‘motherfucker,’ ” my father said. “This is a whole new development that seems to be catching on. Last time I was in Pittsburgh, I heard ‘cocksucking motherfucker.’ Language changes constantly, Cleo. It’s a living, vibrant thing. This is what gives American English its special vitality. The way words change and evolve. We used to say ‘snafu’ when I was in the service. ‘Situation normal, all fucked up.’ Now they say ‘unbe-fucking-lievable.’ I heard a soldier say that to another soldier on a street in Columbus when we went to visit Mother McCormack.”

My whole world was crumbling. I was in a state of total, speechless shock. My hair was absolutely standing on end. I just couldn’t believe what I was hearing from the mouth of my own father. I’d never even seen him wearing a sweat shirt and here he was using these ultraforbidden words right to my face.

I knew the words, sure. But hearing them from my own father was just so totally strange and overwhelming I wanted to bite through the roof of my mouth.

It wasn’t Badger. It was some strange, dark place without a name.

“ ‘Baby, let me bang your box.’ Used to hear that in jukeboxes in one of the bars near the base. ‘How ’bout getting us some poontang, fellas?’ That’s Southern. Poontang. Names for the female member are kind of interesting, regionally.”

He sat there relighting his pipe, gazing out over the lilac bush. Flurries of wind moved through the maples. The air was incredibly sweet smelling. In my head, I was screaming, *Shut up, shut up, you crazy person!* But I was too shocked to say anything. I just sat on the grass, squinting.

He’d even brought Mother McCormack into it. The nicest, whitest-haired old lady in the world. Why drag *her* name in with all these incredible, regional swear words?

“Sooner or later, you’ll hear somebody talking about the blowjob he got the night before. This is an old word that sort of refuses to die. It was in use when I was a boy and it’s still in use, I gather. It’s a word that always seems out of date, but somehow never totally disappears. Blowjob. A classic example of longevity.”



Kenny was making moron faces.

“You’ll also hear occasional references to finger-fucking. This is something boys will talk about when the subject of girls comes up. There’s no avoiding it. It’s best you hear these things first in the home, Cleo, where they don’t have the snarl of the gutter about them. Hearing things at home is the best way to avoid confusion and shock later on.” Puff, puff. “Finger-fucking. Dry-humping. Beating the meat. Lapping cunt. Fucking like a bunny. That’s a golden oldie. Fucking like a bunny.”

I was mortally stunned.

“Confucius say: woman who fly plane upside down have crack up.”

Kenny was giving me bucktooth idiot looks with his eyes bulging out. He started hopping up and down.

“I don’t know what kind of phraseology they’re using for sixty-nine these days.”

“I’ll ask Mom,” I managed to say. “Maybe it’s something nautical.”

My voice was a horrific little squeak. It scared me. I didn’t recognize myself. I could barely get the words out. A pathetic, half-dead whimper. For some reason, it brought a look of wise amusement to my father’s face.

What did he think we were talking about—ovulation? Something you could study with diagrams and labels? The language of men, when you hear it from your own father, could easily bruise your rib cage, and worse. I was all tensed up, sitting there squinting. I swear I couldn’t move my arms.

“The language of men lends itself to insult,” he said. “You want to be ready for all sorts of things. ‘Your mother’s cunt. Stick it up your ass. Eat me, I’m a licorice jelly bean.’ You’ll be hearing these and more.”

“Oh, great,” I squeaked out. “I can hardly wait.”

He fiddled with his pipe, doing all those familiar, fatherlike, homey things, scraping at the bowl of the pipe, banging the pipe on the arm of the chair, refilling the pipe, relighting the pipe, shaking out the match flame, those reassuring things, as he sat with

his knees high and his rear end way down low in the half-buried chair, the pleasant-smelling pipe smoke wafting around his head, our little, hairy, innocent dog curled up at his feet.

“In nature, creatures without tails tend to have homosexual anxieties. Male creatures, I’m talking about. You’ll hear a lot of soap jokes in the locker room. Soap jokes go back to the ancient Greeks.”

He told me some soap jokes. I was wishing I had the nerve to bring up the subjects of fellatio and cunnilingus, Georgie Schlagel’s two favorite words, spotted in one of his father’s manuals, with diagrams. We pronounced them flateo and coonylinkus. I knew how my father would react. Where did you hear those words? I can’t believe a daughter of mine knows words like that.

But I didn’t have the strength, the nerve, or the moral courage. It was all I could do to breathe in the air that was keeping me alive.

“Of all the names for the male member, cock and prick still easily dominate. That’s what you’ll be hearing, on and off the ice.”

Kenny was flapping his arms like a chicken.

“Might as well be ready, Cleo. You’ll be hearing the same, old, aged-in-the-barrel vintage stuff over and over. A lot of these words have rhyming partners. Prick, dick. Fuck, suck. Tit, shit. Let’s think about it and see if we can come up with some more. Forewarned is forearmed.”

Mother McCormack is my mother’s mother, in case you’re wondering.

# 10



**E**VERYBODY knows the winters are getting worse. It is one of those little knowledges of doom we carry around with us. We don't even bother shrugging when the experts say there are no statistics to support this feeling. It is a feeling. That's the whole point. We know it in our bones.

It wasn't snowing in Detroit, but it was gray and bitterly cold, and the wind had a cutting edge. I went for a walk with our Swedes, Nils and Lars, and they spoke wistfully of Chicago, Buffalo, Lapland, and all that snow. I didn't take them altogether seriously.

In my room, I tried to get Shaver on the phone. Finally I called Washington Post and he said as far as he could recall Shaver had not left the building. I asked him to buzz up and see if he got an answer. After a lot of moaning and groaning, he went and did it, and there was no answer. I thought of asking him to go on up there

to make absolutely sure there was no sign of a stiff, cold, bluish, blond-haired body with eyes gaping open (that's how worried I was at this point) or even to sniff at the door for telltale odors, but I know that was a crazy thing to ask, and that he wouldn't go anyway, and that my imagination was running away with itself, and there was a perfectly reasonable explanation, if only I could figure out what it was.

Then I thought of Dr. Sidney Glass. I thanked the doorman and called New York City information. Seconds later, I reached the doctor at his office. He did not seem surprised to be hearing from me.

I said, "Do you know where Shaver is, or how he is, or anything at all?"

"He's in a Kramer cube. Where else would he be?"

"A Kramer cube?"

"That's where people sleep. That's where we sleep them."

"You mean Shaver is asleep?"

"If someone's in a Kramer cube, you can bet he's asleep. That's where we sleep people. There's nothing else to do in a Kramer. It's like Tuesday night in East Orange."

"And you have already slept him, as you call it? I thought we would have a warning."

"A Kramer became available. When this happens, you have to act fast. There are only nineteen Kramers in the world. Nurse went over there this morning. No complications. He got in the cube and I applied the sleep."

"How did you apply the sleep, as you call it? Did you give him an injection?"

"No, no, no, no." (I imagined Dr. Glass looking amused.) "We use ordinary phone lines. Nurse tucked him in the Kramer and stayed with him while I dialed his number from here in the office. He answered from the cube, received the impulse, and went to sleep. Last month, I slept a woman in New Zealand this way."

"Terrific. But what if you'd reached a wrong number? Five months, Doctor. Some poor person is sitting at home doing crewel-work. The phone rings."

"No, no, no, no." (I don't think he was amused any longer.)

“Obviously I made sure I was talking to the right person before I activated the Butler box.”

“What’s the Butler box? The thing that sends the sleep impulse to the brain of the person at the other end of the phone?”

“Something like that,” he said. (I think I was winning him back.) “In any case, Nurse ought to be changing his air right about now.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear he’s not alone. But why didn’t Nurse answer the phone or the buzzer? I’ve been trying to reach the apartment.”

“She turns the radio up loud. A little hard of hearing, although she won’t admit it.”

“Well, how long will she be there?”

“She’s waiting for you to get home so she can show you the controls.”

“Doctor, I’m in Detroit.”

“What an odd thing to say. Your home is here. A Kramer isn’t totally self-sustaining, you know.”

“I didn’t know.”

“The idea is for a loving family in an American home to play an active role in the patient’s treatment. We find this increases the family’s understanding of the problem and actually improves the patient’s chances of reducing his symptoms.”

“But I’m in a hotel.”

“What are you doing in a hotel?”

“I play hockey. I do that for a living, and because I like it, and sometimes we travel. We play home games and we play road games. When we play road games, we stay in hotels.”

“Young lady, when I go on television and say that people can be treated successfully in the American home, I don’t mean a drafty, old Victorian house at the edge of town, with a senile grandmother in the turret window and rain drumming on the roof. I’m talking about a place with a loving family and dear, dear friends. A totally warm and familiar and loving atmosphere. I don’t mean a dingy apartment in the middle of a large, noisy city, with rust rings in the toilet bowl. That’s not the American home I’m talking about.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do?”

“This is most odd. Detroit.”

“Can’t Nurse stay with him?” I said.

“She’s not his nurse. She’s my nurse.”

We talked in circles for a while. His two other phones were ringing, and since we weren’t getting anywhere anyway, I said goodbye and hung up. I was angry, frightened, confused, and worried. When I get this way, I immediately start pacing, and that isn’t easy to do in a small hotel room with a bed and a couple of chairs blocking your path. I was more or less pacing in place, trying desperately to clear my head, to think logically. Some days you go from dumb to smart in seconds. This wasn’t one of those days.

Half an hour later, with my head buzzing with half-thought-out ideas, solutions, and schemes, and with my feet still moving up and down, I decided the thing to do was act. When you don’t know what to do, do it anyway.

The game with the Red Wings was the following night. There was a practice in about an hour, and later in the evening I was scheduled to go to a speaking engagement with Toby Scott, who would “introduce” me. I was addressing a group of convicted sex offenders, believe it or not, who were being returned to the world via some Episcopal church basement, and I had no idea what I was supposed to say to them, or why they’d want to listen to a hockey player, or why people like Toby were always asking me to have cookies and soft drinks with murderers, car thieves, flashers, and pimps.

I called the Swedes’ room and asked whichever one answered—they sounded the same in English—to tell Jeep for me that I couldn’t make practice because of a sudden family crisis.

I called Toby Scott and told him the same thing. He wanted to know whether it was a religious crisis. I told him I didn’t think the average religious crisis was all that sudden, and that people didn’t ordinarily skip hockey practices and speaking engagements to rush to the side of the stricken person in order to clap hands and sing hallelujah.

Scratch one practice, one church basement.

I picked up the phone again and called American, United, Eastern, National, Northeast, and Northwest.

I found the flight I wanted, put on a coat, and went racing out into the windy street. Found a cab, got to the airport, made my plane, and then sat there taking deep breaths as we soared into the whitish sky.

It wasn't until we landed in New York that I realized I had no luggage. Where was my luggage? Then I realized I hadn't brought any, which was the clever thing to do—no waiting at the baggage carousel.

I ran outside, jumped in a cab, and gave the man my address. We headed toward the bridges, the tunnels, the rivers.

"Please hurry," I told the driver.

"What is this, what I'm doing?"

"Okay, but which is the absolutely fastest way?"

"For your situation, I recommend the Triboro."

"They always recommend the Triboro. What's so time-saving about that big loop out into Long Island Sound? You practically see the white cliffs of Dover."

"You're that hockey woman."

"That's right."

"I hate hockey."

"Good."

"Sure, you're her."

"I'm her."

"I knew it."

"Good."

We reached Manhattan and he was moving slowly along my street, looking for the house number, when I threw some money into his cigar box and leaped out before he had time to come to a stop. I ran into the building and had to wait until Washington Post, in his big, heavy, oversized, gold-braided doorman's uniform that reached almost to his ankles, asked me who I wanted to see and was I expected.

I stared deeply into the little oblong face with the sweat droplets over the upper lip, and the short, gray sideburns, and the put-upon

eyes that were always ready to retreat into some defensive limbo, some vague, hidden, put-upon place that the eyes of other people could not reach.

“Birdwell,” I told him. “Seven-D.”

“Let me announce it. What’s your name?”

“I’m not visiting Birdwell. I *am* Birdwell. Cleo. Seven-D. You loaned me your bayonet.”

“Let me recall.”

“I moved in. I had cartons. You were nice enough to let me use your bayonet to slit the cartons open. I had no utensils yet.”

He waved his hand in front of his face, indicating he recalled. He also remembered the nurse, and said she’d just left. I hurried into the elevator, pressed seven, and went on up. I opened the door and headed right for the bedroom, taking off my coat and tossing it at a kitchen chair. Everything was still and quiet. I opened the door. Late sunlight slanted into the room. I struggled to fight off a craving for Ralphies.

The Kramer looked like something you might employ to keep dinner rolls warm. Only bigger, of course. I thought it would be attached to the bed, or arrayed over the bed, but it was a self-contained unit and it sat alongside the bed. Now that I was within arm’s length of the thing, I began to feel a reverence and awe. I lost some of my long-striding, coat-flinging self-confidence. The thing was just so elaborate and important looking, and hummed with the power of life and death.

There were multicolored dials set into two exterior panels. Little glassy wires ran through the thin surface of the plastic, cubelike shield that covered Shaver. Inside the cube, on each side of him and even above him, were a number of plastic bottles containing various fluids whose nature I decided not to dwell on. Tubes connected some of these bottles to Shaver’s arms and nose. Other tubes connected bottles to other bottles. In calling these things bottles, I am probably making a grave error. They are probably called interfaced containments, or ICs, or anything but bottles.

I tiptoed closer. There was a note taped to the side of the Kramer. I checked the signature first. NURSE, it read. At a glance, I



could tell the note contained instructions. There were headings like Nutriments, Wastements, Bedsore Rotation etc.

I turned my attention to the patient. He was wearing a pair of striped pajamas. He looked like any sleeping person, only more so. An ordinary bed sheet covered the lower two-thirds of his body. I felt as though I'd entered the four-thousand-year-old tomb of some prophet or king. It was so still in the room, and the sunlight was full of dust, and Shaver's unconscious body seemed pale and a little deflated. In the waking state, his body had a built-in conceit and self-importance, and even when he was sleeping normally there was something proud and chesty about him. But in the Kramer, all that was gone. He looked overly rested, rested right out of his mind and body, no longer totally himself, and this was just the first day of the program. Whatever that Butler box transmitted to his brain cells, it made one hell of an impact. But I guess that's what it was supposed to do.

A longer look at the note alerted me to something Nurse called the cloudy fluid. I decided not to read that section. The last part of the note dwelled on ease of operation and the importance of loving participation by the patient's family, including things that small children could do to make them feel involved. It appeared that most of the day-to-day tasks were done by the Kramer itself, automatically. A few other things could be done only by human hands, but they seemed simple enough and safe enough. The problem, of course, was that I wouldn't be there to do them.

I went down to see the doorman. He was cleaning the glass on the revolving door, and when a small boy entered the building he went right on cleaning, stepping into the turning door and moving in short, hurried, mincing steps, like some little maiden in feudal Japan running errands for a band of samurai.

I waited for him to emerge. When he did, I gave him a broad outline of the situation in 7D. He walked away from me waving from the hip.

"It's just a little adjusting of dials, emptying of bottles," I told him. "Anyone can do it."

He kept moving across the lobby with me following.

"I will pay well," I said.

His back was almost completely turned and he kept waving me away with little hand gestures from the hip.

"His air just needs changing now and then. And his cloudy fluid."

He had to stop at the wall, but he kept waving from the hip to make me keep my distance.

"I don't take no jobs involving secretions from the body."

"Well, I'm not completely clear myself on exactly what the cloudy fluid is."

"What do you think it is, Missus?"

"Well, we could speculate, I suppose."

"I draw the line at wastage."

"We don't know for certain," I said. "It could be something from the glands that's just being stored because he doesn't need it while he's asleep."

"That's a desperate remark."

"It *is* desperate, yes. I admit that freely. But in the absence of any clear proof, I think we're allowed to speculate."

"Desperate written all over. Like a blinding light."

"I'm not asking much, Mr. Willie, and I will pay very, very well."

"You think that make my day? Cloudy fluids?"

I tried pleading.

He said, "I'm just here to spin the door so you can move in and out without coming in contact with common building materials."

"Minutes a day," I said.

He moved along the wall, waving me away.

"People expect to see me at the door. I can't go loping through the building changing bottles for some nonleasee. You don't *expect* that. I'm supposed to man the door. I'm the doorman."

To illustrate this remark, he started heading along the wall toward the revolving door. I tried to get closer to plead my case more convincingly, but he wagged his hand at me.

"Too many people trying to dissuade me from the door. You don't know what kind of sly bodies been trying to get in here un-

announced. Not a day goes by that I don't open my coat and let the curious have a look at the bayonet I keep in there."

He reached the door and started spraying Windex on the glass. An elderly woman entered the building and Washington Post moved with the turning door, taking those quick, small, dainty steps. He cleaned the glass as he revolved and then kept right on revolving once the woman was through the door.

This was a pointed hint, I thought. Anyway, he was right. I had no business entrusting a doorman with something so delicate, no matter how easy it might be to keep the Kramer going.

All right. I went upstairs, got some money, put on my coat, took the elevator back down, walked through the revolving door (joined by Mr. Willie, who was polishing metalwork by this time), and hailed a cab. I gave the driver the address of Dr. Glass's office, and eastward we went. Luckily the doctor was coming out of his building just as the cab pulled up and I more or less snagged him on the run and arm-wrestled him into the back seat.

He carried an umbrella and briefcase and looked every bit the mild-mannered demon of lobotomies.

"I usually walk," he said.

"I'll pay."

"It's all right. We'll go halvesies."

I could tell from his tone of voice that he was a little miffed at the way I'd hauled him into the cab.

"I insist on paying, Doctor. It was my idea, this ride, and I will pay, and let's have no more discussion."

"Get a receipt from the driver," he whispered.

I told him I'd found the note taped to the Kramer.

"Nurse is good with words," he said.

"I have no problem with the note. It's a good note, a lucid note. The problem is that it's physically impossible for me to be with Shaver on a regular basis."

We were stuck in traffic already. Horns were blowing and cabdrivers yelled at each other in the gathering dusk. I was waiting for Dr. Glass to go into his routine about the loving atmosphere of the American home.

“Did you think of calling a nursing service?” he said.

“A nursing service.”

“They’ll provide a nurse whenever you want one, for whatever period of time.”

“That’s great. Why didn’t I think of that? A nursing service.”

“See how easy?”

“Doctor, I’m really grateful. I was so confused and worried I just wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Sometimes we *do* help.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “I feel so much better.”

“It’s a weight off your chest, isn’t it?”

“You’ll never know.”

“They always say that. ‘It’s a weight off my chest.’ ‘It’s a load off my mind.’ How much better do you feel?”

“So much better.”

“They always say that.”

“I also feel very dense for not having thought of it myself. I came racing here from Detroit. I was one big, jangly nervous wreck.”

“See how easy?”

“Sure, when you know what you’re doing.”

Our driver kept racing down side streets from one traffic jam to another. I didn’t care. I felt lightheaded with joy and relief.

“Doctor, there’s something I’d like to ask. How well will Shaver be after five months in a Kramer? Will it all be worth it?”

He looked amused.

“I don’t play God with other people’s lives.”

“What does that mean?”

“No person should have that power.”

“Is it playing God to cure someone?”

“We have to ask ourselves what constitutes a cure.”

“All right, what constitutes a cure?”

“We don’t know,” he said. “At our present level of knowledge, we don’t really know who is sick and who is healthy. The definitions blur into each other.”

All through this, he was looking amused and paternal and supe-

rior. I didn't want to undergo a wave of depression fifteen seconds after my burst of joy, so I decided not to probe any further and I just sat there looking out the window at people streaming along the sidewalks.

"Can you recommend a particular nursing service?" I said after a while.

"I have a phone number in my study if you'd like to run up with me."

"I guess that'd be okay. Sure, thank you."

"I'll make us a couple of Tanqueray martinis and we'll watch the afterglow on the river."

I looked at him.

"It's been a long, tough, trying day," I said, pausing between words to give them added impact. "I think I'll just get the phone number and head on home."

Tanqueray martinis? The afterglow on the river? It sounded like Fifties Suave to me. He probably had a library of LPs devoted to huge stringed orchestras with female voices making vowel sounds and seagulls crying above the breaking surf.

Our driver broke away from First Avenue and went speeding toward the river. Soon we pulled up in front of the doctor's building.

"Ask for a receipt," he whispered.

The driver had a toothbrush in his breast pocket. I paid him and got a receipt. Dr. Glass and I went into the lobby. In the bright light, I could see that the blond streak in his hair was now an ash-blond streak. He took off his coat and handed it to the doorman along with his umbrella and briefcase.

"It's the only exercise I get," he told me.

"Handing stuff to the doorman?"

"Running up the stairs."

"You run?"

"Good for the pulse rate. Want to come?"

I shrugged, took off my coat, and handed it to the doorman. Dr. Glass and I walked to a door at the far end of the lobby and the next thing I knew we were running up the stairs.

“Our coats go up by elevator?”

“Yes,” he said.

“I guess you two have it down pat. He waits a set amount of time, puts the stuff on the elevator, and it gets to your floor just as you come running along the hall.”

“Don’t talk,” he said.

As dumb as it was to go running up the stairs, it was exactly what I needed after the kind of day I’d had. I was in good shape, naturally, and I have to admit I enjoyed sprinting up the dim stairwell, taking two steps at a time at the outset and easily outdistancing Dr. Glass. There’s nothing like physical exertion to wipe out tension, worry, and strain.

“Long stairways,” I called back.

“Old building.”

“High ceilings?”

“Right.”

I geared down to one step at a time. We seemed to be going awfully far up. I tried to remember what floor he lived on, thinking back to the time I’d visited with Shaver.

“How much higher?” I said.

“Don’t talk.”

“Give me a yes or no. Ten or above?”

“Yes.”

We were both panting. He was catching up to me. He’d probably done this about seventy-five times and knew exactly how to pace himself.

“Fifteen or above?”

“Yes.”

There were numbers in the stairwell. We were on eight and I was definitely slowing down. Dr. Glass was abreast of me and we ran stride for stride, wordless, panting, straining, aching, for about four flights. He loosened his tie and undid the top button on his shirt collar without breaking stride.

“Twenty or above?”

“No.”

“So. It’s between fifteen and twenty.”

“Yes.”

“Is it closer to twenty?”

“No.”

“So. It’s fifteen, sixteen or seventeen.”

My lungs ached and my calf muscles were tightening up, but I kept on going. We reached fourteen. Dr. Glass stumbled forward and I just left him there between landings. I was either getting a second wind or had died and was leaving my body. I reached sixteen and went careening around the bend and up another flight, tossed forward by momentum alone. I was still climbing when I realized I didn’t hear the doctor behind me. I stopped, and stood there huffing. My sweat had turned from warm to cold on the eleventh floor, and my heart was pounding.

Slowly I headed back down. I found Dr. Glass sitting on sixteen, on the landing, his belt undone and his pants open, to help him breathe. One leg was bent up, the other stretched along the marble floor. He was trying to fan himself with a limp hand.

“Are you all right?” I said.

He nodded, breathing heavily, grasping at his shirt collar to loosen it further.

“This it? Sixteen?”

He nodded.

“I accidentally climbed about an extra flight and a half,” I said.

He kept nodding. I don’t think it was completely voluntary.

“What now?” I said.

He managed to raise an arm and gesture toward the door. I opened the door and found myself facing the freight elevator. The elevator door slid open and I went over there and got our coats—they’d been neatly folded over the handrail—and grabbed the doctor’s umbrella and briefcase from the far corner.

When I returned to the stairwell, he was inching his back up along the wall, trying to stand. My left leg was having spasms, which hadn’t happened since a triple overtime play-off game in Medicine Hat, about three years earlier.

He took off his jacket and handed it to me. He zipped his pants and slowly fastened the belt. He looked ashen. He kept licking his

lips in a search for moisture. I watched him take his pulse. I was holding both coats, his jacket, the briefcase, and the umbrella.

A drop of sweat fell off the tip of his nose onto his wristwatch. He seemed satisfied with his pulse rate.

I took the taxi receipt out of my jeans and handed it to him. He thanked me.

I followed him through another door to the hallway proper. He dug his keys out of his pants and we went inside. I dropped the stuff on the floor. Dr. Glass went into the living room and flopped down on the sofa, gradually sliding into a horizontal position, face up, one hand trailing down to the carpet. He alternated between dry gasping and mere heavy breathing. I sat on the arm of a big, stuffed chair, my head hanging. We remained that way for a considerable period of time. At length I realized someone or something was moving nearby. It was little Mona, the doctor's ten-year-old.

"Mona, get us something to drink," I said.

"I only do Bloody Marys."

"I'll settle for water."

"Have we met?" she said.

"In a tall glass, please."

When she came back, I realized how dirty and wan she was. Her dress was soiled and fit badly, and she was gnawing on an ancient crust of bread. She looked like a Depression child in some classic, haunting photograph.

"Thank you," I said. "This is good. Get some for your daddy, too."

I drank the water slowly and once again scanned the paintings in the room—big, stark, impressive canvases. Dr. Glass was still stretched out.

"Where is your wife, Doctor?"

"Don't talk," he said.

Mona came back in with some water for him.

"Where is your mother?" I said.

She shrugged and went down a hallway.

"Doctor, I'd feel better knowing your wife was home. You un-



derstand. It's just a question of appearances. Where is your wife?"

"Around somewhere. It's a large apartment."

"I know, it sprawls."

"Mona will find her."

"In the meantime, I'd like to get that phone number if I may."

He lifted the drooping arm and pointed back over his head. I headed that way through an open door and found myself in his study. Glass cabinets, big desk, diplomas, shelves and shelves of dark old tomes. I felt the same way I always do when I walk into a room like that. Who is he trying to kid with all these books?

There was an address book on the desk. There were three nursing services listed under N, and I called the first one. The woman told me they'd have someone at my door at eight sharp.

My mood was on the upswing again. I drank some more water, and when I lowered the glass from my face I realized little Mona was standing practically at my feet, gnawing at that crust of bread.

"Mona, I thought you had your own apartment."

"I got evicted."

"I won't ask why."

"I'm supposed to be looking for a new place."

"All by yourself?"

"One of them comes with me. They take turns. We're looking at lofts."

"Aren't most of the lofts way downtown? You'll be far away."

"My mother knows a lot of people down there. And she's down there almost every day. Her male lover lives in a loft."

"I see. That's nice. Does he paint or sculpt?"

"He raises pigeons."

"I see. That's nice."

She took my hand and led me out the far door and down a long hallway into a big, gloomy, practically rubble-strewn bedroom. On the bed was her mother Natasha in something I believe is called a peignoir, and she was drinking wine out of a jelly jar and gazing intently at a small portable TV set propped among pillows at the foot of the bed. Cats crawled around everywhere, slept on windowsills, bounded down from chairs—all noiselessly, moving from one soft object to another.

As I stood in the doorway, taking in this scene, I realized Mona had disappeared, and just about then the woman turned and spotted me. Without the dark lipstick and heavy eye makeup she'd been wearing last time, her face seemed pasty and drawn.

"Well, hello," she said.

I mumbled something about the nurse service, having met her before, love the paintings etc. etc.

"Throw a cat off a chair and make yourself comfortable. I'm going through one of my haze-outs. Nothing but TV for a solid week. I don't want to think about anything. I don't want to discuss the art market, Wall Street, theater, film, dance, war, what have you."

She didn't mention hockey, so I wasn't sure she even remembered me, although she was using a tone of intimate confidentiality. Mona crept up behind me and nudged me to a chair alongside the bed.

"I forget to feed the cats," Natasha said, as if she expected me to reply that *I* forgot to feed the cats during *my* haze-outs.

Mona hoisted up a gallon bottle of wine called Jiminy Cricket and her mother filled the jelly jar. I used my water glass to indicate I was doing just fine, thank you.

Natasha was watching a movie made for TV. It had that glossy look. They spritz the whole set with hair spray. The actors have carved faces and move about on casters. Every third shot is a zoom into some frightened woman's teeth.

Mona climbed onto the bed and we watched a while. The movie was about a woman being stalked by two escapees from a lunatic asylum. An old man and a young man. I'd seen clones of this movie about nine times in hotel rooms in hockey cities all over North America. Women being stalked is one of the great themes of movies made for TV, I've noticed. The other is athletes with fatal diseases. The first is all zoom; the second is slo-mo.

"Isn't it dreadful?" Natasha said. "I let it wash right over me. This is one of the liberating things about haze-outs. You accept shit for what it is. It is shit. They know it and you know it, and there is no need to get mad at it, or be critical of it, or call it names. Its only name is shit."

I couldn't get over how soundlessly the cats crept and jumped and scratched. All the time I was there, I was aware of motion at various speeds but never any sound.

"I find I need longer and longer distractions," Natasha said. "I used to haze out for a day or two, at most, and I'd only watch old movies or documentaries. Now I watch anything, the most staggering shit imaginable, and I keep adding on days. But we all justify it to ourselves the same way, don't we? We need to be dumbed out, rinsed out, or we'll shatter from the strain."

I was getting interested in the movie. I hate to admit it, but once the suspense starts building it doesn't really matter how superficial everything is, or whether you've seen these same car chases and car crashes four hundred times.

"Isn't it excruciating?" Natasha said. "They pile shit upon shit. It becomes an art form of its own. A pyramid of shit. An Uffizi Gallery of shit. The Museum of Modern Shit. Astonishing that we need these shit sabbaticals in order to become viable again."

Against my better judgment, I wanted to find out what was going to happen to the stalked woman. She was in a cabin in the woods and the lights had gone out.

"When did the lights go out?" Natasha said.

"A moment ago."

"The lights always go out."

"I know."

"Look out for the old fellow. He's the one she ought to be worrying about."

"He's the canny one," I said.

"He's under the house," Mona said. "He's coming up through the boards."

"Where's the young one?"

"In a tree," I said. "Trying to get onto the roof."

In the cabin, the woman heard a prying sound below her and heavy footsteps above. There was weird, vibrating music—your typical unique paranoid-schizophrenic soundtrack. The camera zoomed into the woman's terrified eyes. A commercial came on.

"Where's your daddy?" Natasha said.

“On the sofa.”

“Did he run up the stairs, that stupid ass?”

“Yes.”

“Sid Glass, Stupid Ass.”

“She ran up with him,” Mona said.

“She did not. Don’t be silly.”

“She did so.”

Natasha looked at me.

“You didn’t. You couldn’t have.”

“Of course I didn’t.”

“Why would you? Why would anyone?”

“Exactly,” I said.

Mona gave me one of those betrayed-child looks. I think they practice that look in front of mirrors. If you’ve never had a betrayed child give you that look, you don’t know the first thing about guilt or shame. My brother was a little master of that kind of look. He went around searching for situations that might lend themselves to the betrayal of a child.

Anyway, I kept glancing away from Mona and finally the movie came back on. In the background, cats moved silently through the murk.

“The great, wonderful, healing thing about haze-outs,” Natasha said, “is that you don’t have to get interested in what you’re watching. If a completely different movie comes on after the commercial, it doesn’t make the slightest difference. This is the thing about shit. It exists only in the present. We have no memory of shit. This is why TV is the perfect medium for shit. Shit has no place in the theater, the art gallery, the cinema, the bookstore or the library. It belongs in the home.”

I was wishing she’d shut up so I could concentrate on the gory conclusion. The old lunatic was in the house, prowling around in the dark. The young fellow was still stomping around on the roof.

“The old coot’s going to touch her and she’s going to jump,” Natasha said. “So be ready.”

About eight seconds later, he reached out and grabbed her arm and she reacted hysterically, and even though we all knew it was

coming, the three of us made little sitting jumps and coiled up somewhat.

“The young one’s getting ready to come crashing through the roof. Remember the leaky part of the roof, Mona? We saw it way back at the beginning. The lady called someone to come and fix the roof?”

“What lady?”

“Suck your bread, sweetie.”

I was aware of something looming in the doorway just to my right, out of range of Natasha and her daughter. I looked over there. It was Dr. Glass, motioning me to come out. I shook my head and pointed to the TV set. He gestured more dramatically, bending his knees and tilting his head, aiming an index finger across his belly toward the end of the long hall.

The young lunatic came crashing through the roof. I got up sort of halfway surreptitiously, took a final lingering look at the TV screen, and went out into the hall, following Dr. Glass into a smallish sitting room overlooking the river.

I was surprised to see he was wearing a smoking jacket and looking refreshed and rested. When I finished checking out the view, I turned to see him standing by a coffee table with a martini in each hand. He held the drinks aloft for my inspection like a magician demonstrating the utter innocence of his props before he turned them into live chickens. A pair of elongated olives glared out at me from the silvery mixtures.

“Doctor, I hate martinis.”

“Nonsense.”

“Can’t stand the things.”

“I freeze the glasses,” he said.

“Sorry, but I will have to say no.”

“That’s absurd. These are Tanqueray martinis.”

“Means nothing to me.”

“They’re precisely eleven to one.”

“They could be even money. I wouldn’t touch one.”

“I take pains not to bruise them. They’re the silkiest martinis you’ll ever be offered by anyone, anywhere.”

“No.”

“My olives come from Ninth Avenue.”

“I’m sure they’re lovely, but I just couldn’t, really.”

He put the drinks down and stood there, thinking.

“Some Jiminy Cricket?” he said.

“I don’t think so.”

“We find European wines overrated and overpriced. California wines as well. The whole wine mystique is ridiculous, we think. A glass of Jiminy Cricket with meat *or* fish is as good as anything you can find for three, four times the price.”

“Doctor, I’ve made two mistakes today. I’ve come all the way from Detroit when I probably didn’t have to. And I’ve run up sixteen flights of stairs in a senseless Race of Death. You were nice enough to give me the phone number I asked for, and I think the thing for me to do now is to take my destiny in my own two hands and go home, just go home, walk out the door and just go home.”

“Let’s begin by breaking your argument down into two parts,” he said.

Four cats raced soundlessly past the open door. The doorbell rang and Mona went running to answer. I waved to Dr. Glass and followed. I could hear him clearing his throat as I went down the hall. His coat and my coat, and his jacket, umbrella, and briefcase were on the floor where I’d left them. Mona climbed right over the whole pile of stuff and opened the door. It was Chinese food for the haze-out.

I shook the dust off my coat and hurried out.

I had trouble sleeping. It was just so eerie. The bed was only a few feet away from the Kramer. Every so often, the cube would make a small noise, changing cycles or something, and I’d get out of bed and look in on Shaver. He looked all right. He looked better than I did. Immortal, somehow. For the first time, it occurred to me that he might never wake up. I’d have him around forever. I could see myself pushing the Kramer along the boardwalk at some seaside resort. He would never wake up, and never get old, and never die. They would keep him in a little cubbyhole at the Smithsonian. The

plastic shield on his Kramer would be covered with graffiti. You'd need special permission to take pictures.

At three in the morning, I ransacked the cupboard for Ralphies. Found half a bag, which I devoured with a cold beer, reading a passage from *The Heart-Shaped Moment*.

A certain sage found a cat lurking in his garden. The animal's grace, stealth, and cunning filled the learned man with admiration.

"Dear cat," he said, "can you teach me your secret movements, for I believe I have never seen such effortless beauty."

And the cat replied, "Why would a wise man and teacher want to prowl in dark places?"

"All men envy grace," said the sage. "All my life I have had my nose in books, and these many years of mental discipline have caused my body to become clumsy and frail. Is a yearning for physical grace such a crime in an aging man?"

"That is not for me to say."

"Dear friend, to move as swiftly and stealthily as a cat would fill me with pleasure, bring envy to the hearts of my colleagues, and arouse admiration among the youngest and fairest of the village women."

"I have heard it said by your own students," remarked the cat, "that you teach a stern doctrine. Namely, all creatures are destined to act only as their natural abilities dictate. The gopher burrows. The hawk hunts from on high. There can be no deviation."

"Totally beside the point," exclaimed the sage. "Can you teach me your movements or not?"

The cat narrowed his shining eyes.

"It will be done," said he.

Now the whole village turns out to watch the sage catch mice.

I was able to sleep after that, and in the morning the buzzer rang at 8:45. The first thing that went through my mind was that it would wake up Shaver, but of course that was foolish. When I pressed the intercom button, Washington Post told me it was a white female—he always mentioned race and sex before he gave the person's name—from Nurses Anonymous. I told him to send her up.

She was very young, still in her teens, and quite, quite small. She wore floppy jeans, a pair of clogs, and an army surplus coat. Her name was Anna Maria Mattarazzo. It's not as though I was hoping for a silvery-haired, white-clad woman with a name like Emma Stroud, from Independence, Mo., but I have to confess I was a little crestfallen at the sight of this girl. She looked as though she'd spent the last seventy-two hours ripping clothes off rock stars.

"I expected you at eight," I said. "The lady on the phone said eight."

"Yeah, I know, but I had to do an enema on the way in, and then my train came to a dead stop under the river. Don't you hate it when they do that?"

"It's okay, Anna Maria. Incidentally, I've been wondering why the service is called Nurses Anonymous."

"It's because we're selfless. It's like we have no identity. We only want to serve."

"Well, that's nice. I thought you might be a bunch of people who considered nursing a disease and got together to tell each other how your lives have been ruined by nursing, and how your families have given up on you, and how you finally realized you needed the help of other nurses in overcoming nursing."

"It's like we don't even have names," she said. "You don't even know we're here. We just care for the patient and disappear in the night."

"Would you like some coffee, and then we can look at the Kramer?"

"Do you have a Coke? Some days I can't get going until I have something fizzy, you know?"

I gave her a Coke and we went into the bedroom to look at the



Kramer cube. She was familiar with the system and seemed to know the difference between bottles containing nutrients and bottles containing cloudy fluid. She assured me the patient would be fed and cleaned and shaved and so forth on a regular schedule. We went over the amount of time she'd be spending in the apartment and the billing procedures. I gave her a set of keys.

I said, "What do you call these bottles that are hanging all over the inside of the Kramer?"

"We call them bottles."

I smiled weakly.

"I can't believe people in the profession, skilled and highly trained people with their complicated, technical names for things, would call these things anything as simple as bottles."

"Bottles," she said. "We call them bottles."

That worried me.

"How long have you been a nurse?" I said.

"What nurse? Did they say you were getting a nurse? Who did you talk to?"

"I don't know her name."

"It was Fat Sally, I bet."

"She sounded fat."

"Sure, that's who it was. That explains it."

"Well, if you're not a nurse, what are you?"

"I'm a nurse's aide. It just means I don't have a degree."

"It just means you're not a nurse."

"Yeah, you could say that."

She had black hair reaching practically to the base of her spine, and very dark lipstick—I think it was an Ultima shade called Black September—and her fingernails were covered with many coats of dark, dark polish. None of this seemed to go with the name Nurses Anonymous. But since she wasn't a nurse to begin with, maybe it didn't matter.

"Well, I'll leave you to your work, Anna Maria. I have a plane to catch."

"Can I bring my boyfriend up?"

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

“He picks me up wherever I’m working that day in his car. He comes and gets me, that’s all.”

“If it’s just to pick you up, I guess that’ll be all right.”

“We might watch TV. Half an hour.”

She was so small and young looking I felt like a chaperone for the Miss Teenage America Pageant. You wouldn’t call her dewy eyed, however. I figured she and her boyfriend spent many a white-hot hour locked in still-life embraces in various parts of his car.

“This makes the second job in this area,” she said. “I have an old lady right nearby who broke her fibula.”

She pronounced it fib-*yu*-la, with the accent on the middle syllable. It was hardly an earthshaking mistake. We all make that kind of mistake. If she had mispronounced a different kind of word, I wouldn’t have thought twice. But it was a word for a part of the body. She was a nurse’s aide, and her job was to care for the body and its parts. It seemed a little worrisome that a nurse’s aide would mispronounce a word for a part of the body.

I flew back to Detroit, and two minutes into the game with the Red Wings one of their defensemen gave me the hardest check I’ve ever received in my life. When my body hit the boards, it made a noise that sounded like *Caribou, Maine*.

That woke up the crowd. It was Philadelphia all over again. In that mysterious, spontaneous manner, the Wings realized it was all right to maim and kill Cleo Birdwell, and the crowd reacted to each hit as if little bells were announcing their doggy treats, and the ice was filled with upended, sprawling, deadpan bodies. The rougher things got and the noisier the crowd, the more we were determined not to show emotion. I felt I was getting my glazed-eyed look honed to perfection. By the middle of the third period, we were dashing around the ice with such blank looks on our faces that it might have been the world’s first display of Zen hockey. We were full of inwardness and self-mastery. There was no separation between the skaters and the ice.

Sitting in my cubicle afterward, I looked up to see Murray Jay

Siskind in his sixty-yard high-hurdle crouch, staring at me with those velvety eyes of his—that deep, rich, sneaky New York look.

“Do you know what I’m going to do for you, Cleo?”

“What?”

“The greatest thing I could ever do for a woman.”

“What?”

“Cook you dinner.”

“What?”

“Cook you the best dinner you’ve ever had in your life. This event will take place tomorrow night in Dallas-Fort Worth. Somehow, some way, I will find all the right ingredients for the perfect meal. Somehow, together, we will discover a place to prepare this meal and eat this meal. If I have to take hostages to accomplish these things, I will not hesitate. I’m a very oral person, Cleo, and eating is a sacred business with me. I don’t eat with just anyone. And I cook only for women. Name me a woman who can resist a man who cooks her a meal.”

His heavy brows quivered with a kind of frank, playful lechery.

“Oral people have a natural talent for preparing good food. Great chefs like to talk and sing and weep. I’m never happier than I am when I’m eating and talking at the same time. And that’s what we’ll be doing twenty-four hours from now, somewhere in that nameless wilderness between Dallas and Fort Worth.”

At the hotel, I was just crawling into bed when the phone rang. I realize there are more telephone conversations in this memoir than there are in the bugging files of the FBI. That’s life on the road. You can’t make deathless prose out of phone calls, but people in hotels are always reaching for the phone and if I’m going to tell you what my life in the NHL was like, we have to have some ringing phones. I don’t see any major thematic material coming out of these phone calls, and that’s what worries me more than recounting the calls themselves. It is not exactly cloud-capped stuff.

This was tennis wiz Archie Brewster.

“Cleo, finally found you.”

“Hello, Archie.”

“Been trying for days.”

“Here I am.”

“Is our date still on?”

“Sure.”

“I have a house in Dallas-Fort Worth.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s my U.S. base of operations. Boy needs a place to call home.”

“How is Floss?”

“Floss is Floss. What can I say? She’s a survivor, my old Aunt Glad, you better believe it.”

“Where is she?”

“One hotel behind me.”

“Where are you?”

“Acapulco. What time do you get in to D-FW?”

We made arrangements to meet at the airport. All through the second half of the conversation, I was thinking about Murray Jay’s dinner proposal, but the team had three days and two nights in Texas, so I figured I’d be able to sort it all out. It would be nice seeing Archie again.

Before the phone rang, I’d been all set for a night of solid sleep. One of those wintry plunges into the depths. You jump into bed wearing a flannel nightgown and socks. You bury yourself in sheets, blankets, bedspreads, and pillows. The body is curled like an autumn leaf. Knees up. Elbows down. Loose ends tucked in toward the navel. Gradually you envelop yourself in warmth. Your mind contains only incomplete thoughts. You begin slipping into silence and darkness. Nothing intrudes from the outside world. Your body gives a little jerk and then you curl up even tighter—warm and snug and safe. The Uterus Hilton.

Unfortunately, Archie’s phone call forced me into a state of alertness. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep for at least an hour. I decided to seek revenge on a whole species. I picked up the phone and called my brother in Sunnyvale, California.

“Hello, jerk.”

"Who's this?" he said.

"I purposely put off calling you for a few days. I was so angry and disgusted I was afraid I'd say things that would haunt both of us in our twilight years."

"Hey, it's Cleo. Hey, Cleo."

"What's the idea of being in that movie?"

"What movie?"

"You know what movie."

"Movie? I'm thinking. What movie?"

"*The Open Kimono* with Seymour Hare."

It was easy to picture his expression. Slow light dawning in his eyes. Sly amusement.

"They released that movie?"

"You bet, Ace."

"Well, I'm just flushed with delight. We never thought that movie would get out of the can. The bank seized the prints. Maybe now we can do the sequel. *The Tiger's Revenge* with Claude Balls. Did you see me in the underwater sequence? It's a home movie, basically. The whole microcomputer group was in it. It was edited by nine people drinking apricot brandy. So, how was I?"

"Oh, great. Mom and Dad are very proud."

"Oh, no kidding. Did they see it? Fan-tastic."

"We went together. Mother McCormack came, in her wheelchair, and the funeral was three days later. We buried her on a hill overlooking the river. Mom is in a white cotton shift at the state mental hospital. She's painting her walls with spinach. And Dad is officially a Missing Person. I think he sedated himself and took one of those ninety-nine-day See America tours on a Greyhound."

"I wish they'd really see it. Take them, Cleo. Go on, I dare you. What a stunning turn of events. I'd give anything."

"I feel like your maiden aunt instead of your younger sister. I've been your maiden aunt since you were six and I was three. You're my only foothold on being a grown-up."

He made cackling noises.

"Where are you, Cleo?"

"In the NHL, that's where."

“The NHL?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“I don’t usually answer the phone.”

“The National Hockey League. The New York Rangers.”

“I don’t read the sports pages, Cleo. I don’t know what that means.”

“Doesn’t matter. You hate hockey anyway.”

“I do?”

“You’d rather toss a Frisbee with a dolphin.”

“I think sports are okay if people don’t infringe on each other’s space.”

“What about you, Kenny? What do you do when you’re not working?”

“I don’t separate work time and other time. I don’t divide my life. It’s one life.”

“Well, I just wondered about your private life.”

“There’s no public life, private life kind of division. There’s just my life. We don’t think in segments here. It’s all one stretch of time. You can divide it artificially if that’s the mode you’re into, but it’s still a continuum with interchangeable points that we assign names to, like past, present, and future. If people would let their lives become part of the natural time cycle, we’d really see something organic begin to happen.”

“What is this, Dial-a-Hindu? I want to talk to Kenny Birdwell. I want to ask him a few stupid family questions, that’s all.”

“Okay, like what?”

“Do you have a steady girlfriend? Any marriage plans?”

“Marriage, maybe someday. But kids, definitely not. I’d never bring children into this world.”

“Why not?”

“It’s self-evident. The atmosphere. The rivers.”

“Is that any reason not to have kids? The rivers?”

“What better reason? What about the ice caps? People have already forgotten that. The ice caps. The ozone layer.”

“Those aren’t exactly day-to-day problems that the average four-year-old is going to be affected by.”

“What about those sky booms over the Eastern Seaboard?”

“Sky booms?”

“See, you’ve already forgotten. Those big noises in the atmosphere that nobody could explain.”

“What’s that got to do with bringing children into the world, Kenny?”

“It’s self-evident, isn’t it? There’s just every kind of catastrophe looming around the bend, that’s all. The rivers. The oceans. What about tinted toilet paper?”

“Children just grow up little by little. These things don’t affect them directly. Even if they did, we’d have to think about continuing the species anyway, wouldn’t we? Don’t we have an obligation?”

“What about foreign policy? Our foreign policy’s totally chaotic.”

“I don’t know how to argue with you, Kenny.”

“Because you know I’m right.”

“How can you not have a child because you don’t like our foreign policy? That’s such an abstract thing, foreign policy.”

“Environmental groups have completely forgotten what tinted toilet paper does to the oceans. What about our balance of payments?”

“What about continental drift?” I said. “North America and Australia are probably going to collide in eighteen million years. What about that?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” he said.

“Won’t *that* put a crimp in the baby boom.”

“These are real problems, Cleo. They’re not abstract. They already affect everything we do. What about monosodium glutamate? What about that? You want to tell me that has no effect on children?”

“Shut up.”

“What about red dye number two? You don’t think that has practical bearing? What about grade-A beef that’s really horse meat and chicken necks?”

“Just shut up, all right?”

“What about Legionnaires’ Disease? How can anyone seriously think about having children with this thing still going around unchecked?”

“People have babies. That’s all. They don’t think about these things. They just have babies.”

“Well, it might occur to them to start doing some thinking. What about fossil fuels?”

“What about black holes?”

“Black holes?” he said.

“What about the whole universe disappearing into a black hole? Let’s not have children, Rodney. They might end up getting sucked into a black hole.”

“Be serious. What about nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists?”

“What about sex orgies?” I said. “Let’s not have children, Rodney. They might grow up to see their older brother taking part in a sex orgy.”

“Be serious. What about the weather?”

“Just shut up, okay, Kenny?”

“There could be another ice age on the way.”

“All right, it’s getting a little colder.”

“She finally agrees on something.”

“Well, so what? You don’t stop having babies because of the weather.”

“Cleo, do you realize what an ice age would mean? Even a little one? It’s self-evident. There’s no aspect of our daily lives that wouldn’t be affected.”

“It’s getting colder. I said I agree. But that doesn’t mean a great sheet of ice is going to cover the earth in ten or twenty years.”

“Would you bring children into an ice age?”

“Shut up.”

“What about unemployment?” he said.

“Sure, millions of children are out of work. Do me a favor. Stick to chicken necks. That’s my favorite.”

“What about supertankers? Every one of them is an ecological time bomb, slowly ticking.”



“Look, I’ll be in Los Angeles in five or six days. Maybe we can get together and have a sensible conversation. Where is Sunnyvale, anyway?”

“Where is Los Angeles?” he said. “Where is anything?”

I crawled back under the covers. I was exhausted. As I drifted closer to sleep, I could hear the sound of bodies hitting the boards. Heavy checks at both ends of the ice. That big, hollow, booming sound.

Caribou, Maine. Caribou, Maine. Caribou, Maine.

# 11



*M*ETROPLEX. That's what they call the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Imagine telling people you live in Metroplex. In a cement bunker, they'd probably think. Someday there'll be a Greater Metroplex. People will feel nostalgic for Metroplex. They'll think back to the days when growth and sprawl had a kind of seedy charm.

Whenever I hear the word Metroplex, I picture a science-fiction slum. The outskirts of a vast, galactic city, pockmarked by craters, with crumbling skyways in the distance, and the crackle of burnt-out neon, and Ragnor the Sea Snail poking along behind his giant sensors, under two full moons.

For all I know, the real Metroplex is full of thatched cottages and brambly gardens. In two and a half days, I saw very little of the place, if you can call it a place, and I could never get a fix on what I was seeing.

I guess Metroplex begins, in spirit, at the airport. The airport is called D-FW, and that's where I was when Archie Brewster's plane landed. I watched him come into the arrivals lounge, dressed half sloppily in jeans, a knit shirt, and moccasins, and I was about to fling up an arm in greeting when I spied a familiar figure right behind him. Floss Penrose. I felt a little buckling of the knees. Dear, sweet woman, as Glenway Packer liked to refer to her, but she had a gift for turning up at the wrong time.

She wore a turban and wraparound dress, and looked quite the sexy minx. I was glad to see her, but I didn't know how to handle the situation. Do I hide behind a chair or do I sweep her up in a big embrace? As they headed my way through mobs of people, I caught Archie's eye and he gave me a sheepish grin, and shrugged, and looked a little tense around the mouth. The least forceful of close-fisted blows would have made his nuts scream well into the cocktail hour.

Floss looked great. Better than I'd ever seen her. She looked fulfilled. She looked radiant. Like something out of the pages of *Modern Bride Remarried*. She positively glowed.

There was no time to decide what course of action to take. They were on top of me in seconds, and Floss gave a little shriek of joy and we hugged and clutched and made incoherent sounds.

Eventually we all headed down an endless corridor. Archie, keeping his eyes dead ahead, sneaked around to my left side. He kept me between himself and Floss. He motioned me to keep my suitcase between myself and Floss. Then he mumbled some hurried remarks in the general direction of my left ear. The idea was that he'd told Floss I'd be meeting the plane and there was nothing to worry about.

I looked straight ahead, talking out of the side of my mouth.

"When did all this develop?"

"She caught up to me at four A.M."

"Where?"

"My hotel."

"What happened?"

"We played Monopoly."

With all the fuzzy sounds around us—voices, flight announcements, engines revving, planes taking off—it was fairly easy for Archie and me to carry on this side-of-the-mouth conversation without Floss realizing it.

I kept looking straight ahead.

“Why am I meeting her plane?”

“To welcome her to Metroplex,” he said.

“This is the first time I’ve been here in my life. How could I welcome someone?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “Won’t come up.”

“Well, how did I know what plane she’d be on?”

“I called and told you.”

“When?”

“Won’t come up. No problem.”

“Well, if you two had your great reconciliation at four in the morning, that wouldn’t have left you much time to call me and tell me to meet the plane. Is there a time difference between Acapulco and Detroit?”

“She won’t ask. Won’t come up. Forget it.”

“I’m just trying to get our stories straight.”

No sooner did I get that sentence out of the side of my mouth than I realized Floss was talking to me out of the side of *her* mouth. We both looked dead ahead. I switched my suitcase to the other hand.

“It’s been sheer hell,” she said.

“Glenway told me you wept on the phone.”

“I’ve had difficulty swallowing.”

“Anxiety,” I said.

“No, tension.”

“I thought anxiety made it hard for you to swallow.”

“Anxiety makes me choke.”

“I thought tension made you choke.”

“Anxiety. I wake up choking.”

We looked straight ahead.

“But it’s over now,” I said. “You’re together again.”

“He can be so sweet when he wants to.”

"You look great."

"We played Monopoly," she said.

We moved through a sliding door onto a sidewalk where a lot of people milled about. I realized I was standing there with my mouth distorted because of the unnatural way I'd been talking. A porter came out with their luggage and we waited for Archie's car and driver.

Floss looked straight ahead.

"It was sweet of you to meet the plane, Cleo."

"It's been so long. We haven't seen each other. You should have called."

"How did you know when we'd be getting in?"

"Archie called and told me."

"He's such a doll face sometimes."

"He wanted you to have a real welcome."

"He must have gotten you out of bed. What a shame."

"I haven't been sleeping."

"Cleo, you need your sleep."

"We all do. Believe me. What a road trip."

"Is there a time difference between Acapulco and Detroit?"

A plane took off. I watched it rise into the dust and haze.

"There's certainly a language difference," I said.

I didn't know what I meant by that, so how could she? But we both laughed, looking straight ahead. An old Packard with running boards pulled up. Leave it to Archie to own a block-long 1930s gangster car with a skylight. It was in great shape, too.

He guided me around to the far door, and as he looked grimly toward the horizon, as if waiting for Amelia Earhart's plane to come into view, he said with a totally closed mouth, speaking with his *teeth*, "What are chances of you and me getting together for the second reel of our private movie a little later in the day, when Aunt Glad is sleeping off the effects of her travels?"

"No chance. None."

"Good. Just confirming."

"The chances are zero and under."

"Very good," he said with his teeth. "You may get in now, madame."

“With that question, you have got us into the negative numbers.”

It took a long time to get out of the airport and we cruised smoothly over an expressway for a while. I saw tall buildings, a real city, but we veered onto another road and headed deeper into Metroplex. It was a pretty day, in the sixties, and I was lured into thinking winter was something that didn't happen here.

Finally we got to Archie's place. It was a large stone house at the end of a quiet street. Out back were kennels, garages, and tennis courts, and about six Irish setters came leaping onto our lanky hero as he emerged from the car. In and around the garages were nine old cars—Plymouths, Packards, DeSotos, LaSalles etc.

“Aren't they a gorgeous sight?” Floss said. “I half expect George Raft to be sitting inside one of them, flipping a coin.”

Archie's driver was a large fellow wearing a good-sized Stetson. Floss and I followed him and the luggage inside while Archie rolled around on the grass with his setters.

It was a rambling house full of recreation rooms or dens or TV rooms, whatever these things are called. Everywhere I looked I saw pinball machines, pool tables, jukeboxes, TV sets, video recorders, movie projectors, bars and barstools, card tables, athletic trophies, movie posters, dart boards, Ping-Pong tables, stacks of Captain Marvel comics, a Moog Synthesizer, and various computer games and puzzles.

“There's an indoor pool at the end of that long corridor,” Floss said.

“Great. I wouldn't mind.”

“And he's extending the basement to build a shooting range. Seems he's discovered the handgun.”

“What a place. I think I hate it.”

“Me, too,” she said. “There's a fully equipped kitchen, but the rest of the place is strictly Summer Camp in the Catskills of the Mind.”

“But Archie's an intelligent guy.”

“He's also emotionally and psychologically stunted. We're both warped. Or I'm warped, he's thwarted. In any case, it's mostly my fault, so I can hardly go around making cracks about his house.”

“At least he has decent taste. I mean the dogs are handsome. And the cars are really stunning.”

“I can hardly go round referring to his house as an American Boy’s Fantasy of Life After Death.”

A fully equipped kitchen. That reminded me of Murray Jay and his idea of cooking dinner. I mentioned it to Floss and she said she was sure Archie would be in favor, and so I found a phone, called Murray’s hotel, and told him I’d solved the problem of finding a place to cook and eat his glorious meal. The only catch was that he’d have to cook for four instead of two. He didn’t seem to mind. I told him who the other two people were, and he asked me how to get to Archie’s place. I put down the phone and ran out to find Floss. She was in one of the dens, digging out a swimsuit for me.

She said she didn’t know how to get to Archie’s place. No one knew except for Archie’s driver and he wasn’t talking. It was virtually the only thing he knew about anything, and he didn’t want to let go.

She gave me the street name and house number, and wished me luck. I rushed to the phone to tell Murray.

He said the address wasn’t much help unless I could either tell him how to get there or give him the name of the township or congressional district or regional planning board, or something. I said I couldn’t. No one could. All we knew was Metroplex.

He said he’d call his office in New York.

“Come out early. There’s tennis and swimming.”

“What else?” he said.

“Darts, Ping-Pong.”

“What else?”

“Pool tables, pinball machines. You shoot pool?”

“I bowl.”

“I’ll have to ask,” I told him.

So Floss and I went to the swimming pool, to be joined by Archie in a raggedy, lopsided pair of trunks that he had to keep hitching up to maintain minimum standards. Floss, meanwhile, was wearing a stunning accompaniment to her turban—a one-and-a-half-piece poolside toga, I guess I’ll call it. Of course she wasn’t wearing the turban with it, but you could easily see there was a

relationship. The turban, the dress, the toga were all part of a coordinated outfit that you could keep adding to or subtracting from as your mood changed. It was the kind of stuff you swirl into and out of over the course of a long weekend in some Latin American dictatorship. All the items are infinitely adaptable. I think the toga *was* the turban, as a matter of fact.

We had sandwiches and drinks at poolside, served by a thin, elderly man named Wing, who, except for skin color, reminded me a lot of Washington Post. The same string-beany body and small, oblong, henpecked face.

"Wing used to work for Elvis," Archie said. "I had to outbid the Bee Gees to get him."

"Was he up on a block?" Floss said.

"I'm glad Elvis died when I was in the States," Archie said. "I would have hated to miss the coverage. Where were you when he died, Cleo?"

"I don't know."

"Where were you, Floss?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"I was in my room at the Stanford Court in San Francisco, watching TV when the news came, and eating a steak sandwich, medium well, with french fries and a Budweiser. It was just getting ready to rain."

Floss and I sipped our drinks, lazily turning the pages of magazines.

"Where were you when Jimi Hendrix died?" Archie said.

"I don't know," Floss said. "Not a clue."

"What about you, Cleo?"

"I don't remember, Archie."

"I was in Sarasota, Florida, playing tennis with my uncle J.R. when we heard it on somebody's transistor. It was the first set and J.R. was ahead three games to two. I was wearing cut-off jeans. Where were you when Janis Joplin died?"

"We don't remember," Floss said.

"Let Cleo speak for herself."

"I don't remember," I said.

"I was in Williamstown, Massachusetts, with my mother and fa-



ther and my cousin J.R. Junior. We drove up to watch the leaves change color. We heard it on the car radio. We were doing forty-five in a thirty-mile-an-hour zone. There was a green Toyota in front of us. My mother was cleaning her sunglasses.”

We ate and drank a while.

“Where were you when Jim Morrison died?” he said.

“I give up,” Floss said. “Where was I?”

“Where were you, Cleo?”

“I don’t remember.”

Archie finished his drink and dove into the water without telling us where he’d been or what he’d been wearing. He came up clutching his trunks and hung on to the edge of the pool.

“It would have been awful to be out of the country when Elvis died,” he said. “I don’t think I could have survived that. I would have felt as though I forfeited my citizenship. Not to be here when something of that magnitude takes place. I would have felt unbelievably lonely out there in Europe or Asia, totally frigging alone and depressed. That plus the media coverage. Imagine not being able to enjoy the media coverage. What’s the point of being American if you’re going to be out of the country for a thing of that magnitude?”

I said, “You sound to me like someone who’s thinking about changing his life.”

“Maybe it’s time.”

“Settling down,” I said.

“I’ll give you an idea how out of touch I’ve gotten. I didn’t even *know* about the Panasonic five-foot screen.”

“Good detail, I hear,” Floss said.

I looked from one to the other.

“I didn’t even *know*,” he said.

“What is it?” I said. “Know what?”

“There’s a TV set with a five-foot screen on the market,” Floss said. “Good detail, they say.”

“*That’s* how out of touch,” Archie said.

He hoisted himself up and came flopping over the edge. I watched him crawl over to the bourbon bottle and start pouring little trickles all over Floss’s toes. Time to think about leaving. I

dove in, swam a few lengths, towed off, and went down the hall to my den. On the way, I walked past seven or eight open doorways. I couldn't help pausing at the last of these. Beneath a Tiffany lamp stood two chairs and a table with a green felt top. Set up on the table was a Monopoly board. The Chance cards and Community Chest cards were face down in the allotted places. Monopoly money was stacked neatly in three piles—two for the players, one for the bank. The title deed cards were in one neat stack. The houses and hotels were in a little Chinese box—an Aunt Glad contribution, no doubt. The weird little tokens all sat in the corner marked GO. The dice were at the center of the board, showing snake eyes.

Beyond the table and chairs was a pretty little brass bed.

About three hours later, I was in the kitchen checking out the herbs and spices when the dogs started up a fearful yowling. I stuck my head out the window and saw Murray plodding across the lawn with shopping bags in both hands and all kinds of implements, silverware, and other stuff hanging out of his pockets.

He moved sideways through the leaping dogs and made it to the door. I let him in and he just dropped everything on the floor and sort of collapsed standing up against a wall.

"I'll get you a drink, Murray."

"A small, neat Scotch in a clean glass."

"Coming up."

"Where are the others?"

"Taking a nap."

"What's the story there?"

"She's his agent."

"She's your agent, too. You don't take naps together."

I gave him the drink and he started taking things out of the bags.

"I took cabs, buses, and hitchhiked. You don't want to hear about it."

I watched him haul his massive, shaggy manuscript out of the bottom of the second shopping bag.

"What are we eating?" I said.

“I’m aiming for a brilliant simplicity. It’s not easy finding the right ingredients in these retired aircraft carriers they use for supermarkets, but I did my best. Not that I’m complaining. I happen to be a Brooklyn boy who loves the idea of America. These travels out of the solar system are what make my job tolerable. I’ve had a love affair with America ever since my father took me to the funeral of an old friend of his in Waterbury, Connecticut. He wanted me to see death in a natural setting. To him, Waterbury was the country. To me, too. He dragged me around the streets, saying, ‘Go ahead, look for kosher.’ That funeral was like summer camp for me. ‘Find me a knish,’ he’d say, and we’d both laugh.”

He was putting things in the refrigerator, taking other things out of cabinets, checking drawers for the right implements, inspecting pans and bowls, finding a lemon press, reading the small print on the unfamiliar packages of butter, cream, sugar, and so on. He took a knife out of his inside jacket pocket. He called it his four-inch Wusthof. A utility knife. He said he carried it everywhere.

In a side pocket was his Peugeot pepper grinder.

He got all this stuff out of his jacket, then threw the jacket over a chair and began washing his hands, turning them slowly over each other under hot water, like the head of surgery at the Mayo Clinic.

“Veal piccata, Cleo. To answer your question.”

“Wonderful.”

“I managed to find some white peppercorns. I don’t like black pepper because it distracts from the golden whiteness of the finished scallops. Fortunately, I picked up some fine-crystal French sea salt when we were in Boston. And I never leave New York without a quart tin of extra-virgin, cold-pressed olive oil stashed *somewhere*.”

He looked at me through his little round glasses. Then we both got down to serious work. Naturally I let Murray call the shots. We worked pretty well as a team.

Using his Wusthof deftly, he quickly reduced a pile of parsley to exactly four teaspoons.

He watched me dust the zucchini blossoms in a snowy haze of flour.

He opened a bottle of soave, saying that an authentic veal piccata should be made with a *good* Italian white wine—very dry, and light, and good.

I rolled a lemon on the counter because Murray wanted to bring its juices to the surface. After I cut it in half, we put first one half, then the other into Archie's German-made lemon press, and out came four teaspoons of lemon juice.

The whole experience was kind of impressionistic. Murray was doing veal with one hand, cheesecake with the other, and at the same time he'd guide me calmly through a tense moment with the *crème de Crécy*, and follow this with a discussion of the difference between an unripe brie on Bremner wafers and a brie with more character on a Carr's water biscuit.

(Better mouth texture with the former.)

"Cleo, you're bruising the arugula. Kindly let it rest in that bowl of water. When I'm finished here, we'll dry it in a special bath towel I use for drying the more delicate salad greens."

"Can I do it?"

"Of course."

"How do I do it?"

"Arugula is fragile. It has to be rocked back and forth very, very gently in a fluffy bath towel. Watercress, endive, Bibb or Boston lettuce I spin-dry in my Swiss Roti green-dryer. Iceberg, we don't even talk about. Coarse. And noisy."

"I like noisy food."

"Food sounds are interesting. Some are tacky, some are subtle. Listen to butter melting on a warm croissant. You can *hear* it, I swear."

"You ought to write an article."

"No time. First things first."

I thought I saw him glance at his manuscript, which was sitting on the refrigerator.

"What kind of cheesecake is that?"

"Lindy's original," he said. "I want you to beat in the sour cream and half-and-half."

"Will do."

We were having fun. Murray was sloppy and methodical at the same. It is an ability that flourishes in kitchens, I've noticed. He would throw things around and create enormously chaotic little instances of panic in various parts of the kitchen, but there was thought, practice, and professionalism behind all the seeming disorder. In the midst of buttering a cake pan and applying a mallet to the veal, he made me a Scotch on the rocks, got another Scotch neat for himself, used his elbow to nudge the pulse button on the blender, and fondled my bottom with his hand in a plaid mitten potholder.

"Are they really taking a nap, those two?"

"First we all went swimming," I said. "Then I got some badly needed rest while they played chess or checkers or something. I think they like to nap after checkers."

I felt like a total fool giving him this censored version of events. I even avoided the word Monopoly because of the erotic, incestlike quality that I had gradually come to associate with it. But I didn't think it would be very gracious for a houseguest to reveal the intimate secrets of her host, on the one hand, and her friend and agent, on the other.

Murray gave me a skeptical look as he broke an egg with one hand and held a handful of dill up to his nose with the other. He seemed to take great pleasure in smelling things. He took deep, thoughtful sniffs of practically everything that passed through his hands and he even stuck his head in the refrigerator, the oven, the pots, and the mixing bowl to reconnoiter for strange, familiar, or alarming aromas. I realized, thinking about it, that on at least one occasion, when I had a drink with Murray and Sanders Meade in Los Angeles, Murray had seemed to be sniffing the *women* who passed our table. At the time I'd thought it was just my imagination, but as I watched him in the kitchen, lifting handfuls of produce to his nose, I recognized the look on his face as the expression he'd had in that lounge as waitresses and other females drifted by, and his head sort of fell to his shoulders, and his eyes narrowed, and he took swift, deep breaths through his nose. Sinus, I'd thought at the time. But he was smelling the women walking past.

I tried to recall the difference between sensual and sensuous. I'm not sure why exactly. There is just something about being in the presence of a man who sniffs women that made me feel I ought to know.

"Have you met Floss and Archie?" I said.

"Neither one."

"Never covered tennis?"

"I hate tennis. Of all the sports I hate, it's the only one I've never covered. Tennis is in my pantheon of all-time thumb-sucking, jerk-off sports, second only to golf. Golf is the puritan ethic, landscaped. It's eighteen anal openings with waving flags. I don't even want to talk about it."

Three twists of the Peugeot pepper grinder. He never left New York without his pepper grinder, he said.

"Are there any sports you like?"

"The animal sports," he said. "Boxing, roller derby, cockfights. That's the real world and that's what I'd like to cover. Puerto Rican cockfights."

I jerked a thumb toward the refrigerator.

"What's in that manuscript?"

"I don't talk about that."

"You carry it everywhere."

"I work on it all the time."

"Has anyone read it?"

"I send copies to my editor. I have a contract."

"What's the big secret?"

"The book touches on some sensitive areas."

"In what field?"

"Can't tell you, Cleo."

I began to clear a space so I could get ready to sauté the zucchini blossoms.

"Give me a hint," I said.

"It's not sports."

"Is it politics?"

"It's not sports. That's all I'm saying. It's the real world. It's animal. It's Darwinian. It's not a bunch of boys rolling in the mud."

“What’s wrong with boys rolling in the mud?”

“This book is my personal liberation, Cleo. These are adult matters. Things that have a real impact on the world.”

He was chopping garlic with the Wusthof.

“I’ll say this about sports,” he said. “Athletes have bodies. That’s the bottom line on athletes. They’re people with bodies. I envy that in a person.”

The plaid, mittened hand made a grab that I easily evaded. We concentrated on the task before us, although not without a few learned asides from Murray, including demonstrations of knife grips, dicing techniques etc.

“You really like that knife.”

“A gift from my ex-wife. She had excellent taste in cutlery. I mean it. She taught me a lot. If you’re serious about cooking, you have to surround yourself with precision tools.”

“What happened?”

“I surrounded myself with Wusthofs.”

“No, what happened to your marriage?”

“Well, that’s a long, complicated, deeply personal, very boring story. She’s a terrific lady and we had a lot going for us, I think. But these things happen.”

“What things?”

“Things happen, Cleo. It’s so hard to maintain a relationship today. You relate for a while. Then you have trouble relating. Then you don’t relate at all.”

“What do you mean, relate? Can you be specific?”

“Bernice and I related. We talked the same language. We wanted the same thing.”

“What did you want?”

“A relationship. Someone to relate to.”

“Well, what happened specifically when you stopped relating?”

“How specific do you want me to be?”

“Go the limit, Murray.”

“She became a lesbian. They were all doing it. It started because there were so many novels about women who go to bed with men they can’t stand. It began to depress the female readership. Some

of them became lesbians as a result. Then *they* wrote books. This was the second wave of novels, and this is where Bernice started reading. But I think she's since gone back to the first wave, to sort of cement her convictions."

"Who is she a lesbian with?"

"Paine, Webber, Jackson and Curtis. She's a financial analyst."

"No, no, I mean was there a particular woman she got interested in?"

"She was always hazy about that. I never understood exactly what was happening there. I even suspected it might be a man."

"Would that have been better or worse from your viewpoint?"

"Cleo, I spent hours and hours thinking about that very thing. Do I want it to be a man, or do I leave well enough alone and believe it's a woman? A terrific, modern, thumb-sucking dilemma."

"Why would she tell you it was a woman if it wasn't?"

"Either to hurt me more or to hurt me less. She could have gone either way. Who knows?"

A fleeting thought as I stirred the soup. Maybe there was no other person at all. Bernice left him because she got tired of being sniffed.

"Anyway, Cleo, I like to think the whole experience has made me seem unprotected in an interesting way."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm trying to develop a vulnerability that women will find attractive."

He looked at me with those soft, dark, heavy-lidded eyes. They were the eyes of a man who tries to charm people by being frankly conniving. And yet I thought I detected a certain genuine unprotectedness. There was a melancholy depth behind Murray's various attempts to gain a sexual advantage. He was sincere in spite of himself.

"Is this the way the soup is supposed to look?"

"Perfect, Cleo. Peach-velvety. We'll dust it with fresh, snipped dill."

"Should I wake the others?"



“Give them a few more minutes. And adjust the gauge on that mixer, please. Low speed.”

I did that, and together we dried the arugula in the bath towel he'd brought, neatly folded, in one of the shopping bags. He showed me how to cradle the arugula in the towel and then delicately remove the excess moisture, virtually drop by drop. It was like drying a broken leg.

“I use white towels only, for aesthetics, or color contrast. And they have to be one hundred percent cotton. Not a trace, not a whisper of polyester. No polyester. Never.”

“Do you get these ideas out of cookbooks?”

“Absolutely not. It's strictly instinct, practice, personal style. I don't associate food with literacy at all. Different parts of the brain completely. I'm very, very oral. I learn by tasting.”

The mixer came to a stop. Murray finished his Scotch, rinsing his teeth with the last mouthful.

“Tell me one thing, Murray.”

“Anything at all. The more personal, the better. Ask me something intimate, Cleo. I love having intimate talks with women. Warm, frank, intimate, revealing exchanges. Huddled together over a drink. A man and woman in a dark, quiet spot at four-thirty on a rainy afternoon. Sounds of swishing tires outside. Some old, old ballad on the jukebox. He nods sympathetically as she reveals deep, candid, moist intimacies about herself. The blurry panes of glass. The sound of her stockings as she crosses her legs.”

“Why did you want the mixer at low speed?”

Deflated. But I think he knew more or less what was coming. He'd set it up himself.

“You're a wicked woman, Cleo. You're full of womanly wiles in reverse. You seduce by being wholesome, practical, ordinary, and down to earth.”

“Ordinary?”

“The most disarming weapon in the female arsenal. Ordinary. Give me more. I love it a lot.”

“Murray, I'd really like to know why you wanted the mixer at low speed.”

“You add the heavy cream and sugar at low speed because you want a heavy cheesecake. The original Lindy’s is heavy. If you beat at high speed, you get air pockets and that gives you a feathery cheesecake, which is the last thing you want. If you beat at moderate speed, you get a well-balanced, midwestern cheesecake. We want to be extremist here. So we go low speed. The best cheesecake sits in your stomach like a gold bar. Cheesecake has to hurt a little. That means it cares.”

I sat on a stool a while and watched him begin to bring things to an orderly, well-harmonized, timely conclusion. I realized I ought to be setting the table. I went out to find the dining room. There didn’t seem to be one. I jogged down the hall to the Monopoly room and tapped lightly on the door.

It opened a couple of inches. Archie’s wry, pointed face and naked shoulder crowded the small opening.

“Dinner’s ready,” I whispered. “Is there a place to eat it?”

He looked a little disoriented.

“Dinnertime,” I said. “Murray came and cooked.”

He smiled weakly.

“Where do we eat it?” I whispered.

“I usually order out.”

“Well, where do you eat it when it gets here?”

“In the playroom.”

“Which one? There are nineteen, according to the blueprints.”

“The one with Pong and Super Pong.”

“Shit, Archie. Murray came all the way from Dallas, and it took him hours to get here, and he cooked this whole, big meal.”

“What is it?”

“It’s arugula, you jackass. Dried in a bath towel. Now find us a decent place to eat it.”

I heard Floss’s voice from the general area of the bed.

“Are we really having arugula?”

“Yes. And veal piccata, lovingly prepared, goddamn it.”

I heard her padding toward the door. Her head appeared under Archie’s armpit. That was another thing about those two. Aside from their ages, there was a terrific height difference.

“What else?” she said.

“Sautéed zucchini blossoms.”

“Marvelous. Where did he find them?”

“I don’t know, but he went to a lot of trouble and I think we ought to find somewhere nice, with a tablecloth and napkin rings, to eat this stuff.”

“The room with Pong is by far the biggest room,” Archie said.

“What is Pong?” I said.

“I thought *I* was out of touch. It’s an electronic video game.”

We were all whispering.

“The room with Pong isn’t that bad, Cleo,” Floss said. “Anyway, there’s really no choice. I’ll get dressed and help.”

They withdrew their heads, and the door closed, and I went back to the kitchen to ask Murray if he ever left New York without napkin rings.

Wing served us dinner. He moved silently in and out, wearing a white jacket with numerous buttons. I think it is accurate to call him soft-footed. I never knew where he’d turn up. In the midst of some boisterous exchange or other, I’d swing my head toward Archie to zing a remark his way, and I’d find that I was talking into Wing’s elbow, or Wing’s lowered head, as he spooned soup into my plate or replenished the water supply or tactfully lifted Archie’s cuff from the butter dish.

Wing could have been any of eleven nationalities. He had vague pigmentation and uncertain features. Whatever he was, I think he was relieved to be serving a real dinner for a change. I’d had the impression at the pool earlier that he was showing the effects of having spent a lifetime serving tons of junk food to millionaire hippies, bikers, cowboys, movie stars, dope fiends, and jocks.

The food was superb. We all had little fits of ecstasy over it. Murray responded by nodding his head gravely, as though appraising each remark for its accuracy and poetic content. Floss was especially impressed and kept after him for hints, tips etc. Murray, in turn, would bend her way, nodding gravely and at the same time sort of stroking his entire face with his right hand, leaning

way, way over, taking deep nasal breaths under cover of his hand. It took me a while to figure it out.

He was smelling her.

None of my business. No one else seemed to notice and I didn't think it was demeaning to Floss, although I was later to have second thoughts about that. Anyway, the dinner party progressed in high-spirited fashion, with a lot of laughter, banter, and simultaneous talk. I've always thought simultaneous talk was a sign that an event was going well. Aside from everything else, it means no one is listening. Listening is deadly to a sense of good times.

I mentioned this to Floss. She started talking right through my remarks, mainly to correct a phrase I'd used. Simultaneous talk. She called it overlapping dialogue.

Archie had made a grown-up attempt to dress for dinner, no doubt at Floss's urging. He wore a Western shirt with a lot of fancy stitching, a pair of custom jeans with fifties-style pistol pockets, and a stunning pair of Tony Lama boots that a lot of people would have been tempted to rip off his feet if he'd been found dead or in deep shock at the scene of a train derailment.

"When do you play?" I asked him.

"Day after tomorrow. What about you?"

"Tomorrow night," I said.

Floss said, "How has the team been going?"

"Tie some, lose some."

Wing poured more wine.

"No sports," Murray said. "We talk anything but sports."

"What else is there?" Archie said. "Sports, movies, rock 'n' roll."

"Movies we talk," Murray said. "Who starts?"

"You do," Archie said.

Murray thought a moment.

"Where were you when James Dean died?" he said. "I remember exactly what I was doing, what I was wearing, what the weather was like. It was a moment of bright, bright intensity."

"I only get those flashes for rock 'n' roll," Archie told him.

Floss was wearing a vampy dress with slits. It was quite startling, the kind of thing you wear indoors only, and only when you are

sure you will be surrounded by people in the same economic and racial bracket.

We ate the last of the tender, whitish veal.

“Before we left Mexico,” Archie said, “I tried to change some rupees for U.S. dollars. No luck. They never heard of rupees. That’s another reason to come in from the cold. The rupee is slipping.”

“What’s the first reason?” Murray said.

“Elvis dying.”

“I always thought the only justification for a jerk-off sport like tennis was the worldwide travel.”

“It’s all right when you’re still in your teens,” Archie said. “Asia looks like something to a seventeen-year-old. After ten, eleven, twelve trips, you don’t even notice the teeming millions anymore. You get over your respectful sense of awe and wonder and all you think about is getting your jaws around a frigging cheeseburger. Europe’s not as lonely. You’re in the same ballpark more or less. The things I’ll miss about Europe and Latin America are the great names they have for avenues and boulevards.”

“Like what?” I said.

“Well, they have these proud, ringing, nationalistic names that recall great, ringing events in the nation’s history. I’m forever dodging taxis on some boulevard called the Avenue of the Seventeenth of October, 1921, Between Five and Seven In the Evening. Like that. Or the Boulevard of the Military Takeover of the Third of August, When the Black Shirts Stomped the Red Shirts, Fourteen to Seven, In a Steady Drizzle.”

“Fourteen to seven is American football,” Floss said.

Wing arrived with the cheesecake.

Even though I knew Archie was uncomfortable in his spanking new dinner clothes, I couldn’t help enjoying the sight. He looked stiffish and cute, like some little boy all fitted out in white for his First Holy Communion, ladled out by the Bishop himself, or however it’s served. Archie looked good in clothes, even though he obviously didn’t know the first thing about them. He was a natural, in other words, just as Murray was an unnatural, a lifetime loser to

clothes. If you studied the matter, you could see that Murray had given in, that he would wear nothing but comfortable, half-baggy, *balding* corduroys in various shades of brown. In truth, I could picture him in little else. Maybe khaki shorts for sunbathing on his roof.

I watched him sniffing Floss.

"This cheesecake is scrumptious," she told him.

He leaned closer as if to inhale a wildflower she kept pressed in her bodice.

"How many eggs?"

"Four," he said. "Biggest you can find."

"Grated lemon rind, of course. But I detect something else."

He seemed pleased enough to do something foppish, like kiss the tips of her fingers.

"Orange," he said modestly.

"Orange rind. But of course. How stupid of me. Brilliant, Murray."

"And yet how simple."

They kept it up for a while. Archie leaned over to tell me he was beginning to feel a great weight in the pit of his stomach. I told him he was supposed to feel a great weight. This wasn't some supergoody cheesecake from a church supper in Iowa. This was a low-speed, big-egg, extremist dessert. It was the Symbionese Liberation Army of cheesecakes.

"Normally I cook only for women," Murray told Floss.

She gave a frantic little laugh.

"What am I?"

We finished the wine, and Wing brought out Scotch, sweet vermouth, and a water pistol full of ouzo. Archie said this last item was a leftover from a recent party.

I heard Floss ask Murray, "When did New Yorkers stop saying *ciao*?"

"I never noticed. But you're right. They did stop."

"But when?"

"I don't know. But you're right. No one says it anymore."

"Overnight it stopped."

“Like Nehru jackets.”

“Remember Nehru jackets?”

“With the medals that people wore around their necks.”

“You got the medal for wearing the jacket.”

“Remember chianti bottles?”

“Remember the Village when it was the Village?”

I poked my head in.

“How are you two getting along?”

It was nearly midnight. We were making more than a little headway with the Scotch and vermouth. The water pistol lay untouched.

Overlapping dialogue.

Floss was looking at Murray’s manuscript. He’d brought it into the Pong room along with a shopping bag full of his precision tools. It sat on an army blanket in a corner of the room.

“Murray, what are you writing?”

“It’s my Work in Progress.”

“How interesting.”

Archie said, “It must take discipline, being a writer.”

“Shut up,” Floss told him. “I want to interrogate Murray about this thing. Murray, how interesting, so you’re writing a book. On what, may we ask.”

“He won’t tell anyone,” I said.

“How interesting.”

“It’s not sports. That’s all we know at this point.”

Archie said, “Would I have heard of any of your books?”

“Shut up,” Floss reminded him. “So, Murray, how interesting, you’re going in a completely new direction. I admire your courage.”

“I’ve got nearly nine hundred pages,” he said. “Handwritten.”

“Handwritten. And what is the general thrust, Murray, if we may ask. Fiction, nonfiction?”

“Nonfiction.”

“More my kind of thing,” she said. “Would I like it? Is it the kind of thing I would just totally devour on the Hampton jitney?”

“I have great hopes for it. But it’s not light reading, Floss. It’s harrowing, brutal stuff.”

“Have some more wine. Archie, give him wine, so we can get it out of him. I must know what this man is up to.”

Archie looked sleepy.

“Wine’s gone. No more Scotch, either.”

“Well, the sweet vermouth is undrinkable, so that’s out. It’s the vilest stuff I’ve ever set eyes on. The mangiest dog dying of thirst wouldn’t go near it. It’s the foulest smelling thing this side of a Borneo pissoir.”

I was drinking the sweet vermouth.

Floss continued, “Short of squirting ouzo at each other, what do we do?”

“I’ll go find Wing,” Archie said. “Wing will know.”

He went out, and Floss turned in her chair to face Murray head on.

“So, Murray, handwritten, and a completely new direction.”

“It has a nice heft to it. I like to lift the manuscript.”

“I could never do what you’re doing. I think it’s so brave. I get jittery just thinking about it.”

“I did it for my own self-respect. So I could like myself again.”

“How interesting, because I know that feeling exactly. I think you and I feel some of the same things. I sense that about us. But, Murray, why the big secret?”

“It’s controversial, realistic, animal stuff. My publisher doesn’t want to exploit prematurely.”

“I think you want to tell us. Or do I misread the whole atmosphere in this room?”

He inhaled nasally.

She said, “You have this audience of two in the palm of your hand, and I think you know that.”

She made a little, poutish face.

“Please, please, please tell us.”

“Cleo knows about me and women,” he said. “How much I love the intimacies that can only pass between a man and a woman. The everyday, up-close intimacies. The conversations over coffee. The sound of her stockings as she crosses her legs.”

Floss clapped the heels of her hands together.

“He’s going to tell us. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.”



Murray kind of bobbed and weaved in his chair.

“All right, now look, this is in the strictest confidence. No one outside this room must know. It’s investigative reporting of the most sensitive kind.”

Floss put a finger to her lips.

“It involves the mob,” Murray said. “*The* mob. Specifically, it involves the way they’ve muscled in on a particular industry. Nobody turns a bolt or loosens a screw in this industry without the Mafia’s express approval. They *run* it. They’ve got the whole industry in a hammerlock. Violence, blackmail, extortion, you name it. The chain of corruption extends right down the line, from mob-installed top management to people who turn the bolts and loosen the screws. Nobody works unless the mob says work.”

I had to go to the bathroom. I couldn’t help it. It was killing me.

Floss said, “What is the industry?”

He bobbed and weaved.

“Snowmobiles,” he said.

There was a long silence. Floss seemed to lapse into deep thought. I tried to remember whether I’d seen a bathroom anywhere nearby.

Floss said, “So, Murray, handwritten, how interesting, a nine-hundred-page investigative report on snowmobiles.”

There was more than a little sarcasm dripping from the edges of this sentence.

“What do you mean?” he said. “The point isn’t snowmobiles or tractors. It’s how the mob gets a total stranglehold. It’s unbelievable, what I’ve uncovered in the course of this thing. People have been killed. Shot, blown up, stuffed in furnaces. I’ve uncovered a chain of violence and extortion running from the northeast U.S. clear to the Rockies. In Boston, they stuffed a guy in a furnace. He refused to give in to them. They burned him alive.”

Floss said, “We ought to organize a protest. Liberals and their children lying down in front of snowmobiles.”

Murray looked at me.

“Cleo, I’ve got documented stuff here. Witnesses afraid to speak out in court. They’ve spoken to me. I’ve got names, dates. Almost

every city I go to, covering fun and games, I find more evidence, more witnesses, more stories of violence.”

I said, “It’s still snowmobiles, Murray. I think that’s a thing you just have to face. Frankly, I don’t see how you can keep running down sports and bad-mouthing sports and saying how you’re so terribly unhappy writing sports if this is the alternative. The corruption of snowmobiles. I think you’re better off sticking to hockey and football. Sure, there’s violence. The world is full of violence.”

“So what else is new?” Floss said.

“Exactly,” I said.

“Besides,” she said, “I always thought people were supposed to write about things they know. What do you know about snowmobiles? What could be less Jewish than a snowmobile?”

“Besides which it’s a sport,” I said. “Snowmobiles are basically sports things.”

“Recreation vehicles,” he said, a trifle sharply.

“Yes, so you’re right back with sports. You’re basically writing about sports after all the talk about going off in new, serious, adult, controversial, realistic, animal directions. What really gets me is not the snowmobiles, Murray. It’s the way you savage sports.”

I liked that a lot. The way you savage sports.

“That’s right,” Floss said. “There’s a terrible loss of innocence you’re guilty of.”

My turn.

“All this talk about the real world,” I said. “Well, which world is the real world? That’s a question I ask myself daily.”

“We all do,” Floss said. “Increasingly so.”

Murray said, “The trail of corruption runs two thousand miles right through the heartland and into the Rockies.”

“They’re still snowmobiles, Murray, and you’re stuck with them.”

I asked Floss where the nearest bathroom was, and as I headed out the door I heard Murray say, “They cut off a guy’s toes, sent him home in a cab, and then mailed him the toes.”

I spotted the door around the first bend. When I was ten feet away, the door opened and out came Archie Brewster.

“Wing thinks he knows where there’s more wine,” he said.

“Good. I need the toilet. Look out.”

He put out an arm, stopped me in my tracks, nodded back toward the bathroom, and said in a confidential, discreet, respectful tone, “Wear the helmet, Cleo. It’s hanging right by the john.”

“What helmet?”

His tone grew even more discreet.

“It’s a motorcycle helmet. If you’re going to be sitting down for any reason, just be sure to put it on.”

“When did peeing become a contact sport?”

He became practically reverent. Natural functions have that effect on people.

“Cleo, you’ll need the helmet. The hot water heater is right above the john. It leaks sometimes, and I’m afraid it might even explode. If dripping water was the only problem, we could wear towels or plastic rain-things, but I’m afraid it might really go.”

“Isn’t there another toilet?”

“It went.”

“Give me the damn hat.”

“It’s on a towel hook,” he whispered.

I went in there, noting rust spots all over the bottom of the heater. I put on the helmet and sat down. While I was there, I had serious second thoughts about the way Floss and I had reacted to Murray’s book. We’d gone way too far. He’d obviously worked very hard, taken great risks, compiled terrific documentation. We had no right telling him he was guilty of a loss of innocence. The way we’d jumped on him was ridiculous. We resented the fact that someone involved in innocent pleasures should want to tackle tougher subjects. We were telling him he had no right to do that. I was almost in awe of the depths of my own resentment. It was a furious attack we’d launched. We were like winged harpies with snaky hair. I’d surprised myself with the sheer feeling that had come gushing to the surface. It was as though we’d caught Murray tampering with something precious and childlike in all of us.

I heard a plinking on my head.

When I got back to the dinner party, Floss and Archie were

involved in half-amorous peckings and nibblings. I sat next to Murray and told him I thought we were dead wrong. I said he had not only the right but the duty to expose these things. I explained that Floss and I were reacting as people involved in sports who feel their most precious emotions are being slighted, and he said he understood.

“Have some more wine,” he said.

He reached for a gallon bottle. The label had bouncy, green, cartoon lettering that seemed familiar. Of course. It was Jiminy Cricket. Even the wine looked green and bouncy. With Wing’s discovery of this bottle, the party got back into high swing. We were all friends again. The wine was a little oversweet and pulpy, but no one seemed to mind.

In a short while, Archie got a droll, droll look on his face. I think he was the kind of fellow who got devilish when he was sleepy. There was something about being tired that made him sexually mischievous. It is probably connected to jet lag somehow.

“I think we ought to play a little game,” he said.

“What kind of game?” Floss said.

“You know what kind of game.”

“No, what kind of game?”

“Cleo knows what kind of game,” he said. “Cleo, tell her what kind of game.”

“Do I know what kind of game?” Murray said.

It went on like that for a while. I kept my eyes on Floss. I knew she’d never agree to play strip Monopoly in mixed company, no matter how much Jiminy Cricket she poured down her gullet. She’d get up and bolt the room, just as she’d done in New York.

Meanwhile, Archie was getting cuter and droller by the second, and was explaining to Murray that the game was Monopoly but with a difference. I kept watching Floss.

“All right,” she said. “If that’s the game you want to play, that’s what we’ll play.”

“You’re not serious,” I said.

“It’s his house, Cleo. We’ll play his game. These are all his toys. They’re his dogs and his cars. It’s his life.”

Her face was tightening up into a little, mean, flat-nosed, wrinkled look. She resembled a well-coiffed Chinese dog. It was a spiteful look, among other things. I tried to talk her out of playing while at the same time not saying too much because of Murray's presence. It was clear Floss didn't care who said what. She was in a very spiteful mood. Archie was trifling with their Neurotic Obsession and she didn't like it one bit. She kept darting spiteful looks his way, and her face kept scrunching up. She was determined to do this thing. She would show him once and for all. An incestlike relationship is too delicate, fragile, and rare to be mocked. She would make him sorry.

"It's his board," she told me. "They're his dice, his green houses and hotels, his play money, his little racing car and top hat and armored personnel carrier. If this is the game he wants to play, I say we play."

Murray looked more than agreeable. Archie kept grinning slyly.

"Floss," I said, "let's discuss this."

"What's one more game in a lifetime of games?" she said.

She looked mean, nasty, pug-nosed, and bitter. We followed Archie down the hall to the Monopoly room.

What fun, what fun.

# 12



*I*N ancient days, people could be decadent without worrying about the Warsaw Pact. There was a Roman emperor who went bathing in his grotto surrounded by small boys who swam underwater and nibbled at his loins. Fun-loving fellow. And there was a Victorian woman who liked to be served up naked in anchovy sauce at her own dinner parties.

In high school, I read a paperback history of the orgy that had a lot of stuff in it like that. The book also mentioned secret rites held by torchlight in ancient shrines. That's what really caught my fancy. Rites. I liked the formality of orgies that had rites. But the book was never clear about exactly what went on. Sure—frenzied dancing, drinking, and sex, but what about the rites? What did they consist of? The secret rites seemed to be the whole point since they were the things that got people into an orgiastic frame of

mind. The best the book could do was say that these rites were shrouded in mystery. So I was left to imagine dark-eyed, olive-skinned men whose heads were crowned with myrtle, and lithe, graceful women in clingy tunics, and some vague, solemn, torchlit ceremony that would build the sexual tension to a fever pitch, in a clearing in the woods, as owls hooted and clouds raced across the moon.

It is all a long way from Metroplex and Jiminy Cricket wine. But that's where I was, and what I was drinking, as we tossed the dice and moved the little things around the board, buying, selling etc.

We sat boy-girl, boy-girl. Floss declared herself banker. It was obvious she was out to dominate the game. I've never seen anyone take control of something so completely. She was a little buzz saw of activity. She seemed to have three hands—doling out money, buying up land, railroads, utilities, collecting rent, buying houses, making change. Money, dice, Chance cards, all seemed to be passing through her hands simultaneously. She was grim-faced as she played, said little, and was roughly half-naked before the rest of us could remove so much as a single shoe.

It happened in no time. A little luck with the dice and the two sets of cards, some shrewd and brutal maneuvering, and a fierce determination all combined to give her a controlling position on the board. She had some of the choicest lots and was soon the only player with houses and hotels.

Every time one of us landed on her property and paid rent, she whipped off an item of clothing.

The item of clothing a player removes in strip Monopoly is determined by whether the property that player owns is undeveloped or chockful of tidy, middle-class houses. It is sometimes complicated. There are situations in which a player must remove his or her underwear before taking off an outer garment or garments. This is neither here nor there.

Floss's dress was long gone—she'd hurled it right out the door into the hall. She sat there wheeling and dealing, and wearing her left shoe, her Givenchy smoke-rose pantyhose, and half a bra—the strap in her mouth to keep the whole thing from falling.

This is the woman who told me the first time we'd ever met that she couldn't stand being looked at. Visual scrutiny, she called it. That much did she want to get back at Archie. That much was she willing to forgo in the way of personal dignity.

Murray landed on Pacific Avenue, which happened to have a hotel on it. He paid rent to Floss, and off came her brassiere. She sent it whizzing past Archie's ear. Then she glared at him with that mean little wrinkled look, one eye shut tight.

It was the most angry display of nudity you'd ever want to see. I was shocked. It was the last thing I'd ever expected from someone like Floss. She was punishing herself to hurt Archie. Several times I tried reasoning with her, but she fixed me with that one-eyed, nasty glare.

How were the men taking it?

Archie was getting sleepier by the minute. He would occasionally have a fit of semihysterical laughter—the kind of thing that happens to people who sail boats single-handedly around the world and must stay awake for long, long periods. In Archie's case, I don't think it was accompanied by hallucinations.

Murray went into a smelling frenzy. Keeping a hand full of Monopoly money in front of his face, he'd lean toward Floss as if to check out her title deed cards and would take deep, clandestine breaths, holding them, I noticed, for unusual amounts of time. Getting the full savor, I guess.

As the game progressed, the rest of us made small inroads into Floss's dreams of empire. A utility here, an undershirt there. But she continued to hold sway. Her nudity was an aggressive one. She even made a point of keeping her arms away from her body so that her breasts were in the plainest view possible.

Murray now owned the orange properties and talked optimistically of houses. Archie's little token landed on Park Place, which made Floss bounce in her chair with fury. Archie bought the property and then began negotiating with me for Boardwalk, which was the only thing I owned. This got Floss in an absolute pet.

Anyway, he and I made the deal, and Archie Brewster was now a factor on the board.

Other things went against Floss. Income Tax, Go To Jail, land-



ing on Murray's property. She just couldn't seem to get out of her pantyhose, and it was driving her nuts, you could see it. Her revenge on Archie wouldn't be complete until she was totally, frontally nude.

Meanwhile the men began to buy, collect rent, and divest themselves of apparel.

Aside from Archie's manic, birdlike, irrational laughter, and the sound of money changing hands and clothes coming off, it was a fairly silent affair. Floss had set the tone, and it was direct, rigid, brisk, and clipped.

I think Archie wanted to get naked for the sheer, silly hell of it. Just to offset the grimness. I don't know about Murray. I'm sure he was delighted to find himself in the position of watching a woman or women fling off clothes. But I don't think he'd faced the possibility that he himself might be nude in his chair. A softish mound, hairy and pale: He kept fingering the ends of his rectangular beard, which may have meant he was getting nervous.

As for me, I didn't even have a piece of property I could mortgage. Bankruptcy loomed. Every toss of the dice meant further embarrassment. I was stark dressed.

The game lasted about forty minutes more. Murray got down to his socks, shorts, shirt, and jacket—in other words, he was minus pants and shoes. Archie, in a wonderfully intuitive and dramatic maneuver reminiscent of his best moments on the tennis court, removed his Jockey shorts by putting both hands inside his pants through the open fly, drawing in his breath, tearing the shorts down the front, sticking his hands much further into his pants and practically doing a somersault in his chair as he managed to rip the shorts up the back as well, and then pulling out the ragged halves through the fly of his trousers with a stunning flourish that had Murray and me whistling and stamping our feet.

That left Archie with nothing but trousers and boots. In other words, the two men together were one fully dressed person.

As the balance of power shifted away from Floss, she lost much of her grand, majestic, clothes-flinging anger. Not that she'd mellowed. On the contrary. Her Old Testament sort of wrath was

replaced by a sulky, peevish mood, full of little snarlings and carps, which could be a seafood dish.

She and Archie engaged in lengthy, intricate maneuvers to get the upper hand. They argued over the rules, over interpretations of the rules, over entire philosophies of real estate, power, greed, and domination. Not much wine remained.

Archie would occasionally have episodes of that brief, shrill, tense laughter, like some high-strung bird in one of those over-warm habitats at the zoo. Floss began addressing the dice, "Come on, you little fuckers."

When something went her way, she clapped the heels of her hands together, although not with the girlishness we'd seen in the Pong room. It was a scornful, petty, vindictive clapping we now witnessed.

During one of their periods of wrangling, Murray moved his chair a few inches closer to me.

"Cleo, you're so dressed."

"Not my game, I guess."

"Are you trying, at least?"

"Maybe I'm just not orgy-minded."

"You have to enter into things. My mother used to say, 'Mix, mix.'"

"Is this what she had in mind?"

"She said everything twice. What about your mother?"

"My mother would say, 'I don't intend to repeat this, so listen carefully.'"

"Any brothers and sisters?" he said.

"One brother."

"Older or younger?"

"Older."

"What does he do?"

"Goes to orgies. What about you?"

"Two sisters. One's a Buddhist."

"How did that happen?"

"She mixed. She entered into things."

"Are you drunk? I'm not drunk, I don't think."

"I was drunker earlier."

"Dinner was more fun," I said.

"This is fun, too. Except I've been waiting all this time to hear the sound of your stockings as you cross your legs."

"Listen to Floss's stockings."

"I heard them at dinner."

"Murray, do a lot of women ask you if you have sinus trouble?"

"Asthma, they usually say."

Archie had two houses on Boardwalk and a monster hotel on Park Place. It was Murray's turn to toss the dice. They came up eleven. We all counted inwardly as he moved the top hat token along the board. Eleven was Park Place, and when Floss realized what was going to happen she threw her money into innocent, well-meaning Murray Jay's face.

What was going to happen was that Archie Brewster was going to get naked first, if you didn't count his boots.

Slowly, sort of cowboylike, he rose from the chair, kind of hitching his pants up, acting a little smug and self-satisfied, unfastening the heavy brass buckle engraved with crossed tennis rackets, opening his pants and with a slight, droll wriggling of the hips letting them drop to the tops of his fancy boots.

Floss threw her title deed cards in Murray's face.

Our nude ranchero sat down and put his head on the table. The game resumed around him. In minutes he was asleep, his mouth open and a sweet, clear, childlike snore rippling from his lips. If you could ever call a snore lovable, this would be the one.

I moved my chair closer to Murray.

"What about the other sister?"

"The non-Buddhist? She's an expert on germ warfare. She goes to germ-warfare conferences in Switzerland. We're vaguely embarrassed by her. We call her the non-Buddhist."

"Both your parents still alive?"

"With a vengeance. What about yours?"

"Thriving," I said.

"Do you ever go back?"

"Sure, but the place has changed. What about you?"

"My folks are on the Island now. They bought a quarter-acre lot. The lot has a shell on it. They have great hopes for this shell. They water it on weekends. In the meantime, they're staying with the Buddhist in Valley Stream."

"Nephews and nieces?" I said.

"One of each. What about you?"

"My brother doesn't want to bring children into this world."

"What does he want to bring?"

Floss was trying to get Archie's body off the table. I think she had the bed in mind. Her naked fury had instantly vanished. She was suddenly very protective of her weary man, and when Murray tried to help she slapped at his hands. I believe this is known as the vicissitudes of love.

I won't go into a detailed description of what Floss, in her gleaming pantyhose, looked like as she tried to get Archie, with his pants around his boots and those long, narrow shoulders of his and that lean face and funny mouth and generally poignant, stirring, long-muscled body, off the table. It is enough to say that her petiteness was overwhelmed. She was wrapped in limbs. It was like a classical writhing sculpture. Mermaid Engulfed by Sea Snakes.

I suggested she put him on a rug and drag him across the floor. Floss looked at me a long time, considering this.

"Interesting," she said.

"It might work."

"But what would we use for a rug?"

"We'd use a rug."

"There are no rugs," she said. "Does a house like this have rugs? You can't play with a rug. So what good is it?"

"Then let Murray and me help you. Together we can get him over there."

"You help," she said. "Not him."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's a man."

"But what did he do that's so terrible?"

"They're both men. The bastards."

I lent a hand, and we got him over there more or less by drag-

ging him like a ship's anchor, with the gracious volunteer doing her best to avoid any contact with the sleeper's private parts. I don't mind saying I felt a twinge of regret just leaving him behind like that. Those hawklike features haunt me still.

Anyway, hawklike or not, we dumped him down, and I brushed off my hands and turned to see Murray standing in the hall looking back in at me with that tender, sneaky expression of his. He was framed in the doorway, all shirttails and woolly socks.

Why did I want Murray? Was it because of his competence in the kitchen? He'd impressed me, no doubt about it. People who can *do* things are so rare that you can't help being stunned. Skill is an aphrodisiac. I mean individual skills. Things people do that no one else can do quite the same way.

Or did I want him because he was the closest I'd ever get to something in the arts?

Either way, we found ourselves in a room full of comic books. They were stacked five feet high in some parts of the room. There were drifts up to six feet near the window. I assumed Archie had bought them in bulk from a distributor. It would have taken six lifetimes to collect all these specimens individually.

As an afterthought, there was a cot with an army blanket. Murray stood alongside it. He was nude except for his little round glasses. The better to see me undress.

I noticed he was holding his breath. Men do this, of course, to conceal their drifting flesh. It is a nude tactic by and large, although you also see it at beaches and around pools. Murray wasn't exactly overweight, but he wasn't rock hard either, and I guess he felt that an intake of air would give his silhouette a touch of extra svelteness, from the Latin. When a man holds his breath, he not only diminishes his bunchy middle but also makes his chest appear to be larger and firmer than it really is. Murray's chest, however, was a fairly sunken affair, and I don't think any amount of breath-holding would have improved matters.

The other thing that distinguished him was body hair. He had it in fairly substantial amounts. This was no shining piece of god-

like marble that stood before me in the Mediterranean sun. This was a fellow with hair on his back. Also his rear end, his ankles, and his knees.

While I was taking off my teddy pants, he sneakily let out his breath, figuring I was too occupied to notice the resulting wavelet around his middle. So touching, these ploys. Even naked, people find disguises. It is a testament to something.

“Cleo, this is an intimate moment, so I don’t mind telling you I have a thing about women’s underwear. There’s nothing fetishy about this. It’s just the plain delight a man takes in a sexy undergarment.”

“So?”

“Well, those pants, I wonder if there’s anything you can tell me about them. Is there a story to those pants? They’re crazy and delightful, but what gives?”

“I wear these pants in winter. They’re a sort of update on the ancient, baggy teddies. They’re an alternative, that’s all.”

“What about the T-shirt? I love it. What’s Badger Beagles?”

“I have nineteen of these. We were a softball team one summer. All-girl. When I outgrew the original shirt, I started ordering these by mail from a novelty outfit.”

“Four or five would be sentimental. Nineteen is an obsession.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I love it a lot,” he said.

“I keep ordering. I order all the time. I have a morbid fear I’ll run out.”

I struggled out of the shirt. By the time my head emerged, Murray was under the blanket. Not a bad idea. It was cold in the room and we heard a mean wind howling.

I walked over and popped in next to him. He seemed pretty distracted for a man in bed with a woman he hadn’t been in bed with before. Maybe my mistake was taking off my underwear.

“I love being out here in America,” he said. “I really do. But I wish some of the sports arenas were closer to towns, real towns, instead of these vast, nameless, outlying areas.”

“You want a town. I’ll give you a town.”

“A place. A real place. A small, innocent, corn-on-the-cob, American place.”

“You want a real place?” I said.

“Yes, somewhere in the heartland. I love that a lot. The heartland.”

“I’ll give you heartland, Murray. All you can handle, fella. A lifetime’s worth. The most precious childhood memory. The one and only. The finest, the saddest, the deepest, the truest, the best.”

I would give him Christmas in Badger.

He took off his glasses and placed them carefully on a nearby stack of comics. Then he lay on his side, his upper body propped on an elbow and his head resting in his hand. The wind howled and I snuggled a little closer for warmth. A small light glowed at the other side of the room.

“Seasons were strictly observed,” I began, “and in our house we began to get really, really serious about Christmas the first Sunday in December. Between three and four in the afternoon. This is when we’d sit at the dining room table to sign and address the Christmas cards. My father would light a fire made from cherry and peach and birch and applewood. The birch logs made the fire burn bright and long, and the fruitwoods gave it a wonderful smell of autumn sweetness. The fire crackled, as fires should but seldom do.”

I felt a hand on my thigh.

“It usually snowed during the signing of the cards. Big, soft, feathery flakes. Real snow. The whole town would be hushed. My mother would make steaming mugs of hot chocolate. Real hot chocolate. Made with sugar, a pinch of salt, blocks of German chocolate, boiling water, milk, a vanilla bean, and whipped cream folded into the mixture. She’d put in a cinnamon stick for a stirrer and dust the top with nutmeg. And she’d serve it to us with the first of the Christmas cookies. Cookies shaped like trees and bells and stars and wreaths. Cookies sparkling with red sugar, green sugar, silver beads. Cookies with frosting made to look like bows and beards and angels’ wings. The cookies were packed

layer upon layer in an old, round, silvery tin that had belonged to my great-grandmother.”

Murray shifted position on the bed, stroking me gently all the while.

“My brother and I would put on the records. These were records my father had owned for years and years, and they were Christmas records, to be played only at Christmas, and only after my mother brought in the hot chocolate and cookies, during the signing of the cards. RCA Victor Red Seal records. Big, heavy, substantial seventy-eights. We had the Longines Symphonette, we had Toscanini, we had an old, old, old version of Bing Crosby doing ‘White Christmas,’ with ‘I’ll Be Home for Christmas’ on the other side. We always started with ‘Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.’”

I was aware that Murray was sniffing me. My shoulders, my neck, my breasts. He had his head under the blanket, sniffing my breasts. Sanders Meade had sniffed my hair and had seemed content with that. Murray didn’t even bother with hair. He was after naked skin. I lifted the edge of the blanket and peeked down under there seeing one of his dark, velvety eyes shining in the dimness.

“What about the Christmas cards themselves?” I said. “Well, all you have to know about the cards themselves is that no two were alike. Imagine, Murray, the care, the precision, the thoughtfulness that went into selecting these cards. No two alike. One hundred and fifty different Christmas cards. Each one chosen for a particular person. The steam engine locomotive pulling into a cheerful, red-brick station was for Mr. Bushing, whose hobby was trains. The red bird sitting on a snowy branch was for an uncle and aunt who loved birds. And so on. No two alike, Murray. The cards.”

He surfaced and began licking my ear. I think he liked the cheerful, red-brick station.

“Everything was written out carefully. Names, personal greetings, the addresses on the envelopes. No abbreviations, no slashes, no dashes. And the cards had to be put in the envelopes so that



the people receiving them would take them out rightside up, ready to look at, read the greeting and open to the inside to see those carefully hand-scripted names which indicated that the Birdwells cared about Christmas and neatness and standards and the good, traditional, finicky Presbyterian things of life. After we wrote and addressed the envelopes, we sealed them. The envelopes were tongue-licked and sealed carefully along the edge. No wet sponges, no Elmer's Glue-All. Tongue-licked, Murray. Because we cared enough to send the very best."

He discarded the blanket and heaved himself on me to suck at my left nipple. I felt his penis stiffen a bit.

"Choosing the tree," I said. "Always an important part of Christmas and a beautiful, sad, haunting tradition. We always picked out the tree ten days before Christmas. It had to be the perfect tree. We all agreed the perfect tree was a double-needle balsam. The double-needle balsam has small dark green needles all around its branches, not just on top. The double-needle balsam also has needles which are just the right length for hanging ornaments. And it is a symmetrical tree, Murray, and doesn't drop branches the minute you get it into the house. Some families went to a forest and cut down their own balsam."

Here Murray hardened considerably, clutching me and moaning. I think he was on the verge of a premature ejaculation. What may have caused it was the picture of a little Presbyterian family trudging through the woods to cut down their own Christmas tree. I hastened to correct the impression.

"Wait, steady, hold off now. I'm not saying *we* went into the forest to cut down a tree. We didn't, we didn't. But we did the next best thing. We went to the old, abandoned Socony Mobil service station—the one with the flying red horse. This is where the Masons sold Christmas trees for the crippled children's hospital."

The crippled children calmed him down, I think. He resumed slurping on my nipple.

"It was always very cold when we went to pick out the tree, and the hard-packed snow squeaked and crunched under our boots, and the service station was garlanded with Christmas

lights. The Masons dressed in big, heavy coats and earmuffs, and they rang bells, and exhaled steamy air, and warmed themselves over a fire. It was safe. A safe kind of cold. A safe fire. Safe snow crunching under our boots.”

Murray must have thought that particular nipple had terrific mouth texture, like unripe brie on a Bremner wafer.

“The trees were all there. All the trees were there. Some were displayed on crossed wooden planks. Others were tied up, leaning against a jerry-built fence. We took a long time picking out our tree. The poor Mason who got the Birdwells as customers had to be a patient, heroic, warmly dressed fellow. Standing trees were never perfect, somehow. The poor fellow had to carry tree after tree away from the fence, and untie them, and shake out their branches for us. After we narrowed the field down to three or four, we discussed their merits, defects etcetera. It wasn’t only the tree that had to be perfect. It was the discussion, the ten-degree weather, the steamy air that came out of the Masons’ mouths, the sound of the snow crunching under our boots.”

His head was between my breasts and he was inhaling deeply. I reached down for the blanket and pulled it up over both of us.

“What is Christmas without gifts?” I said. “For a child, at Christmas, in Badger, there were many, many anticipations and pleasures. Gifts seemed almost an overabundance. Yet, as I say, what is Christmas without gifts? My mother and father and aunts and uncles and my brother and my cousins—all of us, starting in mid-September, would begin asking each other what he or she wanted for Christmas. Lists were made of blouse sizes, waist sizes, glove sizes, books, perfumes, records, bracelets, earrings, brooches, pins, charms—it was absolutely endless and wonderful. We’d start shopping in mid-October, making every effort possible to be sure we weren’t duplicating a gift. Shopping had to be finished by the day after Thanksgiving. Don’t ask me how that rule got into the family. It just did.”

Murray had sunk deeper into the blanket. He was thrashing around down there. His tongue was cutting a swath across my belly. I felt his beard momentarily in my navel.

“Then started the search for the exactly right wrapping paper,

the perfect ribbon, the appropriate gift card. Every gift, Murray, no matter how large or small, skinny or round, bumpy or smooth, was wrapped with the utmost care and precision. Just like the Christmas cards. Neatly cut paper—no ragged or curvy edges. Tape concealed under the ribbon. The ribbon was a blossom of loops and bows, exactly in the middle of the package. It's a wonder, Murray, we didn't all have nervous breakdowns. Nerves were sometimes frayed, but we felt this was part of the great search, the perfect Christmas, the most symmetrical tree, the steamy air coming out of the Masons' mouths, the crisp, browned surface and juicy meat of the turkey, the lights and shiny ornaments and angels' hair hanging from the tree, and the flying red horse in the Socony Mobil station."

At the sound of "the flying red horse," Murray's penis stiffened further. I could feel it against my foot, which must have meant that his legs were sticking out of the blanket, off the bed, straight into the air, or maybe resting on a stack of Captain Marvels.

"After the presents were wrapped, they were put away in an unused bedroom, placed neatly on the bed. My brother and I weren't allowed to go in there and shake or heft the packages with our names on them, but we did, practically every day, jiggling those boxes against our ears as if they were maracas. The presents from my mother smelled sensational. She used to sprinkle Yardley's sachet powder on the tissue paper in the box. A typical extra touch."

Murray threw off the blanket once again. He was all hunched up down around my crotch like someone trying to fish a ring out of a sidewalk grating.

"Of course the mention of presents always brings to mind the subject of Santa Claus. The fact is nobody in Badger after the age of four or so believed in Santa. Badger was just too practical and down to earth for that kind of extravagant fantasy. However, when I was just learning to print, I printed out a letter to Santa Claus, and my father and I went down to the basement and threw it into the coal furnace, and then we scampered upstairs and out the door, no coats on, to watch the embers come up out

of the chimney, smoldering red in the night sky, and fly up, up, up, to disappear in the dark and arrive eventually in the North Pole, on the other side of the night.”

I don't know whether it was the idea of writing to Santa, or just the mention of the coal furnace, but Murray grabbed one of my legs, and hoisted it, and got in under, and then raised the other leg so that one of his shoulders supported each leg, and his hands were under my buttocks, and he was crouched down, advancing into me tongue-first. With some effort, I could look up over my breasts to the top of his head.

“Maybe the saddest, truest, deepest thing of all was the Christmas caroling,” I said. “Very haunting and beautiful. We went out two days before Christmas. There were different groups. Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, church groups, children of Masons, children of the American Legion etcetera. My group was a peewee hockey team. We made our own lanterns. They were big, tall tin fruit-juice cans with a pattern of holes that we made with a hammer and nail. Two more holes at the top for a wire handle. Then we melted wax in the bottom and stuck in a candle. My pattern was Christmas trees and Christmas stars.”

Murray was extremely active. I think it was the homemade lantern that got to him. I could hear him sort of warbling down there. Coonylinkus, as we used to call it.

“We would meet in the middle of town, in front of the biggest bank on Bank Street. Then we'd all light our lanterns, and there were oohs and aahs at the different designs. Our leader would pass out the caroling books and off we would go, caroling. The snow would squeak under our boots. Down the side street from the bank, we'd stop first at the Presbyterian minister's home. The minister and his wife would come to the door and stand framed there, with the lights of their tree in the living room behind them, and it would begin snowing lightly, and we would start with 'Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,' which was the first carol in the book. The minister and his wife tried not to look so morbidly correct, and when we finished they wished us Merry Christmas and we shouted back Merry Christmas, and went on down the

street in the lightly falling snow, our lanterns swaying gently, casting a sad, beautiful light.”

Murray was tunneling under, using his shoulders to lift my legs higher as he got more excited by the caroling. Warble, warble. Occasionally he'd pause to breathe and then he'd tunnel again, lifting my legs way, way up.

“Our favorite houses stayed pretty much the same from year to year. We particularly liked to sing in front of houses that had decorations in view. Nothing fancy or suburban-grotesque. Just small, welcoming stuff like a wreath on the door or some lights in the window. When we started singing, doors would open all up and down the street, and heads would appear in windows, and lights would go on in upper rooms. In this way, Murray, we continued through town, going through the caroling book maybe one and a half times, usually finishing up with ‘We Three Kings of Orient Are,’ which was mysterious, strange, plaintive, and a bitch to sing, and included the words *frankincense* and *myrrh*, which were as much a part of Christmas as the shiny ornaments and angels' hair hanging from the tree, the RCA Victor Red Seal records, the little Baby Jesus in the manger on our Chippendale table, the crisp, browned surface of the turkey, the steamy air coming out of the mouths of the Masons, the tongue-licked envelopes, and the flying red horse in the Socony Mobil station.”

I was getting cold again, and with my right hand I groped around for the blanket. Found it and tried to drape it over us. In the position we were in, with my legs way up and Murray burrowing so that together we probably resembled a frightened animal seeking shelter under a wheelbarrow, it was not easy to sort of float the blanket over us. But I managed finally, flinging it rather than floating it, although the blanket, hanging from my raised feet, didn't completely cover my breasts at one end and Murray's ass at the other.

“The last house was the home of our leader, Mrs. Tupper, and we'd all go inside and have hot cider with cinnamon sticks and cloves. Around about ten, our parents would arrive to take us home. That was it for another year. The caroling.”

Murray came up out of his crouch and flung himself on me, full body. My legs came down and the blanket fell amongst us, getting tangled in the general clash of bodies. Murray started nuzzling and sniffing again. This time my face, my eyes, my mouth. I was beginning to feel like a bundle of greens that was destined to meet its end in the silvery flash of his four-inch Wusthof. I thumbed him in the ribs, and I guess he got the message because he immediately switched to breast-fondling and other manual activity.

“Then came the arrangement of the Nativity scene,” I said. “This was something I was personally very deeply involved in, although my father helped out in the little practical matters and my mother sort of oversaw the whole affair, as she oversaw and loomed over and quietly supervised every detail of the entire Christmas season. The Nativity scene was set across the entire top of a large Chippendale table in the living room. There was a hand-carved stable with beams, and it even had little bins to hold hay for the animals. I had grass I’d saved over the summer and I used it for straw in the manger. It looked nicer than straw and it still had a faint, sweet smell of freshly mown grass.”

Murray moaned over the grass.

“Now this Nativity scene had Mary dressed in blue, Joseph in a maroon sort of robe, and the Baby Jesus in the manger in traditional white swaddling clothes, with a halo around his head, and surrounded in the barn and outside the barn by two gold-winged kneeling angels; two standing angels, which I always posted at each side of the barn; two shepherds in brown robes; five small sheep; three camels; the three Wise Men, one dressed in purple and gold, the others I can’t remember; two brown and white cows; and two gray donkeys. That was the Nativity at our house in Badger, and those were the people and animals taking part.”

He grabbed my hand and put it around his penis. It was quite, quite hard.

“All the Nativity pieces were wrapped in tissue from Christmas to Christmas, so I had to be very, very careful when I unpacked the box. It was my job to unpack the box. This was a

solemn responsibility when you consider not only how easily the pieces could get broken but also the sacred nature of the pieces and of the whole scene. After I unpacked the box, I always put Baby Jesus in the manger first, to get the most important thing out of the way so I could relax a little. I built up from there, outwards, until finally the camels, the last pieces, were situated at the very edges of the table. Then my father would give advice, make corrections etcetera. When the scene was totally and perfectly set, everyone gathered and my mother gave me the okay to plug in the light cord which turned on a tiny, concealed bulb somewhere up there in the hand-carved beams in the stable, and a soft, celestial glow fell upon the manger, and everyone said it was the best Nativity scene ever, better than the year before, and the year before that, even though all the pieces were the same, and the table was the same, and my father and I had arranged everything the same way, exactly.”

He pushed my legs apart.

“We cared about Christmas, and standards, and neatness, and precision, and doing things right, and customs, and traditions, and never settling for second best,” I said.

Murray took my hand off his penis. I put it back on. He took it off, prying my fingers loose one by one. I guess he was ready, and correctly felt he wouldn't be able to effect entry with my hand around his sex organ.

“Christmas Eve,” I said.

He entered me, moaning and sighing and breathing fast.

“Christmas Eve in Badger, Murray, was better than anything you could ever imagine. It was more Christmasy, more small-townish, more haunting, beautiful, innocent, sad, and safe than any other day in any other place in the world, and I'd bet anything on it. It was always cold and utterly clear. A crisp, sparkling cold. A clear, crisp, brilliant night with moonlight sparkling on the snow. The air was sharp and utterly fresh and crisp. It was like mountain air and it smelled of snow, although we knew it wouldn't be snowing until we got out of bed early the next morning because then it would be Christmas Day and it always

snowed in Badger on Christmas Day. We always had a white Christmas.”

He was building up momentum and breathing very, very fast.

“Our house was in perfect order. Cleaned, scrubbed, and dusted within an inch of its life. The tree was symmetrical, thickly branched, and fully and beautifully trimmed. The mantel was trimmed with holly and ornaments and branches of balsam. Mistletoe was hung in the doorway to the dining room, and on the chandelier out in the hall, and in the entrance to the living room, among other places. A fire was blazing, as fires should but seldom do. Our fires always blazed, with periodic crackling, because my father and brother went to great pains to arrange logs and kindling in complicated, interlocking designs that prevented smoking and smoldering, and guaranteed a steady, hearty, crackling blaze. The gifts were arranged beneath the tree, flawlessly wrapped and ribboned. The Longines Symphonette played Christmas carol after Christmas carol, the robust and stirring ones, the sad ones, the haunting ones. Friends, neighbors, and relatives kept arriving, and people exchanged gifts and admired our tree and our Nativity scene, and drank rum and brandy eggnog, and there was hot chocolate and hot cider for the teetotalers and kids. Despite the noise and commotion and general good cheer, our dog Bowzer would settle down to sleep in front of the blazing fire, and we’d hear his soft snoring, and soon his legs would twitch as he dreamed of chasing squirrels and rabbits in the woods behind the house. Around nine-thirty, people started going home in order to get ready for the candlelight service at the Presbyterian church.”

At the sound of the words “candlelight service,” Murray had his orgasm. I thought, well, I peaked him too soon. But he immediately started mumbling something that sounded like “don’t stop.” Except he was saying it very fast, in a breathy voice. “Dontstop dontstop dontstop.”

“All right, at ten o’clock my mother handed out candles and the whole family left for the candlelight Christmas Eve service at the Presbyterian church. We walked through the clear, sparkling



night, snow crunching beneath our boots. From this or that house, others came out into the night and small groups formed, joined by other groups coming from different parts of town, until everyone converged in front of the church. We went inside. The altar was banked with poinsettias. The only light anywhere in the church came from long, long tapers, one at the end of each pew, all the tapers adorned with dark-red velvet bows. The pews were draped with evergreen."

Amazing. When I said "banked with poinsettias," Murray's penis began to restiffen inside me. When I said "draped with evergreen," it sort of leaped into a red alert.

"The organist would be playing 'O Holy Night' as we entered the church. The church smelled of candle wax and pine."

This made him moan with aching pleasure. Candle wax and pine. I think his teeth were chattering.

"There was no sermon on Christmas Eve. We just sang the old hymns. The old, old hymns. The Reverend Dr. Broadmore read from St. Luke—that was my favorite version of the Nativity. Then, one by one, we took our candles to the altar and lit them from a single large candle. After this, we walked down the aisle and out into the clear, cold, sparkling night. All through town you'd see pinpoints and flickerings and whole ribbons of lights as people headed home with their candles, walking over the hard snow. Among kids it was thought to be bad luck to have your candle blow out, so we were careful to keep it out of the wind, using our hands and body and the bodies of bigger people nearby. My candle never blew out, although the candles of others did, and I used to wonder what would become of them. All the way home, all you could see were the stars sparkling in the clear, Christmas sky, and the candlelight down below, looping and arching over hills, or flickering in the wind, or pinpointed singly as some old widower paused at the door to find his keys. When we got home, we used either my brother's candle or mine, alternating year to year amid occasional squabbles over whose turn it was, to light the Christmas candle in our window. This candle burned for twelve days. The twelve days of Christmas."

Murray climaxed again, moaning and trembling. He immediately followed this with “dontstop dontstop dontstop.” He wanted to hear about the opening of the presents on Christmas morning, and the crisp, browned surface and juicy meat of the turkey, and what the snow was like on Christmas Day, falling softly over the town. But he seemed too, too excited by it all and I thought it would be best if we called it a night then and there.

Too much innocence can burn the heart.

# 13



*W*ING turned out to be Malayan. We had a nice talk in the kitchen as dawn broke over Metroplex. He told me about some of the famous people whose service he'd been in, as he put it. He went back a ways. The thing he mourned was leaving Hollywood, but he'd seen the changes coming many years ago. The future belonged to TV and heavy metal. I think heavy metal might be a rock 'n' roll term.

Later he spoke of going electric, so I guess he *was* talking about rock 'n' roll. He'd left the service of Mickey Rooney to go electric.

Over my protests, he went and woke up Archie's driver, the cowboy-hatted fellow, and this is how I reached my hotel in Dallas minutes before a room check conducted by Jeep himself.

I'd just fallen into bed when he knocked on the door. I threw on a robe and went and opened up, and he told me he was checking all the players' rooms to make sure we were where we were supposed to be and not out carousing.

“The Rangers don’t have room checks.”

“You are right up to a point,” he said.

“What is the point?”

“Midnight last night. The new general manager, he has insisted to check the rooms and the beds in the rooms.”

I had the door opened barely four inches. I was in no shape for a full-fledged visit from J. P. Larousse or anyone else. One Badger Christmas was all I could handle in an eight-hour span.

“So I must check, Cleo, which makes me very morose to do this thing, but they give it to me to do.”

“All right, you have checked. It’s a room check. You have come to my room and you have checked.”

“He has insisted to check the rooms and the beds in the rooms.”

“It is a room check.”

“It is a bed check.”

“The Saudi said this? Check not only the rooms? Check the beds?”

“It is terrible, this rule. What can I do?”

“We don’t have room checks on the Rangers. You know that, Jeep. We’re a mature outfit.”

“You must call me Jean-Paul.”

“Sure, the team’s going bad, but a room check won’t change things.”

“What will change things?” he said.

“We will play the body. We will chop the man’s ankles.”

“Cleo, it is not for me that I do this, eh, but for management in the big offices high above the city. I don’t do this thing, they would not hesitate to give me the knife. They always spill blood on the road. The team does not go good, the media is shooting tracer bullets, the coach refuses to check the beds, just like that they finish me off. What does it mean to them, one more coach, he gets on a plane, eating soft white bread?”

He forgot to mention his three or four kids and the snow crashing through the roof of his house. I flung open the door and he came in. I watched him scrutinize the bed. I was wishing I’d brought Murray, Floss, and Archie with me.

J.P. shrugged sadly, and gave me a grim smile, and sort of

smoothed down the sheets, and fluffed up a pillow for me. He was looking so sad and grim and shamefaced I wanted to sing "O Canada" half in French and half in English to cheer him up a little.

We shook hands at the door and he went to the next room to check another bed.

I slept for four hours or so. After breakfast, I checked the schedule Anna Maria Mattarazzo had given me. Calculating the time difference, I realized she was probably in my apartment at that moment.

I called from my room. A man answered. I kept insisting to him that I had the wrong number, but he kept reading my number off the little thing on the phone. A slow, eerie panic began sweeping over me. Just then another voice came on. Anna Maria.

"That was your boyfriend, wasn't it? It just hit me. I wish I'd realized sooner."

"That was my uncle," she said.

"What's your uncle doing there?"

"He's a repairman. There's a small problem with the Kramer. I had to get somebody, so I figured who can you trust if you can't trust family? Pino is family, so I go call him and he comes right over. I have to tell you it's gonna cost. These things cost."

"As long as he fixes the machine."

"He'll fix. No problem. He's family. Why shouldn't he fix?"

"How is Shaver?"

"The patient is fine. What happened was that some wires shorted and he was getting small jolts in his abdomen during feeding. But Pino's on it right now. Nothing to worry about."

She pronounced it *ab-do-men*. Wasn't it supposed to be *ab-do-men*? First she referred to those highly complex, interconnected bottles in the Kramer simply as bottles, which was human and refreshing and nice, but pretty unprofessional, I thought. Now it's these mispronunciations of body parts. *Fib-yu-la*. *Ab-do-men*. She liked middle syllables.

"This isn't the kind of repair work Pino usually does. He's doing it as a favor for me, because I'm family."

"What does he usually repair?"

“Snowmobiles,” she said.

It would be amusing, when Shaver was up and about in five months or so, to sit in some small, elegant restaurant done up in ecru and puce, during our celebration of his complete recovery, and to tell him, over the jugged hare with chestnuts, that his well-being was literally in the hands of the Mafia.

I took the elevator down to the lobby, and when the doors slid open there was Murray Jay with his arms full of pepper grinders, olive oil etc.

“Ride up with me, Cleo.”

“Okay.”

“Where’d you go? I looked for you.”

“Had trouble sleeping. Got back in the Packard. What about you?”

“Got back in the Hudson.”

“Where’s Floss?”

“Went to New York.”

“What about Archie?”

“Tokyo,” he said.

The doors opened and we stood in the corridor.

“I’m exhausted,” he said. “I can’t wait to get home and get settled in. I’m moving into a brand new high-rise. The kind of building I’ve always hated. Doormen around the clock. A package room. A swimming pool. Laundry rooms. A barber shop. Endless carpeted hallways. A twenty-four-hour gynecologist.”

“Why are you moving into the kind of place you’ve always hated?”

“I need something ironic at this stage in my life.”

“I see you in a brownstone.”

“Everybody sees me in a brownstone. That’s just it. I want to play against the image.”

We ambled toward his room.

“Let me ask you this, Murray. Is absolutely everyone in this industry you talked about last night involved with the mob? Every single person?”

“It’s a total lock. No air gets in or out.”

“These guys don’t hurt people for fun, do they? They hurt peo-

ple who won't play ball with them, right? They want something, they make a threat, and then they hurt. They don't hurt just to hurt."

"They've been known to hurt for effect," he said.

"But that's to make a point. To impress people with their ability and their willingness to hurt."

"They covered a guy with Handi-Wrap and threw him off a bridge."

"But not just to hurt."

"He was the prosecution's key witness."

"So they had a valid reason."

Murray was slightly aghast.

"It wasn't just a morbid act," I said. "They didn't hurt him just to hurt him. There was a legitimate, underlying reason. It wasn't amoral, like we're always reading about."

We'd reached the door. I shook Murray's hand and took the elevator back down. When the doors slid open, voice-of-the-Rangers Merle Halverson was standing there.

"Ride up with me, Cleo."

"Okay."

"Did you hear the rumor?"

"No, what?"

"Paid vacations for players. The Players Association will make it their top demand."

"We're off all summer," I said.

"This is during the season they want. Paid vacations during the season. Two weeks."

"Can we take it in long weekends?"

"It was just a matter of time. In a way I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner."

We reached his floor and got out.

"I thought it would happen first in the NBA," he said. "All those black guys are usually in the avant-garde when it comes to clothes, cars and leisure time."

We shook hands and I rode back down. Made it out the door this time. A nasty mix of rain, snow, and hail came crashing down. High winds sent people spinning along the sidewalk.

I went back upstairs. I tried to read. I tried to sleep. I tried to watch TV.

I played well that night, getting a goal and an assist in an easy win for us. Afterward we came trudging and swaying into the locker room. Mild surprise. We see Sanders Meade standing on a chair getting ready to address the team. This is the first time he has appeared before us since his elevation to the presidency.

Finally we are all in the room, sitting or standing around, getting quiet, muttering and sniffing. I assume he is here to talk about paid vacations.

He is looking well, Sanders is. He has gotten over the fatigue of his long journey from New York to Chicago via Butte, Montana, and other way stations sprinkled and flung across the continent. I would go so far as to say he is looking fit and trim, as we often read of presidents. If the president is described as looking fit and trim, or trim and fit, it means he has had a good night's sleep, he has had some fresh-squeezed orange juice upon awakening, and we have not lost further leverage in the Horn, the Rim, the Gulf, or the Corridor overnight. After presidential vacations, trim and fit becomes tanned and fit. This is automatic. Either way, it is a term I associate with people who have enough money to be happily obese, out of shape, and generally wasted, jowly, and dissipated, out drinking and screwing every night, but who have *resolved* to be fit and trim out of a deep sense of duty. In other words, fitness and trimness are moral qualities, and when the president is described as being fit and trim, we should all feel better. Power has its darker side, of course, and this same president will be described two days later as looking tired and drawn. This isn't so bad. When he is called pale and haggard, however, or gray and shaken, he is having problems right down the line, personal and otherwise. Weary and bent means the job is just too much for him. And if you read that he is looking haunted and ashen, it probably means he is getting ready to board Air Force One for the ultimate scenario.

Sanders looked around the room, locking eyes with me for about an eighth of a second.

"Good, good game tonight," he said. "*Good* game. But of



course I didn't come all this way to say good game, good game. Yesterday, the new Ranger general manager was introduced at a press conference in New York. Here, tonight, it is my pleasure as Garden president to introduce him to you, the players. I'm referring, of course, to Ahmed ben Farouky."

Scraping of skates. Hooded looks.

"Benny, unfortunately, couldn't be in New York yesterday and can't be here tonight. He's attending a family function in Boulder, Colorado. Funeral, I believe. I've met Ben and he's most eager to assume his duties. He is a sportsman of some standing back home. On the personal level, he's no throwback in any sense of the word. The guy eats hot dogs, drinks beer, whatever. As you know, Ben has already made his presence felt by inaugurating a system of bed checks. This is not some kind of fanatical, disciplinary action. It is simply a means by which he hopes to foster team unity."

Veiled glances. Snickers.

"I've told Ben we still have a mathematical chance to make the play-offs. As the season winds down, I think we ought to remind ourselves of that fact periodically. Now, thanking you in advance for the warm welcome I'm sure you'll extend to Benny, I remain yours truly, etcetera etcetera."

Smirks. Hooded looks. Scraping of skates.

The next day, we flew into Minneapolis-St. Paul in the midst of the worst ice storm in years. There was a split second of visibility just before we landed and I could see about a four-hundred-car pileup on a highway. From a couple of hundred feet up, it looked like a slow-motion cartoon. Cars climbing up each other's backs. Cars spinning out into guardrails. The heartland.

I stayed in my room all day writing letters to practically everyone I knew. Writing letters is an exotic activity to Americans, like breeding flamingos, and it takes a great, great effort for me to get started. It is always a shock to learn that I barely remember how to write by hand. I am also at a total loss when it comes to spelling certain everyday words. I am like a child or senile person. But

once I get started, letter writing becomes a fever—a great, seething excitement in which I pour everything onto the page. Emotions, ideas, confessions, jokes, sorrows, joys. The pen seems to guide my hand instead of the reverse, and I can't write fast enough to keep up with my thoughts. All these things I never knew I knew come flying out. I sit there saying where did *that* come from? And that, and that, and that. Even my handwriting changes. I go from laborious near printing to a huge, free, curvaceous scribble.

I think it was this fever of letter writing on that icy day in the Twin Cities that gave me the notion of doing this book, for better or worse.

The game with the North Stars was the following evening. I finished the last of the letters while sopping up the room-service remains of a roast beef dinner. Then I turned on a TV show called "American Alert" with Col. Danvers Price speaking from Tulsa. Colonel Price was an earnest, bespectacled man in a business suit.

"I am now able to provide documented evidence," he said, "that Lee Harvey Oswald was the son of Nelson Rockefeller and Eva Braun. Let's begin by checking the relevant ages and dates."

I was asleep by ten. When the phone rang, the first thing I did was find my watch and squint into its little gleaming face. Threewentysix. What does it mean?

I picked up the phone and made some drowsy noises.

"It is Jean-Paul. You must forgive the hour."

He sounded urgent and worried.

"Okay, I forgive the hour. What is it?"

"You must tell me you are sure you forgive the hour, Cleo, because this is a terrible thing to do, one of my own players, she is a woman, with a game that is coming up, asleep in her bed."

"I forgive the hour."

"It is all right, then, to talk?"

"It is all right," I said.

"I am a desperate man, which no one understands, this disaster, except this player, she is a woman."

“What disaster?”

In my half-waking state, I didn't realize what a naïve question this was. He began speaking French. *That* disaster.

At least it wasn't another bed check. The man wants to speak his native tongue, far be it from me to deny him. I turned my head to the side and closed my eyes. The phone lay near my ear. Jeep's words were barely audible. I faded into a shallow sleep.

Time passed. His sad, lyrical, smoky voice flowed over me. I heard him rub his knuckles on his day-old beard. He was terrifically eloquent, I thought, for the middle of the night, and even though I was floating into a dream, I was still aware of the little drama of nouns and verbs that played softly from the phone on my pillow.

His voice grew darker, almost tempestuous, I would say. I felt I was melting in the warm rush of this cascading French. It surged into my sleep and seemed to caress me physically.

Suddenly, a commotion. I jerked awake, not knowing exactly what was happening. Turned on a light. Looked around. Got out of bed. Grabbed my robe.

I realized the fuss, the disruption, was something I'd heard over the phone. I picked up the receiver and said “Jeep, Jeep, Jeep,” and other obvious things. I could hear more commotion, sounds of movement.

I didn't know J.P.'s room number, so I put down the receiver with the idea of calling the desk, but with his phone still off the hook, I couldn't get a dial tone. I fastened my robe and went out into the corridor, barefoot, listening for sounds of any kind.

Total, carpeted silence. I knew some of the other Rangers had rooms on the floor above this, so my choice was either go up one flight or zip down to the desk and inquire there, maybe returning with a security person.

I decided to investigate on my own. I went quickly up the stairwell and then slowed down as I approached the corridor. Still no sound. When I was about halfway down the hall, I heard what sounded like a French-accented voice way down near the fire extinguisher. I hurried down there, and a door opened, and Jeep came out, a little white-looking and trembly, wearing pajama

bottoms and a sweat shirt. He closed the door firmly and leaned against it, as if determined to prevent something from getting out.

“What is it?” I said.

“I don’t know. It was dark.”

“It was dark?”

“I wanted to speak French to a woman in the dark. I am in the dark, you are in the dark. It is the mood, the ambience. If I am in the light and you are in the dark, it is only half the ambience. This is simple arithmetic.”

This is simple arithmetique.

“Okay, but what happened?”

“There is a movement. I see a shape.”

I retightened my robe, opened the door and stepped inside. Jeep waited at the open door. Light from the hallway fell into the room. I advanced slowly toward the far window. There it was, a low, hulking shape in a corner of the room.

“Stay away,” it said.

The voice of color commentator Toby Scott.

He squatted naked in the semidark, his eyes a pair of flattened dimes. It wasn’t until I’d spoken to Jeep out in the hall that I’d begun to suspect this was what I’d find.

“Where are your hands, Toby? Get your hands away from your middle. I want to see your hands.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to talk to a man who’s playing with himself. I have nothing to say to such a man.”

“We haven’t seen you in Bible-study, Cleo.”

“Toby, you poor, miserable, squatting fool, what are you doing here?”

“Same as usual.”

“Squatting.”

“I guess.”

“Did you get in with a credit card?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Are you wearing it?”

“I am, yes.”

“You’re enough to make a Christian vomit.”

“Well, I tried to stop. I tried so hard, Cleo. I stayed in my room night after night. Five cities, ten nights. I haven’t squatted since Philadelphia. Not once. But the road is so lonely. You know that. It just wears down a person’s resistance.”

“So you started doing it again.”

“The Spirit’s been strong in me ever since we landed in Dallas-Fort Worth. That’s a real Christian area.”

“You’re not only doing it, you’re doing it all wrong, slipping into a man’s room by mistake.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to misrepresent the circumstances.”

“Toby, what are you saying?”

“I’ve been so lonely.”

“You *intended* to squat in a man’s room?”

“It’s hard to explain what comes over a person. I’ve admired J.P. as a man and a hockey mind ever since I’ve known him, Cleo. He’s a figure of authority, which means a lot to someone like me who’s lost and helpless on the road and who never had a strong sense of identity anyway.”

“I didn’t come up here barefoot to examine the Roots of Anxiety.”

“I know, Cleo, but he can be compelling, the way he prowls back and forth behind the bench, changing the flow of play with some uncanny maneuver, barking instructions to his men. I like the way he gestures with his cigarette.”

“This is pathetic. This is a deviation of a deviation. I don’t want to hear this.”

“I’ve always looked up to take-charge guys. When Jeep stands in the locker room after a tough game, stroking his day-old stubble, I think I’d do just about anything for him.”

“Shut up. Just shut up, all right?”

“You weren’t this short tempered in Philadelphia,” he said.

“I was pretty damn short tempered.”

“Not this short tempered. You’re really cross with me. I think you have to take a good, long look at your sexual prejudices, Cleo.”

I peered into the dimness.

“Where are your hands?”

“At my sides.”

“I want to see them.”

“Go ahead, be snappish. But I don’t play with myself and that’s that.”

“You just squat.”

“When people stop making distinctions, it means dark days ahead for us all. We might as well be friends. We’ll be doing a little traveling, the two of us.”

“We will?”

“I’ve arranged for us to visit Death Row in San Quentin when we get to the Coast. I think you’ll find it a tremendously rewarding experience, Cleo. There are some real good Christians scheduled to die out there.”

“I won’t have time for Death Row. I’m doing a junk food commercial when we get to the Coast.”

“That’s a little disappointing if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Why should I mind, Squatting Bear?”

“You’re getting snappish again.”

“Look, Toby, I’m just not interested in Death Row. Those people don’t want or need a hockey player coming by to chat.”

“Athletes are symbols.”

“Instead of trying to convince me to go to San Quentin, you ought to be trying to think of ways to get back to your room unseen.”

“I know. You’re right.”

“Where is your room?”

“Two floors down.”

“Stay here. I’ll talk to Jeep.”

“I appreciate that,” he said.

I stepped outside. J.P. was standing against the wall, looking sleepy and grim.

“Did you see my cigarettes?” he said.

“No. Look, there’s someone in there, but it was all a mistake. What we ought to do is just let him go back to his room.”

“What was he doing in there?”

“Squatting in the dark.”

“What kind of mistake do you call this?”

“Never mind. He’s willing to go back to his room without any trouble, but you’re not allowed to be here when he leaves.”

“You don’t smoke?” Jeep said.

“No.”

“Look in your robe. There might be some cigarettes that you left them in there a long time ago, when you smoked.”

“I never smoked.”

“What does it mean when you say I am not allowed to be here?”

“It’s better you don’t see him. Why do you want to see him? What purpose does it serve?”

“This is supposed to be hockey, Cleo.”

“I agree with you.”

“We are a hockey team.”

“I couldn’t agree more. All I want to do is play hockey.”

“In a way it is the most romantic game. What do you think? There is a lightness, a speed without effort. It is the skates.”

“The ice. It’s true. Can you go stand in the fire exit there for just a couple of seconds, Jeep, and can we borrow your robe, which I promise will be returned to you first thing in the morning.”

“I don’t have a robe. Why do I need a robe? I put my cigarettes in my pajama tops. Tonight, unfortunately, I wore a sweat shirt, it has no pockets.”

It has no pockettes.

I made J.P. go stand on the other side of the fire door. Then I went back inside and got a bath towel. Toby was in the same spot, crouched down.

“Are we set?” he said.

“Here. Wear this.”

“I love it when he speaks French. Tonight was only the third time I’ve heard him speak French, but it was the longest stretch by far. Something just happens to me. I get the nicest, tingliest feeling.”

“Shut up. Just keep your mealy mouth shut.”

He draped the towel around his body, shooting me a hurt look.

"I'm not going to ask you to make any promises," I told him. "It's your life, your credit card etcetera. But this is the last time I help. No more Cleo. The next time you're trapped, you get out on your own."

"The Birdwells are Christians and that's a fact."

He hunched further into the towel. I stood in the doorway watching him walk down the hall toward the far stairwell. Not the slightest hurry or worry in his stride. He might have been shopping for sandals in some tropical town.

In Los Angeles, a man named Jeremy Phillips met my plane. We got into his Mercedes and off we went. It was early in the day.

Jeremy Phillips was young and crisp-looking in a blue blazer, tan trousers, and a pair of expensive sunglasses. He was an account executive in the Los Angeles office of the ad agency that handled the new Kelloid snack food.

No snow, no rain, no ice or high winds.

"I hate hockey, but my little girl's a fan of yours," he said. "She'll kill me if I don't bring back an autograph. There's a pad and pencil in the glove compartment."

"What's her name?"

"Becky. We did the New England thing. Becky, Jonathan, Abigail. They're holding steady. I'd hate to be one of those people who invested everything in Kim, Kelly, Tracy, and Stacy. Peaked about ten years ago. Looking like shit ever since."

Five minutes later, he began slowing down, right on the freeway.

"I'm dropping you at that interchange, Cleo. You're in good shape, so there shouldn't be a problem making the transfer sort of on the run. Look for a red BMW. That'll be Larry Berman."

"Why didn't Larry Berman pick me up at the airport?"

"He's kind of high up, totemically, to be picking people up at the airport. Larry's my boss. He heads the West Coast operation."

Sure enough, Jeremy Phillips came to a near stop at a busy interchange and out of nowhere a BMW came roaring alongside. Jeremy said, "Go, go," and I leaped out, with my suitcase, into about seven lanes of careening, madcap traffic, and picked out



the red car, and this Berman fellow leaned over to open the door on the passenger's side, the BMW doing about twenty-five, the Mercedes long gone, horns blowing and amazed faces passing me like a cargo of human heads on their way to be glazed and sold to tourists. I ran alongside the target vehicle, caught up, and jumped inside, my suitcase getting wedged briefly so that I had to pummel and knead it before getting it inside.

"You're doing terrific," Larry Berman said. "Now if you'll just reach out there and grab the door before it detaches, we'll be okay."

He was about forty, this one, and wore an expensive, ultra-casual, sort of half-shaggy pullover sweater, with designer jeans and a pair of sun-gradient glasses.

"I prefer the Alfa for this," he said. "Leap over the top. Easy as picking cherries. But I sold the Alfa to the Shah's sister."

"Where are we going?"

"Straight to the set. Get your segment done, then off to the Forum for your game."

We drove through a very opulent, very leafy, very well-maintained suburb. Birds twittering. Glimpses of turquoise swimming pools. Chauffeurs in pin-striped suits. Lawn sprinklers hissing. The little popping sound of tennis balls being hit.

"This year you have a pool, a hot tub and a tennis court, but you only use one out of three. Being chic is knowing which one."

We passed an area full of expensive shops. Powerful cars throbbed at the curbstone. People shopped in jogging suits and sneakers. The whole thing seemed a little dreamlike.

"One thing I've been mulling over," I said. "If Jeremy had to be the one who picked me up at the airport, why couldn't he also take me to the set?"

"Hierarchically, it wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

"Spike Mallory's waiting for us on the set. Flew in from New York yesterday. Spike's the agency chairman. I deliver you to Spike."

"So, hierarchically, as you put it, you can't go to the airport and Jeremy can't go to the set."

“He can go all right. But he can’t deliver the goods. I deliver the goods.”

“So in order to deliver the goods, as you call it, you’ve worked out this transfer.”

“The transfer is designed for an Alfa. We may have to rethink it.”

The set was a frozen pond, strictly man-made of course, and it was located in a weedy lot at the edge of a trailer camp, in the blazing sun. It was like the scene of a terrorist bombing. A kind of stunned chaos. About seventy people from the production company, Larry Berman told me. Taking pictures, making sketches, checking lights and cameras. People from the agency, people from the client. Strangest of all were the people from the trailers, drifting down to watch in twos and threes, many of them still in their robes and nightgowns, asking questions, starting rumors.

Four cops kept them away from the pond.

A silvery Porsche pulled up. Larry Berman delivered me to Spike Mallory. This fellow Mallory was in his early fifties, an active-looking man with a weathered, crinkly face and short gray hair. He wore a T-shirt, faded jeans and faded sneakers, and a pair of mirrored ski glasses with sky-blue frames, to sort of set off his deep, weathered tan. He was probably an accomplished yachtsman who liked ocean racing. And he’d probably divorced his wife of twenty-eight years to marry a much, much younger woman. He had that look about him.

“Vicious tan,” Larry told him.

“Cost me plenty.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“British Virgins.”

“Monster tan.”

They might have been talking about a disease he’d picked up. Larry went away to check on something. I asked Spike if he’d talked to Floss Penrose.

“Larry talked to her. She loves the script.”

“You didn’t talk to her?”

“Chain of commandwise, it would be a Larry Berman who would talk to a Floss Penrose.”

“She runs Floss Penrose Associates,” I said. “She’s at the top of the chain, or the pole, however you say it.”

“Cleo, we bill three hundred million worldwide.”

That seemed to settle that. He uttered the figure softly and a little sadly, as if Floss shared office space with a man who sold artificial limbs over the phone.

We left my suitcase in the Porsche and went over to meet Bandy Stratton. She was the ad manager for the Kelloid Company. The client in other words. We moved slowly through mobs of technicians. Spike said the writer and art director hated the producer. Everybody hated the director, who acted as though he was shooting a feature-length film about death and redemption on a rocky island in the North Sea. The client was merely worried, watching everything and everybody, waiting for some disaster to occur. And the grips called everybody fags.

Bandy Stratton was standing near the pond, reading a script. A pleasant-looking woman in a handsome white suit and green-and-white-striped aviator glasses with polarized lenses.

She shook hands all around. She was an enthusiastic hand-shaker. She pumped way up and down, like someone just learning how to do it.

After pleasantries between Spike and Bandy, he drifted off toward the clamoring mob.

“Don’t you love it?” she said. “God, it’s in my blood. I swear it is.”

“I don’t even know the name of the product.”

“Well, you’ve been busy-busy. We’re very happy with the script. It sings. It absolutely does, Cleo. You skate onto the pond wearing a turtleneck and jeans. Plain, ordinary, everyday. It’s a little Iowa-type pond. Trees in the background, banked snow, a few little girls skating around.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It’s what you’ve come home to.”

“What I’ve come home to?”

“Sure, you skate toward the camera and do one of those sideways braking maneuvers. Then you say, ‘This is what I’ve come

home to, the good, the simple things.' You mention life in the big city, life on the road, a woman playing a man's game. Then the little girls sort of flock around you, and you say, 'That's why it's so good to be back among the Amazons.' "

"Amazons?"

"Sure, they all have bags of our new snack food. And you say, 'Amazon Ringos, Amazon Discos, Amazon Nuggets, Amazon Noshes.' "

"Amazon Noshes?"

"A little ethnic never hurts," she said.

"And they all have these bags of snack food on this Iowa-type pond."

"Right. And they're all skating around you eating the stuff, and you say, 'That's right, the new crackle-snackers from Kelloid's. Amazon Ringos, Amazon Discos, Amazon Nuggets, Amazon Noshes.' Then we have a close-up of one of the little girls, and we hear you say, 'Women-tested Amazons. The snack we packed for women. Every age, every size, every make of woman.' "

"A snack food for women?"

"Right. You say, 'It has the action ingredients today's women demand. Amazons. The new crackle-snackers from Kelloid's.' We cut back to you. One of the girls skates up and hands you a bag of Amazon Discos. 'Be good to yourself,' you say into the camera. 'Take an Amazon to the movies, to the roller rink, to your favorite country pond. Women-tested Amazons. The snack we packed for women.' "

I was a little speechless by this time.

"Then the background gets misty," she said, "and the girls kind of fade into the mist, and music comes up, something nostalgic but with a beat, and you skate around in slo-mo eating your Amazon Discos, and we hear your voice over the music. 'So come home to Amazons,' you say. 'Amazon Ringos, Amazon Discos, Amazon Nuggets, Amazon Noshes. The new crackle-snackers from Kelloid's. Amazons. The snack we packed for women.' "

I guess she'd memorized the thing.

"Then it starts snowing," she said.

“What does it snow, Amazon Brain Maggots?”

Bandy moved her glasses down toward the tip of her nose in order to look at me in natural light.

“I don’t think I quite understand.”

“I don’t either, but I felt something disgusting was called for.”

“Oh dear, what does this mean?”

“I don’t know, Bandy. Beats me.”

“Cleo, it sings.”

“But snacks for women?”

“We want women to be good to themselves. I do jazzaerobics two minutes a day, every day. I use a rubber massage glove when I shower, to get rid of the ripples on my heinie. Amazons is part of this whole womenshape, womenform, be-good-to-yourself thing.”

Jazzaerobics?

“We’ve copy-tested this idea all through the heartland. It’s a wonderful marketing strategy. It will sell and sell and sell. I don’t see the difficulty, Cleo.”

“Okay, the turtleneck is fine. The turtleneck and jeans I like. But I can’t skate up to the camera and say this is what I’ve come home to—Amazon Noshes.”

“You’ve come home to the good things, the simple things. You’ve been on the road, suffering anguish in lonely hotels. You’re back on the pond of your childhood. You have a snack. Everyone has a snack now and then.”

“The pond is fine. I don’t mind the pond. But I can’t say crackle-snackers from Kellogg’s. That’s just too stupid.”

“Oh dear, I think we’ve got a problem.”

She went off to find Spike Mallory. My own fault. Glenway Packer had offered to read the script to me over the phone. He’d said it was acceptable. This meant no cleavage. My only concern was cleavage. Shortsighted of me. But how could I know they were devising action ingredients for women in their junk food laboratories in Battle Creek?

Spike Mallory suggested we go to lunch. He and I. A working lunch. We got into his Porsche and a few minutes later were ensconced in a cushy banquettes in a very smart, dark, hostile restau-

rant. All the waiters looked like matadors and seemed to hate the patrons, although Spike, in his faded jeans and T-shirt, got a pretty good fawning over.

“Everybody comes here,” he said. “But you have to get the right table in the right part of the restaurant. Otherwise you’re better off staying home. It’s better to stay at home than to sit in the wrong place at the right restaurant.”

People were having margaritas and guacamole. There was a fair amount of necking going on and a little drunkenness here and there, early as it was. All the women had cigarette-leg jeans, frizzed hair, and bluish lipstick. The people without margaritas and guacamole had strawberries and champagne.

“Once you’re at the right table in the right part of the right restaurant, you have to get a phone call,” he said.

Even his voice was weathered and chapped. He sounded kind of amused by the world. I couldn’t help noticing his impressive forearms. They were the forearms of a man who’s been fighting the wheel of oceangoing yachts through years of heavy seas.

I kept seeing myself in his mirrored ski glasses. About three-quarters of the people in the restaurant wore sunglasses. Tense, bitter, cynical remarks flew from table to table. The lithe, angry waiters glided through the dimness.

“Tell me what’s bothering you,” Spike said.

He took off his glasses, revealing clear, gray, flinty eyes. The eyes of a man who billed three hundred million worldwide.

“Well, you have me on this pond, talking about real things, lonely hotels, life on the road, and it turns out that what I’ve come home to is crackle-snackers from Kelloid’s. A junk food for women. Amazon Dildos. I can’t skate out there and say those things.”

“We’ve tested this idea. People like it, Cleo. It’s got a lot of cute.”

“A lot of cute?”

“Sure, when the little girls skate around you, and you say you’re back among the Amazons. Or when you skate in slo-mo munching on Discos.”

“I want to talk to Floss,” I said.

Our strawberries arrived.

"I don't think it's crackle-snackers that's got you upset. I think it's the pond."

"The pond is fine."

"You don't believe the pond."

"I believe the pond."

"You don't like the idea of a frozen country pond at high noon on a sweltering day in Southern California."

"I'm sure you do it all the time."

"You don't think the pond is real."

"The pond is real. It's the rest of it that's fake."

"It's the rest of it that's real," he said. "The Amazons are real. That's real snack food those kids are eating. Those are real kids. If anything's fake, the pond is fake."

"I want to talk to Floss," I said.

He slumped a little lower in his chair, nodding at someone across the room. In seconds, a phone appeared at our table as though on little cat's feet. Spike put his glasses back on and dug into his strawberries. I watched myself in his mirrored lenses as I talked to Floss in New York.

"I don't think I can do this commercial."

"Why not?" she said.

"It's mindless."

"Of course it's mindless. It's a junk food commercial."

"Well, I'd feel stupid standing out there saying the snack we packed for women. They make me say everything three or four times. Crackle-snackers, for instance. I'd feel so stupid."

"Of course you'd feel stupid. Who wouldn't?"

"Can we just forget it then?"

"It's got a lot of cute," she said.

"Floss, every age, every size, every make of woman."

"Keloid's of Battle Creek," she reminded me.

"I know, but half of it is real and half of it is fake, except Spike and I can't agree on which is which."

"Spike Mallory is there?"

"Yes, but tell me what to do. Can we just call it off?"

"Cleo, you sweet, dimply, blue-eyed, innocent child."

“What are you trying to say?”

“Give Spike the phone. I want to talk to Spike.”

“I’m not sure he’ll talk to a Floss Penrose.”

He smiled faintly and reached for the phone. I started chugging champagne. In two clean, jerking motions, I went through two glasses. Spike said something to Floss about legal action, moral obligations, time, money, talent, man-hours, the client, the agency, the production house, and he ended with the human commitments people make to each other on a one-to-one basis.

I looked at myself in his mirrored lenses.

I knocked back another Moët. Not half bad. A lean, dark waiter refilled my glass. This one I merely guzzled, letting my throat contract, or whatever it does, between gulps. So although the glass never left my lips, the long pauses I took between swallows meant, I think, that it was not a true chugging exploit such as we used to do with beer in Lethbridge, Saskatoon, and Billings, drinking it without throat contractions so that the backup of beer caused near death by drowning, under the big western skies.

Spike said something about the dynamics of trust. He put down the phone and took off his glasses. Those flinty eyes were impressive. A little more flint and you’d have a homicidal maniac.

I finished off another champagne and held the glass out near the edge of the table. Someone passing by filled it skillfully. The man and woman at the next table had their hands in each other’s jeans. They necked fitfully. His face was full of bluish lipstick. They seemed to dislike each other.

“Athletes are symbols,” Spike said.

“The last person who told me that had a credit card up his ass.”

He put his glasses back on. Someone took away the phone. I drained another glass and held it near the edge of the table. A hostile presence loomed like the shadow of a giant wing. Too soon for DTs, I thought. It was a waiter with champagne.

I chugged it noisily, sensing that Spike was looking on.

“Ever eat Ralphies?” I said.

He took his glasses off to stare flintily.

“Never mind,” I told him.



I rode out to Inglewood in the team bus. The driver was new and kept getting lost. I don't recall much of the game against the Kings.

There was another bed check that night. Not Jeep this time. Two darkish fellows with beards. They carried flashlights and wore New York Ranger Windbreakers. One of them also wore an Arab headdress.

The road trip was winding down. All we had to do was fly from Los Angeles to Atlanta. Then back out to Tacoma-Seattle-Vancouver. Then back east to New York.

Murray Jay came and sat with me on our flight to Atlanta.

"I wonder if the pilot will get lost," he said.

"As long as I have a window seat, who cares?"

"All these dislocations, expansions, disappearances."

"What are you talking about? I don't feel well, Murray."

"Some teams are named for places they don't play in. Other teams are named for places that don't even exist anymore. Still other teams are named for entire regions. And still other teams are named for lofty descriptions of cities, states, or regions. Some places have names but no teams. Some places have teams but no names. Some places have names and teams but don't exist in people's minds as the places that have these teams because the teams are named for different places. That's why bus drivers get lost going to arenas. It's like some secret geography. Anaheim, Inglewood, Landover, Bloomington, Uniondale, Irving."

That romantic drumroll of American place names.

"As much as I love the idea of America," he said, "I can't wait to move into my new building. The doormen are tiny and pink."

"Where's your Wusthof?"

"They seized it at the boarding gate."

In Atlanta, they play hockey in a thing called the Omni. The usual, friendly mixture of imbecile organ music and smoky lights. Forty miles to the east lay Shalizar with its white columns, and its honeysuckle and parakeets and Spanish moss, and its old ruined church sinking in the swamps.

Which world is the real world?

# 14



**G**LENWAY'S mother's chauffeur was a young woman named Bette, pronounced *bet*, McCatty. Actually she was more or less a free-lance driver and worked only parttime for Mrs. Packer. Most nights she worked for a topless chauffeur agency, driving visiting businessmen to and from Atlanta nite spots.

I wondered aloud whether this attracted the attention of other drivers.

"The novelty's kind of worn off as far as local people driving off the road or anything."

"What about the police?"

"Topless driving doesn't have too much priority around here what with all the high-profile crime. Although some people would say nothing's higher profile than bare breasts across four lanes of speeding traffic. It's strictly business anyway. Men with expense

accounts who want a little different time come dark. If one of the drivers wants to make private arrangements, that's up to her. Otherwise it's just a cutesy kind of evening for these guys. They seldom get fresh. At least with me. I've always been big chested. Driving around, I kind of sense a hushed silence back there. There might be four or five men crammed back there. They don't say a whole lot. Ask me where I went to school. Things like that."

"Do they ever sit up front?"

"Not supposed to, but some drivers make exceptions. You'll get a whole bunch been drinking, there's always one that wants to sit up front. 'Hey, I want to sit up front.' Like that, you know. I don't let them. Some drivers might."

"You think we'll ever have total nude?"

"New Orleans maybe. Not here."

I dozed the rest of the way. When I opened my eyes, we were coming to a stop in front of the main house at Shalizar. I thanked Bette and got out. As the car crunched away over the pebbled surface, Glenway came bounding down the stairs like the Master of the Hounds after a hearty breakfast.

He wore soft, white Italian pants and a hooded shirt the pale blue color of his eyes. Behind him, the old plantation house loomed above marble columns. Ivy climbed one wall and I caught a glimpse of giant plants on a veranda along the near side of the house. Everything half sagged, but in an interesting, realized way.

Glenway took my bag and we went inside to meet his mother. He said she was in the parlor, and she was, surrounded by plants and bird cages and ivory-inlaid chairs and mahogany cabinets and silver candlesticks and four-bladed ceiling fans and rolltop desks. A parrot was squawking in its cage and a Great Dane lay by the fireplace.

"Two of the most amazing women I know," Glenway said, a little carried away by the occasion. "Cleo Birdwell, this is Randall Leeds Packer."

She was about seventy-seven years old, standing straight and tall and white. She wore a white caftan and had short, white, slicked-back hair, cropped to the nape. All in all, an impressive, spooky

sight. She stood with her right arm fully extended as though taking aim with a pearl-handled Colt. All she wanted to do was shake hands, I luckily saw.

"You must call me Randall," she said.

I knew she was going to say that. What else could she say in this kind of setting? Her voice was strong, very Southern, with a raspy twang to it.

"I understand you know the works of our dear Wadi Assad," she said.

"I've read his stuff."

"A major influence on the latter part of my life, those books. They are ageless, I think."

"We hate the New South," Glenway said, which may or may not have belonged in this conversation.

"Wadi Assad makes us reflect," she said. "There is so little that makes us reflect. Each of his tales has a theme. It is all so beautifully worked out. We find the meaning and the moral we all crave but so seldom find in our own lives. There is a pattern, a plan, a design, a lesson, a principle, a truth."

The Great Dane got off the floor, in sections, and came over to nuzzle my crotch.

"Above all, there is an inner calm," Randall said. "We are never anxious or adrift when we read these tales. We are comforted, reassured, quietly invigorated. The appeal is spiritual."

The dog lumbered out finally and Randall took me over to a lovely old wicker table, near the still squawking parrot, to show me her morocco-bound collection of Wadi Assad books. The whole room had so much character I wanted to move in with a hammock and do nothing but sway back and forth, drinking tall, frosted, minty bourbons.

It was decided Glenway would show me the grounds. Randall told him to keep an eye out for Maudie, his half sister, who had a music lesson in an hour.

On a quick tour of the lower floor, Glenway pointed out architectural details, giving me a brief history of things and telling me what was original and what was lovingly restored.

All I can say about the rest of Shalizar is that it's the closest thing I've seen in my own life to a straight torkle. This is saying a lot, but it's the most romantic, mysterious place you could ever imagine—the gardens, the arbors, the lily ponds, the gazebo, the water mill, the Civil War cemetery, and the mossy old trees and hidden paths and dusky marshes full of wildfowl. There were secret bowers, and ancient, wooden bridges, and half-ruined buildings, sometimes just a couple of walls still standing in the woods, all overgrown with vegetation, birds screeching out as we approached.

"You see what we're after," he said. "A rampant, extravagant, natural quality. We encourage decay. We want something just short of buzzards on the portico picking apart the carcasses of baby deer."

Glenway said this was all lush bottomland. I don't know what lush bottomland is, but whenever I see the word bottomland it is preceded by the word lush. They never talk about scraggly bottomland or barren bottomland. Bottomland, apparently, is something you don't eke out a living on, like a hardscrabble farm. I don't know what hardscrabble is, either, except it's something you don't want your farm to be. I used to think hardscrabble was a crop, like rutabaga or zucchini.

We saw Glenway's half sister Maudie walking through a field picking flowers. Glenway said she was a child-woman. Beautiful, delicate, vulnerable, innocent. She wore something gauzy and wind-whipped.

"Maudie is thirty-seven," he said, "although she's been taken for half that age by the few people who've seen her. We hide her from people. She is simply too delicate. The world devours souls like Maudie. She has a lovely, fragile, dreamlike quality about her."

"She's not allowed out?"

"Into the Sun Belt? Lord, it would kill her in minutes. We don't even have newspapers at Shalizar. No television, no radio."

The Old South was one thing. The Middle Ages were another. But I didn't want to lecture the man on how to treat his own half sister. Maybe she was better off sticking to the plantation. I had the

feeling Glenway enjoyed having a child-woman around. He and Randall probably sat in the parlor smoking opium as Maudie went drifting through the house, wearing ballet slippers and a dream-like, gauzy dress.

"If Maudie is thirty-seven," I said, "Randall must have been quite, quite mature for someone giving birth."

"She's a remarkable woman, my mother."

"I'll say."

"She knew Hemingway and Picasso, she did a striptease for trappers in the Klondike, she lived in a mud hut with headhunters in New Guinea, she helped Hermann Goering resolve his Oedipal conflict, she knew Einstein and Mao, she rode an Arabian stallion under a full moon in the Sahara with a band of marauding tribesmen."

"In the nude?"

Glenway threw back his head and laughed—that clear, gay, metallic sound.

"None of the half siblings knows his or her father. If you have Randall for a mother, a father is superfluous, I think we agree."

"How many are you? I thought there was just you and Maudie."

"There is Manley, the youngest. The baby, as it were. Mother was fifty when Manley was born."

"Wow."

"We think his father was a former count or baron, but Mother isn't letting on, assuming she even knows."

Glenway laughed attractively.

"If Maudie is beautiful, delicate, and dreamlike, what is Manley?"

"Handsome, cynical, and suicidal," he said.

We walked through fields of flowers to talk to Maudie. She was everything Glenway had said. Quite, quite lovely, sort of enchanted looking or spellbound. Her hair was cut even shorter than Randall's, but she had the small-boned look to bring it off. It was very, very short, almost down to bristles, with soft, little, tousled bangs up front. With Glenway's shaved head, Randall's cropped look, and Maudie's marine-recruit, minimalist bristles, I was begin-

ning to think there was some sort of family rule or tradition concerning hair.

"You have a music lesson," Glenway told her. "Mustn't forget."

"Yes, I know."

"What kind of instrument do you play?" I said.

She smiled at me.

"Castanets."

I let the word hang there in the slanting sun.

"Oh, the little clicky things," I said.

Well, I had to say something. Castanets. Who teaches castanets?

We headed back toward the house. Maudie walked just ahead of us, sort of sweeping her hand through the high grass. Glenway said dinner would be served shortly. He was disappointed to hear I wouldn't be spending the night at Shalizar. I explained the team had suspended all such privileges. On the road, everybody had to sleep at the hotel.

Glenway showed me to the rosewood bedroom. The fireplace was big enough to take a shower in, and the paneling and sconces and so forth were all pretty stunning.

With his customary beautiful manners, he said it might be pleasant for me to rest here before dinner. He went softly out on his white espadrilles, closing the door soundlessly as he left.

The bed had a goose-down comforter. I flopped right down and closed my eyes, feeling I needed sleep almost as much as Shaver did, and for almost as long. I pictured us in twin Kramers, millions of years after the Great Population Explosion (a tremendous blast caused by the heat of so many bodies). We are discovered by aborigines when Australia and North America collide. They climb aboard, so to speak, and head east with their boomerangs to my apartment, where Shaver and I are asleep in matching striped pajamas.

This half-waking fantasy was too dumb and flimsy to survive the clacking sound that came from across the hall. It was Maudie's castanets lesson. It didn't sound as though she had much of an ear, or very nimble fingers either. I didn't hear any stamping feet, so I guess she was doing a strict instrumental thing with no dancing.

I tried to come up with a more plausible fantasy than the ab-

origines, but the clacking sound was just too much. I got up. There was an early American pitcher on a table near the bed. I poured some water into the basin and splashed it on my face as I imagine people did in the great days of Shalizar, before decay became an art form.

We were three for dinner, Glenway, Randall and I, and we sat at an oak table that looked sturdy enough to support the Harlem Globetrotters on a fast break. Dinner, by candlelight, was baked red snapper with corn bread and about seven fresh vegetables, served by a West Indian woman named Sammy, who had a wet cigarette hanging from her mouth.

Randall entertained us with tales of playing gin rummy with Dietrich and Mah-Jongg with Garbo, plus teaching Howard Hughes how to roll a joint one night in his wooden plane. Glenway fed her straight lines and generally showered her with urbane affection. You don't find too many middle-aged men who get along this well with their moms.

"Of course the one great figure of this century I've always regretted not meeting is Wadi Assad," she said. "Little is known of his death except that it occurred in 1924, a tedious year in every other respect. Manley thinks he is pseudo profound, pseudo this, pseudo that. But isn't pseudo profundity exactly what we need in these terrible times? Don't all our problems arise from true profundity? Isn't the failure of our age a failure of profound men with profound ideas? What was Marx if not profound? Or Freud or Gandhi or Bertie Russell. Yet all we have to do is look around us to discover the fruits of this deep, true, genuine profundity."

Randall's strong blue eyes flickered in the candlelight and her white hair shone a little, as if professionally backlit.

Near her was a huge cage full of parakeets and finches and other birds, hopping about, flapping a little.

"What was Chairman Mao if not profound when I flew in from Tibet to talk to him? I piloted an old mail plane and put it down in a pasture in Hunan Province, slick as a berry. With me was a Belgian Jesuit who couldn't make up his mind whether he wanted to convert me or sleep with me."

Glenway stopped chewing to laugh. With food in his mouth, he



couldn't throw back his head, so he laughed a little Frankenstein-like, terribly, terribly stiff, his mouth barely open.

"We desperately need pseudo profundity," Randall said. "Much, much more of it. Beg, borrow, or steal. It's the only comfort left to us."

Maudie came in, sort of daydreaming along, all spacey and small-boned. She talked to the birds for a while, quietly, in English, with a little bit of twittering mixed in. I think the word for her is fey.

Over coffee, Glenway talked about retiring to Shalizar to read and think. Randall sat there smoking a cheroot. I was relieved to hear no mention of the Amazons fiasco in Los Angeles. I was afraid Floss might have called Glenway. I would have to sit and listen to him tell me that I was misusing my stupid, that my stupid deserved a chance to flourish just like other people's stupid.

Later, Randall and I sat on the veranda. Night had fallen on Shalizar. We watched a small glow in the distance, a soft, unsteady light. Glenway was upstairs putting Maudie to bed.

"I think you and I are alike," Randall said. "I have always seized life by the short hairs. I tried to surround myself with people who seized life. I found early in the game that pseudo profound people are more apt to seize life than any other type of person. And so we all lived life to the hilt, in garrets and country houses, on the *Normandie* and the *Hindenburg* and the Orient Express, being pseudo profound together. We were all of us in a mad rush to live, to live, to live. It was worthwhile but tiring. I was tired all the time. Thank God for World War II. Things slowed down considerably."

The moon was full and Randall seemed very chalky on the unlighted veranda. Her face and hands were almost as white as her hair, and her caftan practically gleamed. She was powdery and chalky, like a wind-sculptured mineral, maybe the most striking person I've ever seen, and I loved the little rasp in her drawl, even if she thought I was pseudo profound.

"Seizing life is hard work," she said. "We all worked at it all the time. You must be willing to sacrifice, to give up things that are

very important to you. Home and family, peace of mind, and so forth. When you see that light burning in the distance, you know nothing can stop you from running toward it, the wind in your hair, the grass beneath your bare feet, on and on through the darkness, to seize what is there.”

Here she did something dramatic. She lifted that long, right arm of hers and pointed toward the soft glow off in the woods. That little, wavering light we'd seen when we stepped onto the veranda. It was like a scene from ancient theater. The moon shone on her chalky fingers. Her profile was nothing short of heroic. I waited for her to drop the arm and say something else. But it stayed up there, pointing.

Was she saying I was supposed to get up and run toward the light, the wind in my hair, the grass beneath my bare feet?

She turned and looked at me, without dropping the white arm. It was true. There was some kind of life out there she wanted me to seize.

“What about Glenway?” I said.

“He is putting Maudie to bed. He always puts her to bed when he's here. They dote on each other.”

“I know, but how long will it take? I wouldn't want to wander off. That woman is coming with the car to take me back.”

She was still pointing. Terrific steadiness for a seventy-seven-year-old arm.

I shrugged and walked out onto the lawn, looking back at her to make sure I was doing what I was supposed to do.

The night was bright and sweet smelling, full of the sound of insects. I walked through a patch of woods, keeping the flickering light in the plainest view possible. The ground began to get squishy. Fortunately I stepped right onto a narrow wooden walkway that sort of meandered through the swamps. I could see that the light I'd been following was coming from a building, or what was left of one. I heard a sound above the chatter of the insects. A rapid, whippy thing. Five minutes later, I was standing outside the building. It was an old church, sunken and bent in the moonlight.

Again, that lightning hum, that rapid, swishing sound.

I peered in a window. The interior was lighted by giant torches set into the walls. Someone in a tight-fitting white suit, wearing a mask, was slashing the air with a sword. That's the sound I'd heard.

I watched as the person made some fancy, high-stepping moves, rotating the sword slowly and menacingly, then lunging at an imaginary opponent. This went on for a few minutes. Bullfrogs were croaking and a night bird went screeching overhead.

The person put down the sword and took off the mask. This had to be Manley. A handsome, cynical face, with dark, hooded, tired eyes, and what looked like a dueling scar on one cheek.

After the shaved head and cropped hair of the other Packers, Manley was a revelation. He had a mane of beautiful auburn hair. It flowed over his ears and down around his neck. Romantic hair. The kind of hair that suited a place like Shalizar.

I watched him take off his gloves and the jacket part of his outfit, which left him in long white stockings and a pair of knee breeches. Auburn hair curled lightly over his pectorals. He had one of those bronze tans you see advertised in magazines but rarely glimpse on living people.

To think that Randall at the age of fifty could have delivered something that turned out this well was pretty dumfounding.

He spotted me and smiled. The smile of a handsome stranger. His flesh rippled in the torchlight.

"It isn't often we have visitors to our little chapel in the swamps."

"Randall suggested I drop by."

"She's a sweet old thing. They're all sweet old things."

I found the entrance and went in. Parts of a pulpit and a few church pews still remained. Grass was growing between the blocks of stone that constituted the floor. The torches cast a deep, mellow, mysterious light.

Manley picked up a sword and extended it to me handle-first.

"This is a foil," he said. "Fencing is a conversation between weapons. The foils talk to each other. They whisper, they threaten, they entice, they seduce."

He had a kind of sawed-off drawl. It was a voice that made me think of a military academy, somehow, or some secret society where men gather at dawn on alternate Thursdays to fire antique pistols at each other or duel to the death with foils. Not that I disliked his voice. I liked his voice. But I thought Manley might be bored by anything short of death-defying adventure.

I whipped the foil back and forth. That lightning hum. He showed me how to hold it. Then he demonstrated the *en garde* position, left arm curled way up, right knee bent, and so forth. We did a little advancing and retiring. He showed me how to lunge and gave me a rough idea of some simple parries.

“Fencing is complex as hell,” he said. “The mind never rests. It’s like mind-and-body chess. I’d call it chess to the death, but that’s a bit rich, even for my blood.”

He explained about targets and hits.

“It was Mother’s idea, my fencing. She thinks I lack discipline and concentration. For years she’s been saying the only thing that gets my eyes to focus is death.”

“What makes her say that?”

“I used to hang-glide in thunderstorms off Big Sur. Then all the tacky people started doing it.”

He suggested we engage, since I seemed to be learning quickly. I made a clothes-wearing gesture. I was wearing a tawny-port pants suit and didn’t want it punctured.

Manley pointed to a uniform draped over one of the pews. Then he turned his back and began doing different kinds of lunges. I took off my clothes and put on the breeches, jacket, stockings, and gloves. He came over and fitted a mask on me.

He showed me what the line of engagement was, and how to engage, and so on. As he explained things, we began to fence, more or less in slow motion. I found I liked it. The clothes were fun, for one thing, and I enjoyed the classic, formal nature of the thing. It was all rules and tradition and areas of attack and correct cadences and rhythms.

Manley corrected my grip, adjusted my stance, and told me to try to pink him.

Pink him? I took a closer look at the tip of my foil. I thought it would have the same little plastic button on the end that Manley's weapon had. But it was sharp. A real sword-point. And Manley was not only unmasked but barechested.

I told him, "Look, this is cold steel. I don't care how glamorous you think dying is, but my fan club in Scarsdale would go all to pieces if I got convicted of manslaughter."

"Cold steel, I like that. Come on, pink me."

He started fencing, a tired smile on his face. I assumed a defensive posture, parrying like crazy. Manley told me he was launching a compound attack and we discussed what I would do to fight him off.

We circled slowly, lunging, parrying and riposting.

Manley complimented my swordplay, but kept urging me to pink him. I had visions of my foil sticking out of his chest, still vibrating slightly from the impact. I would hide his body in the swamps and try to go on with my career.

"What's the closest you've come to dying?" he said.

"I was caught in an avalanche."

"Where?"

"Chicago. About nine days ago."

He launched a reprise, scoring several hits. Obviously he was capable of making a hit any time he chose. But this was the first time he'd chosen, and my competitive instincts were aroused and inflamed, contrary to good sense, a decent upbringing etc.

"I nearly died in Hawaii," he said. "I was surfing the High Rise off Kauna Loa Kiki. The High Rise is forty feet of white death."

Talking all the while, he scored several more hits. Who was supposed to say *touché*? I guess I was, but I was frankly too pissed off to be speaking French.

I did some sloppy back-pedaling, then regained my poise. He was still talking. Apparently this Hawaiian wave came down on top of him like the contents of the Hoover Dam. The tacky people fished him out.

Once again, *swish swish*, he just about debloused me.

We stepped up the pace. He was getting very complex, making

a half-dozen feints before plunging his button in my ribs. As he talked and stabbed, I began to note a pattern in his moves.

He never wore underwear, he said. He hated the thought of dying in underwear.

The next time he went into the same complex routine, I stepped inside his thrust and pinked him. Just like that. Pinked the son of a gun. I can't say I didn't mean to. I meant to, but I forgot I was wielding cold steel instead of a plastic button.

"Well, *touché*," he drawled, ever the Southern gentleman.

A spot of blood glowed below his left nipple. I took off my mask. We stood reverently, watching the blood trickle toward his navel.

I've never minded the sight of blood. I mean some people faint, some people *feel* faint, some people turn away in disgust. I could recite a litany of hockey cities where I've seen huge amounts of blood. I don't mean a cut lip or bloody nose. Blood from the head, forming a river, with tributaries. Blood that has to be scraped up fast or it freezes to the ice and leaves an impressive cultural deposit.

I realized Manley was kissing me. My first thought was Blood on my Pants Suit. Then I remembered I was dressed for fencing. But why is he kissing me, I wondered.

We broke our embrace and looked at his wound. It was smudged from body contact. We locked eyes. His flesh rippled in the torchlight.

"You just about ran me through," he said.

"A lucky shot."

"Luck, hell. You damn well planned it."

He grabbed me and kissed me again. We were still holding our foils, and were smudged with blood, and dressed or half-dressed in dueling garb, and Manley had spun me half around and dipped me way down in a sort of 1930s ballroom plunge. What a perfume ad we would have made. The torchlight, the crumbling walls, our dramatic embrace.

*Duelesque . . . the sweat of love.*

He put a hot, wet mouth to my ear and whispered that my foil was stuck in his foot. I let go. It fell to the floor, bouncing a little.

Manley let go of his foil. This gave us two free hands each. We were the Handsome Stranger and the Mysterious Visitor with a total of four free hands, all our fingers and toes, no marital attachments, no membership in satanic cults, subscriptions to three magazines each, a common language, similar vaccination scars, no need to register as foreign agents, a love of the outdoors and the indoors, and I soon found myself with a torn fencing jacket hanging off my left shoulder, and my breeches pushed down around my knees, and my hands in Manley's pants, clutching his buttocks. This is the kind of grand passion that is not afraid to make a fool of itself, and it is what more people will engage in, I am sure, as the fabric of our society continues to unravel. Sex in torn clothing has tremendous leisure-time potential. We were using arm holds from Greco-Roman wrestling and practically biting each other's mouth off.

Manley backed me against a wall. With my breeches around my knees, I was glad to have a wall for support. Besides, the stone was smooth and cool against my bare bottom. He broke off a kiss to get some hair out of his eyes, shaking his auburn mane. (Auburn, Maine?) Shadows leaped across the stone walls. We resumed our wild, lip-biting kisses. Our upper bodies were smeared with blood from Manley's wound. All we needed was a typhoon, with bending palms.

He was trying to take off his breeches while we kissed, but he was having trouble because my hands were in there, making the pants tighter. I couldn't help wondering if his penis would be as brown as Glenway's. Is this kind of characteristic shared by half brothers? Maybe if they have the same father, it is. I don't think a gene for brown penis can be transmitted by a woman. Brown penis is probably dominant, but how can you transmit brown or pink or whatever if there is just one penis involved in the reproductive process?

When my mouth was free, I said, "How are we going to do this?"

"Just the way we're doing it."

"Standing up?"

"It's in the catalog," he said.

"I know, but in church?"

Anyway, since Glenway and Manley had only one common parent, and that was Randall, a woman, I figured Manley's slangy parts were under no obligation to resemble Glenway's.

His eyes were full of smoky colors. I tried to get my hands out of his pants.

When we finally got the pants off, I noticed that Manley's foot was bleeding where I'd accidentally stabbed him. He noticed, too, and it seemed to arouse him to even stronger emotion. In sex, this is contagious. The other person starts panting, you find yourself going along. It is almost a form of down-sized mass hysteria.

We were all over each other, clutching and moaning. We each had a hand between the other person's legs. We were not checking for deformities, I don't think, as much as simply grabbing what was there. It is always interesting to grab a handful. There is a natural relationship between the penis and the hand. It fits the hand. Of course the hand itself is quite something in its own right. The hand is a noble instrument of work, the deftest thing in nature. Limp, the penis is a dubious item compared to the human hand. It just hangs there, backed by testicles, like a soloist with a rhythm section. Even the word is funny. It is a stupid, funny-looking, funny-sounding word.

*Penis, Virgil.* U.S. Senator from Mississippi; cosponsor of the Moody-Penis Bill; assassinated.

The penis erect can be impressive. It has the force of legend and myth. An engorged, murky thing. It loses its playfulness, erect. There is sometimes a purpling along the seams. It is a little beastly if the truth be known. But women accept it as the force of nature and myth that it is. I don't think we want to change the basic principle.

Anyway, Manley and I were whispering desperately to each other.

He was saying *now* and I was saying *wait*. This is probably the



most ancient of dialogues, and it could be the only thing Will and Ariel Durant missed in *The Story of Civilization*, Books I through XI. Manley pulled me off the wall, drawing me toward him, our hands now grabbing each other's bottom.

"Where is it?" he said.

"Right where it's supposed to be, Manley."

"It's not there."

"Mine's there. It's yours that isn't. Where is yours?"

"Cleo, bend your knees and move your thighs a little farther apart and I'll just insert myself."

"I can't bend my knees. My breeches are around my knees. I think you have to bend your knees, move your thighs together, and then sort of dip under me and insert yourself on the ascent."

"One of us is too low. I can't find you."

"All right, get your hand off my ass. Find me with your hand. Then find your hand with your penis. If you don't know what to do after that, you ought to pick up your foil and go home."

"All right, I've found you."

"You didn't say, 'May I?'"

"The angle's not right. I bounce right off."

"You're not dipping. Dip your knees. Insert yourself on the ascent. I will try to sort of thrust myself down onto you."

"You shouldn't be thrusting," he said.

"What should I be doing?"

"Spread your thighs. Back your ass into the wall."

"You're the one who took my ass off the wall. My ass was on the wall. Now just dip, will you?"

"I bounce right off. Maybe you're not ready. Are you ready?"

"Am I ready? What do you think I'm doing in this silly position?"

"I mean are you moist?"

I eyed him suspiciously.

"Where?" I said.

"You know where. Where else?"

"That's a little personal, isn't it? Am I moist? That's a little intimate, it seems to me. That's an intimate detail I don't think I care to discuss with a stranger in a church."

“Cleo, spread your thighs.”

“I left my thigh-spreader in Los Angeles. They’re into that out there. You have a tennis court, a pool, a hot tub, and a thigh-spreader.”

We grappled some more. He was still either bouncing off or missing completely.

“All right, do this,” he said. “Put your legs around me and I’ll hoist you up.”

“Manley, I’m still wearing these breeches.”

“All right, do this. Put your legs together. Tight, tight. I take off the breeches. You wrap your legs around me. *Voilà!*”

More French.

I did this. His hand was caught in there. I don’t know why we were so reluctant to let go of each other’s sex organ. It’s as though we were talking on the telephone and feared dropping the receiver. Some vital message might go unheard.

Anyway, with my legs tight, tight together, and Manley’s hand trapped inside, he reached down with the other hand and awkwardly tried to remove my breeches. He was like a man trying to pick flowers while hanging from a precipice.

It would have been so much easier with two hands. Maybe if I had let go of his organ, he would have felt better about letting go of mine. I was probably at fault. But we were determined to maintain some kind of mysterious status quo.

He got the pants and stockings off me. This gave my legs the freedom we believed we needed. He rose to his full height, eyes smoky and hooded.

“All right, climb,” he said.

“You’re serious about this.”

“Do this. Put your hands on my shoulders. Climb my flanks. Wrap your legs around me.”

“You will have to take your hand out of where it is.”

“Why?”

“You will need both hands to hold me, or I’ll fall right off.”

“Your legs will be wrapped around me.”

“With your hand between them? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It will work. Trust me.”

“To put my hands on your shoulders, I will have to release your member, which I am holding with one of my hands.”

“You can come back to it later.”

“Why should I be the one who lets go? We both let go.”

“Cleo, I’m not trying to get an advantage.”

“It is not a question of advantage.”

“What is it a question of?”

“I don’t know.”

“I will need my hand there to help me find you.”

“I will be easy to find. My legs will be wrapped around you. I will be utterly available.”

I counted to three and we both let go. We were finally in business. The torchlight cast leaping shadows on the walls. Night birds screeched overhead.

I put my hands on his shoulders. I felt as though we were about to do a Polish dance. He grabbed my buttocks and lifted, and I wrapped my legs around him. All through this, I eyed him carefully to see if he could handle the weight. I knew the strain would show first around the mouth. I examined him for lip-biting and tense jaw.

“Where are you?” he said.

“Maybe I’m too high.”

“I can’t find you.”

“Lower me.”

“Is that you?”

“No, it’s my wire-haired terrier. He likes to go climbing with me. Manley, lower me. I think we’ll be all right if you lower me.”

I think lowering me caused a terrific strain on his arms. He began backing away from the wall. I was pretty sure this move was involuntary. He needed the wall to prop me against. The wall provided balance, equilibrium, stability, coolness, and smoothness. But Manley found himself moving away from it. There was a little bit of wobble in his stride. I was down too low. He was like a man staggered by a punch. I studied his mouth for signs of strain.

“It’s all right,” he said.

“You’ve got to stop, Manley. You’re going right out the door.”

“It’s just momentum.”

“We’ll drown in the swamps. They’ll think I strangled you with my legs and then committed suicide. The tabloids will eat it up.”

“I think we’ve stopped,” he said.

We stood in the middle of the floor. Our eyes met. It was hard for them not to. He tried to lift me higher in order to kiss me. This would be the final, trembling kiss that would lead into the main act. The strain on his arms and back must have been awesome. I tried not to rub too hard against his chest for fear of aggravating the puncture.

He lowered me to prepare for the coupling. I watched his mouth and jaw.

“Maybe we ought to go back to the wall,” I said.

“If I start moving, I may not be able to stop.”

“They’ll call it the Battering Ram Sex Murder. They’ll think you rammed the wall with me because I stabbed you.”

“You seem preoccupied with violence.”

“Manley, you’re bleeding in two places. There is torn clothing all over the floor. Plus swords and bloody footprints.”

He lowered me some more. I tried to move slightly off him to give his thing room to maneuver. I felt it probing down there. Manley raised my legs. My knees were in his armpits. I clasped my hands tighter around his neck. I was practically hanging from his neck. In this new position, most of my weight was supported by his neck.

I felt him down there, probing, and then he sort of sighed with relief. Job well done. That kind of sigh. I narrowed my eyes.

“You’ve got the wrong orifice,” I told him. “You want five-oh-one, just down the hall.”

I more or less climbed up out of range. I think we were a little piqued at each other. His mouth was very grim, definitely showing the tension and strain. I kept my eyes narrowed, suspicious of his next move. We adjusted and readjusted several times. Then we tried again. It was hard to see what was happening down there, and our hands were occupied elsewhere, so it was very much a hit-or-miss operation. I inched my knees down out of his armpits. He tried to peer between my breasts to see what was going on.

Somewhere a dog was barking.

Finally he effected entry. I think it caught us both by surprise. Manley stood there breathing a little heavily, but from exertion rather than passion. I tightened my scissor hold.

We remained locked that way for quite a while. We were afraid to move. Without a wall or other support, we could easily have toppled. The slightest attempt to do anything pelvic might have sent us crashing through a pew. I tried to adjust to a more secure position, but this caused his penis to smart. He said, "Ow," and gave me a sharp look.

I heard a noise in the trees. A light, light, splattering sound. Rain. I looked up. What was left of the roof was over at the junction of two walls, about fifteen feet away. The sound grew louder. I felt the first drops.

"What do we do?" I said.

"Not much we can do."

"We can try to reach shelter. That's number one."

"We're totally unbalanced. We'll either crash into the wall or fall down long before we get there."

"Number two is we just stop. We disengage. I climb down. We make our separate ways to the shelter of the roof."

Manley wanted to stay engaged. I explained that we were getting cold and wet, and not accomplishing anything.

"We are having sex," he said. "That is accomplishing something."

"We are not having sex. We are locked motionless in this dumb embrace."

"It is sex."

"It is engagement. It is not sex. We are motionless. There is no friction."

"I am in you. What is that if it isn't sex?"

"All right, you are in me. But we're not doing anything. Sex is something you do, something you have."

"We are having a dialogue. We are doing the most intimate thing people can do."

"There is no friction, Manley."

"What a quaint romantic I must seem."

I have to admit I liked that phrase. It put me away neatly: A quaint romantic. It made me seem the grossest thing in North America, talking about friction. I guess Manley thought I was some kind of sex mechanic. A dialogue or exchange wasn't enough for me. I needed high-speed rubbing.

It was raining hard. Manley's hair was matted down over his eyes. I began to shiver. The water flowed down our bodies. I tried to see the humor in the situation. I took one of my hands off Manley's neck and pushed the hair out of his eyes.

The rain was a torrent now, and I couldn't control my shivering. I think that's what did it. I shivered us into a beautifully timed climax. It was the kind of simultaneous thing that people spend years mastering. People read Hindu epics and do bizarre pelvic exercises to achieve what Manley and I achieved barely knowing each other and with no movement except for the little trembles of coldness that swept my body.

The rain came down. We were worried about the slick floor. If I tried to climb off, one of us might slip. We decided it would be best to remain absolutely still until the rain stopped and the stone floor dried a bit. These storms rarely last, Manley pointed out. He also said that stone dries fast. I thought about it. Stone *does* dry fast. Certainly faster than wood or carpeting.

We clung to each other. I pushed the hair out of his eyes. Somewhere an owl was hooting.

Attendance was slipping in Vancouver. As a result, the Canucks were playing part of their home schedule in Seattle, part in Tacoma, part in Vancouver. Not an unusual arrangement in modern sports.

Our mistake was in going to Seattle. We were expected in Tacoma.

We all piled onto a bus and went to the right city. We got to the arena just before the scheduled start of the game, and by the time we got out on the ice the crowd was a little testy. The Canucks decided I was the one who had kept them waiting. It was a bloody contest with bodies spinning across the blue lines, sticks thwacking

the boards, helmets bouncing across the goal mouth. With less than a minute left in a two-all tie, Nils Nilsson put the puck on my stick with a cross-ice pass, and I broke around the last defender, drew back my stick to bring out the goaltender, and swerved hard, low, slantingly left, my skate blades hissing, and put the puck into the cords on my backhand.

Slick as a berry, as Randall Leeds Packer would say.

My teammates came vaulting over the boards to smack me on the head with their giant gloves, and I felt a few claws on my backside as well. They were all shouting in my face, and giving me those gap-toothed, withered, senile grins, and rubbing my head with their gloves.

“All I want to do is play hockey,” I told them.

It was a noisy, happy locker room. When we were all dressed and ready to board the bus for the ride back to the airport, where our chartered plane would be waiting, we found out that our chartered plane had gone to Vancouver and was waiting there. The pilot thought we were in Vancouver. He knew Seattle was wrong, but he didn't know Vancouver was also wrong.

It was decided we would spend the night in Tacoma. Four in the morning, a knock on the door. I went and opened up. It was two more Arab-looking fellows, making another bed check.

“Look, what is this?” I told them.

“Bed check, bed check.”

“How are we supposed to sleep, you people keep showing up, what is this?”

“It is just a formality,” one of them said.

“It is routine,” the other said.

“It is also four A.M., if you don't mind, *sirs*.”

They shined flashlights all over the room and bed. One of them looked in the bathroom. The other opened the closet and beamed his light in there. The first one went over to the bed and felt it to make sure it was warm and slept in. I didn't think I liked the idea of my bed being felt.

As soon as they were gone, I grabbed the phone and called Sanders Meade at his apartment in New York.

He answered in a phony Irish voice.

"This is just the handy man. I'm up here to unclog a drain. God love you for calling. Goodbye."

"Sanders, it's Cleo. Why are you disguising your voice? You don't have to do that anymore. You're back from 'Boulder, Colorado.' You're safe from the media. You're the president, damn it."

"Cleo, what a relief. I thought it was Ahmed ben Farouky. He usually wakes me up about this time with results of the bed checks."

"That's why I'm calling. This whole thing is insane. It can't go on. One of them wears a thing on his head. They have flashlights."

"They're pretty ethnic people."

"What does that mean?"

"We have to be sensitive to other people's customs and attitudes. Hughes Tool does business over there."

"It's four in the morning. What kind of custom is that, waking people up and beaming lights all over? You're the president, Sanders. This Farouky guy is just the general manager. Tell him to knock it off."

"You don't know Benny."

"Well, we've had it up to here. We're grown-ups, damn it."

"Cleo, think a minute."

"Yes?"

"Reflect," he said. "When did the bed checks start?"

"In Dallas-Fort Worth."

"And what happened?"

"My bed was empty. What do you mean, what happened?"

"I mean in the game."

"We won the game."

"What happened in the game against the North Stars?"

"We won the game."

"What happened against the Kings?"

"We won."

"Against the Flames?"

"We won," I said.

"Against the Canucks?"



“We won again.”

“Five straight victories. On the road. At the tail end of a trip that was looking more and more like an unmitigated disaster. Five wins, Cleo. All since the bed checks started. I think I can safely rest my case.”

On the flight to New York, we ran into horrific turbulence over the Great Lakes. I decided this would be a good time to review my personal life.

I had betrayed my friend Floss with Archie. I had betrayed Archie with Murray, in Archie’s own house. I had betrayed Glenway with Manley, his half brother. I had betrayed Sanders with Jeep. I had betrayed Shaver with Sanders, Glenway, Jeep, Murray, and Manley. I had betrayed Jeep with Murray, who I had also betrayed Archie with, in Archie’s own house. I had betrayed Murray with Manley, who I had also betrayed Glenway with. I had betrayed Archie not only with Murray, in Archie’s own house, but with Shaver, in Floss’s house, where I had betrayed Floss with Archie. I had betrayed Glenway not only with Manley, his half brother, but with Jeep, who I had also betrayed Sanders with, in Buffalo. I had also betrayed Sanders with Glenway, in Glenway’s apartment, and Glenway with Murray, in Archie’s house, but I had not betrayed Jeep or Glenway with Sanders, in Chicago, because Sanders lost his erection when I said Watergate.

Shaver was Most Betrayed. Manley was Least Likely to Notice, which is ironic because I hadn’t had time to betray him yet. Jeep was Worldly and Resigned. Glenway was Basically Unbetrayable. Murray was Willing to Discuss a Relationship, based on his Oral Needs. Sanders was Superficially Embittered, or a good bet to slink away and lick his wounds. Archie was Too Sleepy to Care.

I knew what I had to do. I had to order ten more Badger Beagles T-shirts from Yankee Doodle Novelties in Osaka, Japan.

We began our descent.

**THREE**

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*The Kramer is Now*



# 15



*T*HIS will be the meaningful part of the book, my last chance to find a theme in all the space junk that's been floating through these pages.

I opened the door.

Anna Maria Mattarazzo looked up from my bed. Entwined in her long, dark hair was a young fellow wearing a yellow hard hat. They were otherwise undressed.

I closed the door and went back down on the elevator. I was determined to avoid any more mindless fun. I waited fifteen minutes, watching Mr. Willie water the apartment lobby plants. They were like apartment lobby plants anywhere. Pale, bent, and haggard.

I went back upstairs. Anna Maria was watching television by now. I looked in on Shaver. He seemed to be resting well enough, although he looked pale and thin.

“Anna Maria, who was that?”

“Call me Chickie, okay?”

She was wearing jeans etc.

“Who was that?”

“My boyfriend JoJo.”

“He wears a hat in bed?”

“We were hurrying.”

“Why were you hurrying?”

“I called the airport. They said your plane was in.”

“How often have you had sex in my bed while you were supposed to be caring for the patient, with or without hats?”

“Where can we do it?” she said. “You can only do so much in cars. Up to a point, a car is all right. You can do a lot worse than a car. Up to a point. Can we go to some cheap hotel where you don’t need luggage? My mother, what she’d do to me if she caught me going to some cheap hotel, forget it.”

“Where is JoJo now?”

“Taking a shower.”

I tried to think of some withering remark. Something with enough sarcasm in it to melt her right off the chair and onto the floor. I would pick her up with a spatula and put her in JoJo’s hard hat.

Nothing very original came to mind. Probably because it was so strange for me, so rare, to be in a position where I might criticize someone else’s mad, rash, wild behavior.

JoJo came out of the bathroom, dressed for the street. Decent of him. He was a tallish, shambling fellow with the same put-upon eyes that Washington Post had, despite the difference in age, race etc. People with put-upon eyes usually shamble. It gives them time to figure out how wary they should be of a given situation. This JoJo looked like the Third or Fourth Fastest Gun in the West walking into a saloon where the Fastest Gun was playing Super Pong with his cronies. He also had the worst-looking fingernails I’ve ever seen. I think he had syphilis of the cuticles.

“Hey, Chickie, so I’ll see you, hah?”

“I’m going with you.”

“Yeah, all right, but let’s go, hah?”

“Where did you park?”

“Hey, where did I park? Where am I gonna park?”

“What, there’s no space downstairs?”

“Downstairs? You know what downstairs is like?”

“You think I’m walking, forget it.”

“Hey, you coming or what?”

“You have to take me to Nineteenth Street.”

“I ain’t going to no Nineteenth Street. What kind of Nineteenth Street?”

“I have a detached retina that I have to check out down there, and feed her and her dog, and then we go home, okay?”

She pronounced it detached re-*ti*-na. When they were gone, I called Fat Sally at Nurses Anonymous and told her the patient was moving to a drier climate. The planet Venus.

I settled in. The season was winding down. Several very short road trips were all that remained.

I spent a lot of time hovering over the Kramer. I found that I enjoyed taking care of Shaver. I did everything myself. I wrote out a schedule, made frequent time checks to be sure my watch wasn’t running too fast or too slow, used the stove timer for crucial feedings etc.

Time passed. In some mysterious, intuitive, unexplainable way, I had the feeling Shaver was getting better. He was still pale and thin, sure. But there was something so utterly calm and peaceful about him. His face began to acquire a sweet glow. He looked a little transformed. He was like someone returning a little better, a little wiser, from a great journey through the world. (That sounds like Wadi Assad, although he’d have been pithier.)

I made sure the sheets were always clean, the patient’s pajamas always fresh. I even dusted and shined all the bottles in the Kramer until they sparkled.

Shaver *did* glow. There was a sweet, gentle, innocent, restful look about him. I could only hope it wasn’t the Glow of Death, or Madness, or Slow Starvation.

I called Dr. Glass. He said there was no such thing as the Glow of Death. If there was such a thing, he would have heard of it, he said.

I told him Shaver seemed so rested, so full of peace and well-being.

The loving atmosphere of the American home, he said.

The Arab bed-checkers continued to be active even though the road trip was over. They showed up at players' houses in Westchester and on Long Island at two, three, four in the morning. They followed players' wives to the supermarket, the dentist, their places of employment, the day-care centers where they took their children. They followed the children. They made phone calls around the clock. They carried flashlights and walkie-talkies.

They came to my apartment after a game with the Canadiens. It was 5:00 A.M. Two new ones, both wearing Ranger Windbreakers and headdress things. I refused to let them in the bedroom because God knows what they would have made of Shaver in his cube.

They were visibly miffed. One of them picked up the phone to call headquarters. I went to the intercom to buzz Mr. Willie. Neither of us got an answer.

The team won two at home, tied the Islanders in their building, won again at home, won in Philly, tied the Canadiens at home, won easily in Buffalo.

The more we won, the more we grumbled and bitched. It was embarrassing to be on a winning streak in the midst of this ridiculous front-office harassment. A delegation of players went to see Sanders Meade in his office at the Garden. The same office that big, fat, rasping James Kinross had occupied before his ouster.

Sanders had decorated the office with dozens of enormous blowups—photos that captured athletes in moments of terrific stress. All the walls were covered with these life-sized pictures of baseball, football, basketball, hockey players with expressions of nightmarish pain, agony, and defeat on every face. They looked like recruiting posters for a career in hell.

There were four of us. Team captain Mike McPherson plus Bruce McLeod, Eric Torkleson, and me. We sat in the office listening to Sanders gargle with mouthwash in his private toilet.

Bruce said to Eric, "Is it true Torkle got ticketed for jaywalking?"

"I never left the sidewalk," Eric said.

They all laughed a little, bouncing on their chairs. We listened to Sanders flush.

When he came out, he went into a long, defensive, placating speech about our record in the last few weeks, and he said he would personally see to it that the bed checks were gradually phased out. It sounded very much as though the bed checks would end when the season ended. Maybe the Saudis thought this was a concession.

There were a lot of partly stifled laughs during Sanders' presentation, with some eyeball-rolling thrown in, but at least he'd said that the thing would eventually come to an end.

Mike got some specific assurances out of him. Then he said, "When do we get to meet the general manager? You told us in Dallas-Fort Worth he was at a funeral."

"In Boulder, Colorado, that's right. He's still there."

"That's some funeral," Mike said.

"They're very ethnic about death."

We got up to leave. Sanders asked me if I'd mind very much remaining behind for a moment. Since he'd just spent twenty minutes in the same room with Torkle, I knew he didn't have sex in mind. The others said they'd wait for me.

Sanders got behind his curvilinear desk. It looked like a warped surfboard. He offered me some Juicy Fruit, which I declined.

"He wants to see you, Cleo."

"Who does?"

"Ahmed ben Farouky."

"What for?"

"I don't know."

"You're the president. Ask him."

"Officially he's still in 'Boulder.' I'm not supposed to attempt to contact him. He initiates all contact."



“Next time he initiates, ask him why he wants to see me. I’m a member of the team. When he meets the team, he can meet me.”

“He’s given me a date and time.”

“Tie them in a pretty bow and stick them up your ass.”

“I can accept that,” he said after a pause.

“He hasn’t given *me* a date and time.”

“I see what you’re saying, but he’s the general manager.”

“You’re the president.”

“He calls me Meade Sanders.”

It took me a moment to figure out what was wrong with that.

Spring was in the air, pretty much. From my window, I saw Central Park turning slowly green. There was a riot between joggers and bicyclists for right-of-way.

I gave Shaver a haircut, trimmed his fingernails and toenails, took care of Nutrient Injection, cleaned the plastic shield with Windex.

I think I was falling in love with him all over again.

The weight loss had given his face a shade more definition. Combined with his glow, this little bit of starkness made him look almost saintly. His radiance wasn’t a boyish radiance. He was definitely less boyish. He had, if anything, a more rugged look than before, but it was a ruggedness of the desert, not the hockey rink. A ruggedness of strange dreams and inner struggle.

The cloudy fluid didn’t bother me. I wasn’t afraid of the bottle with the cloudy fluid. I got rid of the contents, cleaned the bottle, returned it to the Kramer, watched it gradually fill up, got rid of the contents, and so on.

The Conquest of Fear, or How to Come to Terms With the Waste Products of Loved Ones in Your Spare Time Without Gagging.

I polished the chrome paneling and all the instruments and dials. I got some paint and touched up some rough spots on the undercarriage. I was scrupulous about Bedsore Rotation.

It was fun going to a medical supply store for a fresh supply of nutrients and for some spare rubber hosing and plastic tubing in the event of a World Shortage of these commodities. I’d never

felt this sense of coziness and security before. We were two, Shaver and I. I liked coming home to him. I started clipping news items for him to read when he woke up. I was constantly looking in on him, whispering to him, patting his plastic shield.

I decided he ought to have a beard.

Floss came over to look at Shaver.

“Interesting,” she said.

“He wakes up in July.”

“Very interesting. Very still.”

“He looks much better than he did the first few days.”

“What do you plan to do with him?”

“Do with him? Nothing. Just look after him.”

“I’d like to have one,” she said.

“He sort of glows, doesn’t he?”

“It’s like a face in a silent movie. I see him in black and white.”

“Interesting. I think I see what you mean.”

“It’s a dated face,” she said. “Melodramatic, sentimental.”

“I’m thinking of taking him out to the park. Spring is here. What do you think?”

“A wonderful idea. A terrific, larky, grand gesture. I see it as a lyrical sequence in the movie version. Along Fifth Avenue and into the park. Slo-mo, with something Vivaldi-ish on the soundtrack. People doing amusing double takes.”

“I’ll have to check with the doctor, of course.”

“Wonderfully composed, isn’t he? Interesting. How do I get one, Cleo?”

“It’s really strange. I didn’t know this about myself. That I would enjoy an experience like this.”

“I want one badly,” she said.

A couple of games remained. We were mathematically assured of a play-off spot. In fact we were the talk of the league.

But we still felt hounded and harassed. Several players complained that their houses had been broken into. Nothing was missing except the liquor and beer. That night we beat the North Stars 8 to 1.

I got home, did my chores in and around the Kramer, and hopped into bed. In the middle of the night, the doorbell rang. A couple of Arabs with eight days' growth. These guys always had eight days' growth on their faces. They were different guys practically every time, but they always had eight-day beards. Either they knew some trick of grooming that kept the hair on their faces at the same level, or Farouky was rotating his men to give me the eight-day beards, for his own secret reasons.

"No," I said, and started to slam the door.

One of them thrust his hand into the opening at the last possible second. He tried not to cry out. The pain must have been impressive. I heard him sort of strangling on the unvoiced pain. He was determined not to yell or moan. I had all my weight against the door, keeping it closed, except for the narrow, narrow opening which the thrust hand had resulted in. I heard him swallowing the sound of his pain.

The other fellow said, "This is not a bed check."

"What are you checking tonight? Chairs? There is no one in my chairs."

"Someone wishes to see you."

"I don't see anyone until your friend gets his hand out of my apartment."

"He would like nothing better. But he is trapped, you see. If you will open the door, he will be happy to remove his hand from the premises."

"If I open the door, you'll both come in."

"We will not come in. We will simply retrieve the hand."

"How do I know that?"

"I speak it. I would not speak it if it were not true."

He was well-spoken. I'll say that for him. It is easier to trust someone who takes the trouble to speak a foreign language well. It is stupid, but it is easier.

I opened the door. The fellow retrieved his hand and immediately sat on the floor in the hallway. He put his hand in his mid-section, covered it with his other hand, and began moving his upper body forward and back in an expression of deep pain. I

guess it helps to move around. Stuck in the door, he could not do much moving.

The well-spoken one said, "The general manager is waiting. Please follow."

I looked at my clothes. I had on pajamas and a robe, and was barefoot.

"Where is he waiting?"

"In the elevator."

"I am not leaving the building."

"Agreed," the fellow said.

"What about your friend here?"

"Leave him. He is at home with pain."

I followed the well-spoken one down the hall to the second of the two elevators in the building. The door was open, but the elevator was not quite at my floor. It was between floors. To get inside, I had to sit on the carpet, stick my legs inside the open elevator, and drop to the floor. As soon as I was in, the door closed.

Ahmed ben Farouky was in his mid-thirties, I think. He had a bristly but neat moustache and wore a suit and tie. Very much the modern petrodollar executive. He stood in a corner of the elevator smoking a Marlboro. There was a briefcase at his feet.

He studied me in an intense but not unfriendly way. His eyes were extremely alert. They had an animal alertness. Almost a wariness, I would say.

He handed me a full pack of Marlboros. I looked at it, mindful of the delicate nature of gift-giving and gift-refusing in Farouky's part of the world, and of the elaborate courtesies I'd heard about. I didn't want to offend, so I put the cigarettes in my robe, figuring I'd give them to Jeep, who always seemed to be running out.

"Thank you," I said.

"I get them duty free."

"I am humbly grateful."

"It is my own great good joy to see this acceptance."

"I would not do otherwise," I said.

“That is graciously expressed.”

“Isn’t this a little ridiculous?”

“What is ridiculous?” he said.

“Being stuck between floors.”

“No one can disturb us here.”

“Is it necessary to be this secretive? I would gladly go to your office if you’d just ask me to do so.”

“I asked Meade Sanders to ask you.”

“Nobody listens to him. You would do better to be direct.”

“Besides, my office is empty. There’s no furniture. I’m still in ‘Boulder, Colorado.’ This is what Hughes Tool wishes, and I see their point.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Your media isn’t ready to accept a Saudi in a job such as mine.”

“Well, after all, it’s hockey.”

“I breed wolfhounds,” he said. “I’m a horseman and dart thrower.”

“These things are impressive, I am sure. But hockey has its own traditions and rules.”

“I’ve spent many years in the U.S. I was a student here.”

“Where?”

“Texas Woman’s University.”

“It is not a collegiate hockey power, I don’t think.”

“Yes, but I know your ways,” he said.

“You know our ways. What are our ways? I don’t know our ways.”

I’d put him pretty neatly on the defensive, I thought. A small, sheepish grin appeared on his face. Texas Woman’s University. I wondered how that sat with the sheiks back home.

“I’d like to put this whole thing in perspective,” I said.

“By all means.”

“Nothing personal. But I’m determined to avoid all the craziness and foolishness of life on the road. I’m home now. This is my home, for better or worse, and I don’t want my life to fall back into its old habits. I’m talking about this meeting on a stuck eleva-

tor at three in the morning. It is stupid and unnecessary. No offense."

His eyes flashed into a higher level of alertness and his smile grew more sheepish and embarrassed.

"Meade Sanders told me it wouldn't be easy to talk to you."

"It is very easy. People talk to me all the time. Why did you want to talk to me anyway?"

"Are you in a hurry, Ms. Birdwell?"

"I am anxious to get back to sleep. I sleep. I am on local time now."

"I've arranged for coffee to be dropped down to us. Turkish coffee. Good and strong. Very delicious. You accept, of course."

"My thirst is always open to a friend," I said.

"I hear this news with great good joy."

"I could not but accept to drink with you."

"You have stayed the knife from my heart."

We were saying these things in English, of course. Stilted and dumb as they were, I have to admit I enjoyed these little exchanges. There is no social usage in America anymore, except in dealings with the police and criminals, and I think the formal codes of Arab hospitality appealed to me for this reason. It was fun to improvise stilted phrases and I was pretty sure Farouky was doing as much improvising as I was. "Great good joy" was an utterance I could accept as genuine, but "you have stayed the knife from my heart" were the words of a man who couldn't think of anything better to say.

"While we wait for coffee," I said, "please tell me what this meeting is all about."

"It's simple," he said. "Hughes Tool has left the team's day-to-day operations very much in my hands. They're impressed with the team's record since I became general manager. The bed checks have brought favorable results. In the Gulf, they are also impressed. But in the Gulf, they have different feelings about certain matters. The delicate business relationships between my people here and my people there have given the men in the Gulf a certain amount of leverage in the management of the New

York Rangers Hockey Club. I am talking about men who train falcons to hunt and kill. Men who have great wealth and many wives. Men who believe in the ways of the clan, the ways of the tribe, the old, old ways. Men who punish crime with the whip and the knife.”

“Those men.”

“You’ve done well on the ice,” he said. “Very, very well for someone who is the first of her sex to make such an attempt.”

“It’s that extra layer of fat.”

“In the Gulf, a compromise has been reached. The men in the Gulf have talked and discussed and argued and reasoned, and they have reached a compromise.”

“What is the compromise?” I said.

“You must wear the veil when you play.”

I looked at him. He was fighting to keep the sheepishness out of his face. The door opened and the one who was at home with pain lowered a tray with two coffee cups to Farouky. Then the door closed.

“It is our coffee,” Farouky said.

“I feel a gladness to receive it.”

“Whatever is in my house and in my father’s house, these things are less mine and my father’s than they are yours and your mother’s.”

“She’s got her own house, but I’ll tell her.”

“The coffee is good?”

“Beyond praise,” I said. “To praise it would be an insult.”

This seemed to please him. We sipped the coffee slowly out of the little white cups. We were catty-corner to each other in the elevator. I sipped too far down into the cup and got a lipful of coffee grounds. Farouky put his cup back onto the tray, which he’d set on the floor.

“So I must wear the veil when I play.”

“This is the compromise that comes from the Gulf. You’re allowed to play, but you must wear the veil.”

“In the team colors, or strictly black?”

His smile grew panicky.

“Just the face,” I said, “or do they want me wearing the full-

length veil? Because it could impede my slap shot, all that flowing material. I could probably get off a pretty good wrist shot, but the slap shot would definitely be a casualty of the full-length veil.”

Foolishness and embarrassment seemed to come flooding to his face. I think I saw his lips quiver.

“I assume they discussed all this in the Gulf before they reached their compromise. My slap shot isn’t that terrific anyway, which probably means they’re leaning toward the full-length veil.”

I realized I was beginning to get angry.

“I’ve been meaning to ask Jeep to let me kill penalties. The full-length veil might be a big help there. I could envelop people in it. Neutralize the other team’s power play. Of course, this could lead to an additional penalty. Two minutes for veiling. ‘Birdwell goes off for veiling LaFleur. She veiled him viciously from behind. You saw it, folks. Another gutless attack by the Veiled Marauder.’ ”

The more I talked, the angrier I got. I was a little detached from my own sarcasm. I listened to it increase and deepen.

“Picture me on a breakaway, Mr. Farouky. My black, full-length veil flows behind me as I speed toward the opposing goaltender. Only my eyes are visible. Maybe my nose, if the Gulf agrees. Will I cut left? Will I aim for the far corner? The crowd watches respectfully. Will I trip on my veil and fall? What am I wearing under my veil? Edible panties and a bra with nipple holes? Do they know about edible panties in the Gulf?”

He was fatally embarrassed. His years at Texas Woman’s University had made embarrassment and sheepishness possible in his dealings with women. Under the circumstances, these things were signs of grace and maturity. He was sensitive enough to be sheepish, proposing the veil.

But nothing had prepared him for my vicious sarcasm. He was unprepared. He had just so much sheepishness to give. I was making unreasonable demands on his fund of sheepish smiles and looks and grimaces.

I kept it up a while longer, getting madder and madder.



“Do I have to wear black gloves and black skates and carry a black stick to go with my veil? I’ll look like Death at the Ice Folies. Is my veil washed with the other players’ uniforms or is it sent out to a Moslem laundry? Do I have a home veil and a road veil? How do I communicate with my teammates in the heat of battle? Muffled shouts? Eye blinks? Can I wear a number on my veil, so people know who I am, ha ha? Can I wear a number on my edible panties? What did you major in at Texas Woman’s University? Stuck elevators? Turkish coffee?”

My voice barked out these questions in the angriest of tones. There was enough sarcasm in the air to register on a pollution meter. Farouky’s eyes were darting wild looks in every direction. Hurriedly, he opened his briefcase, plucked out a fresh pack of Marlboros and handed it to me.

I looked at the pack, then put it in my robe.

“I receive it with the warmth of its intentions,” I said, a little sullenly.

“That is a greatness to hear.”

“The light that falls on this generosity is brighter than suns.”

“That you have graced this elevator with the length of your body is more than the merest cigarette.”

Two minutes later, I was back in my apartment. Stay calm, I told myself. They are not going to get to you. Soon the season will be over and no one will call or visit or squat in the dark or telex. You can read and think. You can wonder at the strangeness of things. You can seek the *meaning* of all this.

Washington Post was reading the *New York Times*. The chair he sat in was tipped back against the wall. I walked up to him and sort of knocked on the newspaper.

He lowered it slowly.

“I’ve been getting visits,” I told him. “Dawn raids by men in Arab hankies. How come no buzz, Mr. Willie? I miss that soothing sound.”

“New owners have come to light,” he said mysteriously.

“New owners of what?”

“This building and what’s in it.”

“Which means what?”

“You’re paying rent to those hankies,” he said.

The play-offs began and we opened with a win against the Red Wings at home. Afterward I sought out Sanders Meade in the crowded locker room. I told him about the visit from Ahmed ben Farouky. I told him about the compromise that had been reached by the men in the Gulf. Namely, I was allowed to play as long as I wore a veil.

“I know all about the veil. The veil’s on the back burner. Concentrate on playing, Cleo. Others will negotiate the veil.”

“What’s to negotiate?”

“Play hockey, Cleo.”

“That’s all I want to do.”

“Incidentally,” Sanders said, “I think you scared hell out of Farouky. He was supposed to be back from ‘Boulder’ for the play-offs, but he decided to stay away a while longer. I think he’s afraid you’ll go to the media with the veil story.”

“I assume that won’t be necessary.”

“He was really shaken.”

“It’s his years in America,” I said. “They’ve turned him to jelly.”

Floss and I had lunch in my bedroom. She brought over some experimental soup—a blend of three or four obscure French soups. I carried in a small, collapsible table and we sat on kitchen stools. It was her idea to eat in the bedroom. She wanted to be close to Shaver.

“The beard is interesting,” she said.

“It’s coming along.”

“Does he get erections?”

“Not that I’ve noticed.”

“They get erections on and off all night.”

“I probably haven’t been around when it’s happened.”

“They go to sleep with erections, they wake up with erections.”

"Shaver's brain has been put to sleep by a Butler box. That's a powerful device. It probably inhibits all sorts of normal activity."

"Nothing inhibits erections," Floss said. "They're like the passage of the seasons, the journey of the sun across the sky."

"Well, I haven't noticed."

"They're there."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"I don't care how deeply he's sleeping, or for how long. He gets his erections. They all do."

"If you say so."

"Nothing stops it from happening. Not even death. Any medical examiner can cite instances of erections after death. It's nature, like water flowing to the sea."

I asked her about Archie Brewster.

"The little prick's back in Metroplex."

"Floss, be kind."

"I've talked to Wing. Wing's quitting. He's tired of living amidst a toy drive for orphans. He says the future belongs to homosexual communications satellites. He's going to work for a man who's putting together financing for one."

"What will it do?"

"Broadcast," she said. "Gay news, gay weather, worldwide."

She got up to look at Shaver. I had some more soup. It was fair to good, I thought.

"Is Archie past tense?" I said.

"He is Swahili."

"Do I believe it this time?"

"You'll notice I haven't cut my hair. Nor do I look like *Return of the Cat People*."

"I have noticed."

"I'm making great advances. This summer I take a long vacation and I travel absolutely alone. No tennis player, no Monopoly board, nothing."

"Great. Where?"

"I'm bicycling through the soup country of France."

"The soup country?"

"I have to learn to ride a bike first. I'm having someone come

over to give me lessons. And I've ordered four books on bicycles and bicycling. And I have to get lots and lots of biking clothes. I'm really looking forward to it, Cleo. Fresh air, exercise and soup."

She got up again and looked at Shaver.

"Interesting," she said.

"The beard's coming in a little darker than the hair on his head. I think it's going to look quite, quite intriguing."

"The tube in his nose is less distracting than one would expect a tube in someone's nose to be."

"It adds to his drama, I think."

"Does he talk in his sleep?"

"No."

"Total silence. Interesting."

"Nothing nasal, even."

"What is that doctor's name?"

"Dr. Glass," I said.

"If I talk to Dr. Glass, will he give me one?"

"I don't think they're his to give."

"What do I have to do to get one?"

"Floss, there are only nineteen Kramers in the world."

"I want an adult male. Sensitive, wryly humorous, nonsmoking. Likes movies, being spontaneous in the Hamptons, doing things with soup. Not too tall. The longer his sleep period, the better. Indefinite sleep would be best of all. Deep, silent, continuous sleep."

"I know this is a dumb question, but if he's asleep, what's the point of all those things?"

"Just to know something about him. To be secure within myself that I'm involved with someone compatible. I forgot vibrant, financially independent."

"How vibrant can he be in a Kramer?"

"That's not the point. You miss the point."

She sat down and ladled more soup into her plate. She looked at it absently, then got up and went over to gaze at Shaver some more.

"Interesting. An alternate lifestyle."

“That’s one way of looking at it.”

“You ought to get him different pajamas.”

“Why?” I said.

“These are too middle class. We don’t want stripes or checks or piping.”

“What do we want?”

“Something very basic. Something almost brutally simple. I can’t quite describe what I mean. Something a little coarse to the touch, and utterly bare of decoration, and a little bit brownish. To set off his glow.”

She sat down again. We talked about this and that. I imagined her peddling a bike through huge puddles of soup somewhere in France.

In Detroit, we lost the second play-off game of the opening round. Jeep told us not to worry, the puck wasn’t bouncing right, we would get them at home the following night. On the bus to the airport, he kept directing deeply meaningful looks my way. I pretended to read, although I had nothing in my hands but a gum wrapper.

Murray Jay sat next to me on the flight back to New York. I couldn’t help noticing he wasn’t carrying his *Work in Progress*.

“I’m going through a period of agonizing reappraisal,” he said. “First my editor gets fired for stealing office supplies. Then the editorial board refuses to comment on the manuscript because they can’t read my handwriting. It costs me a fortune to get the thing typed. Okay, the thing is typed. They read it. They tell me it doesn’t work as fiction the way it’s presently put together. I tell them it’s not supposed to work as fiction. It’s nonfiction. They say, ‘Oh really?’ ”

“Then what?”

“They tell me to make it work as fiction. They like the research on the Mafia, all the details, all the bloodshed, although they think the bloodshed is too funny as presently put together. Guess what they don’t like?”

“The snowmobiles.”

“Snowmobiles are small, noisy, silly objects, they say. Readers will not identify with snowmobiles. They want me to use intercontinental ballistic missiles.”

“It makes a crazy kind of sense, Murray.”

“They say they’ll double my advance. They also say two movie studios are interested in the idea.”

“You’ll need a main character.”

“Brad Carruthers, a reporter for *Megatonnage Weekly*. My non-Buddhist sister, the germ-warfare consultant, knows a lot about the Pentagon, so I can get stuff about the inner corridors of power from her. I want the Mafia to put a man on the moon, but I don’t know how to justify it fictionally.”

“What’s Brad Carruthers like?”

“I’m basing him on myself,” Murray said, giving me one of his velvety looks. “Tall, lean, blond, square jawed, intelligent, graceful, attractive, self-assured, warmhearted, charming, and oral.”

“You’re in there somewhere, Murray.”

“The editors say this is how fiction is made.”

Before the game in New York, about a half-dozen players reported that their homes had been broken into. The only things missing belonged to their wives. Bikini swimsuits, bikini underwear, cosmetics, suntan lotion, birth control pills, IUDs, and diaphragms.

This news gave us tremendous confidence as we took the ice.

The game was scoreless through three periods. About a minute and a half into overtime, one of their Czech defectors fired a blazing slap shot from the left point. The puck caromed off both our Swedish defensemen and skipped into the net.

The red light went on. Dead silence at the Garden. For a moment, no one moved. The Rangers on the ice didn’t want to make eye contact with each other or with the rest of us on the bench. From the corner of my eye, I saw Jeep rubbing the back of his neck. A piece of paper drifted down.

Then the Red Wings started coming over the boards to pound their teammates and hug their goaltender. The crowd applauded

both teams. We all went out and formed two lines and shook hands.

Our season was over. It wasn't real. We couldn't believe it. In the locker room, we walked around saying what happened, did anyone see it, where was the puck.

"Let's go back and do that all over."

"In my own mind, the game's still on."

"Where was the puck, where was the puck?"

Dougie White said, "Why did they steal our wives' underwear if it wouldn't make us win?"

At least we could forget about the bed checks and the break-ins. It took this defeat to make us realize there was nothing mystical about the Rangers' late season play. We'd won on our own, we'd lost on our own. We'd showered, dressed, combed our hair, made our phone calls, walked a little swaggeringly out into the night, our night, full of schizy voices and white-hot neon.

"I still don't think it happened."

"I keep thinking if we don't undress, the goal won't count. They'll bring us out for another overtime."

"Where was the puck, where was the puck?"

So it was back to the suburbs, back to the towns, back to Parry Sound and Swift Current and Oshawa and Flin Flon.

"Did anyone see it go in?"

Before leaving, I cornered Sanders Meade and made him promise that I wouldn't have to listen to any more nonsense about wearing the veil when next season rolled around. He said there was nothing to worry about.

"Do I believe you?"

"Cleo, I need your belief and support if I'm going to function effectively in this job."

"They own my building."

"They own my building, too."

"Well, what's next?"

"Farouky says there'll be one change next season, and one change only. The pregame meal. No more pick and choose. Everybody eats the same thing. Sheep eyes."

“You’re kidding.”

“With liver and brains.”

“I hate liver.”

“We’re negotiating intestines.”

Sanders asked me to join him for a drink at the top of the World Trade Center. I told him I had to sit up with a sick friend. The jerk believed me.

That week I went down to the Lower East Side and rummaged through dozens of boxes in the dusty back rooms of old shops before I found a suitable pair of pajamas for Shaver.

It was a one-piece, gownlike thing. No piping, no stitching, no collar, no pockets, no buttons, no clips, no fly. It wasn’t any color you could easily name. Let’s say it had a dark yellowish stainlike hue and let it go at that.

I knew Floss would be pleased. I kind of liked it myself. It *would* set off his glow, and make him seem dramatic and stark and a little doomed, too. A little doom can be interesting. I went home and got him into the pajamas. Very, very haunting. I lowered the sheet from his chest to his waist. Looked good. And the beard was filling in nicely.

We had a quiet dinner together. Then I read a while and went to bed. I woke up sweating and mumbling, and went out to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Back in bed, I realized what it was that had been gnawing at me these past few days, and it had nothing to do with being eliminated from the Stanley Cup playoffs.

It was a question, a simple question, but it reverberated in my mind like distant noises in the sky on one of those hot, still, haunting summer days when the streets of your town are dead quiet, and the air is heavy and dense, and you know the thunder won’t bring rain, and the bikes and wagons sit on the lawns, and the dogs are all inside.

Do I want him to wake up?



# 16



*I* WENT to Badger for a few days to see the family. Floss stayed with Shaver. She moved right in. I left her a chart with feeding times, cloudy fluid removal, and all the other data. When I got back, everything was checked off and filled in and initialed. She'd initialed all the appropriate places on the chart. The work she does with contracts has made her initial-crazy. I've seen her initial dollar bills she leaves as tips in restaurants. I think she initials light bulbs before she screws them in.

She'd buffed Shaver's fingernails and brushed his teeth. She also used dental floss on his teeth, although I don't know what could have gotten stuck in there since he was intravenously fed. With her ultradelicate grooming scissors, she'd trimmed the hair between his eyebrows and in his nostrils.

I kept waiting for her to go home, but instead she made coffee and we drank it in the bedroom.

“How was your visit?”

“Very nice,” I said. “But I’m glad to be back.”

“Sure, you have something to come back to.”

“Well, you’ve obviously done a splendid job around here.”

“I’m going to miss him, Cleo.”

“Visit often.”

“Sure, but it’s not the same.”

I tried to change the subject several times, but Floss kept coming back to the Kramer.

“It might be best for all concerned if I didn’t see him for a while,” she said.

“Oh, come on.”

“I’m serious, Cleo.”

“You’re being silly and I don’t want to hear any more.”

She held the coffee cup in both hands, staring into it. It was like a scene in a TV soap. Our dialogue was full of long pauses. There was something solemn about the way we spoke and moved and listened.

“I have a confession,” she said.

I looked at her significantly.

“While you were away, I came very close to taking Shaver to my place. I don’t want to think about how close I came. I went over it in my mind many times. I weighed all the factors. I planned, I schemed, I plotted. How to get him out of here, how to get him over there. It’s awful to have to confess this, Cleo, but I feel you ought to know if we’re to go on being friends.”

I stared into my coffee cup. Then I looked at her.

“What would you do once you got him there?” I said. “Obviously that’s the first place I’d look.”

“I know that. I *do* know that. It was stupid of me even to consider doing it.”

“It *was* stupid of you.”

“I know. I see how stupid.”

“If stupidity was measured on seismographs, you’d be an eight point two.”

I don’t think she liked that. There’s not much sarcasm on daytime TV. It was all right for me to be stunned, bewildered,

and angry as long as I was solemn about it. Wisecracking insults were out of bounds.

“Of course,” she said, “there’s a precedent in our lives for this kind of betrayal.”

“What do you mean?”

She passed the sugar.

“Don’t think I don’t know about you and Archie. That little prick.”

“What about me and Archie?”

Slowly she lifted the pot to pour more coffee for herself. We watched the coffee come pouring out.

“You two had sex in my guest room.”

“When?” I said.

“That’s not much of a defense, Cleo. ‘When?’ You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Archie told you this?”

“Down to the smallest detail.”

“That little prick.”

“You were a guest in my house, Cleo, and you saw nothing wrong in having sex with my lover. You were my guest in my house and he was my lover.”

“Are you sure? When? Did he mention a date and time?”

“Sad, sad, sad, sad,” she said. “How very sad for all of us.”

True, my defense was pitiful. But I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Who had expected something like this to come up? It had happened months ago. I’d forgiven myself.

Floss and I looked into each other’s coffee cup. All the words had been spoken. The exchange had worn us out. Betrayal is tiring, I guess.

After a while, she got up, patted the Kramer, rinsed her cup in the kitchen sink, and walked back to her building in the setting sun.

The editors of the magazine *Success* had been after me for months to do a picture story. Floss told them about sixteen times to come back when the season was over.

The season was over. They called and said a preinterview researcher was coming over. I'd seen the magazine a hundred times on newsstands. It was a big, showy thing with the name SUCCESS in gold bars and with a line of type under the name that read: *The Magazine of Fame, Power, Money and Sex*.

Everything we crave except Regular Bowel Movements. Anyway, I didn't know what kind of person to expect. Someone in rhinestone pinstripes, I thought.

It turned out to be a pleasant, straightforward young woman who wore her hair in a no-nonsense bun. We sat in the living room chatting about my life and times. Her name was Jane W. Schroeder, Jr.

She explained that the editors would evaluate this background stuff and then send out a story team. I pictured about six people in softball uniforms carrying tape recorders, camera equipment, lie detectors, devices to measure and weigh me, and a tongue depressor for a quick physical.

After a lot of note-taking, Jane suggested a stroll around the apartment. Maybe she thought there was a six-acre garden just off the toilet, with tree names in Latin. She said that readers liked to see famous, powerful, and wealthy people photographed in their houses, apartments, hunting lodges etc., and she would have to make out a report on my living quarters.

"There isn't much to see and it's pretty routine," I said.

"Let's start with the bedroom, shall we?"

It hadn't occurred to me that I'd have to show her the Kramer. But in she went, without waiting for a footman to lead the way. I scurried behind. She stopped a few feet from the Kramer, edged forward, stopped, went bravely on.

I sort of hovered in the area like a terrifically unobtrusive salesperson, ready to advise, to caution, to answer any question. Someone quietly proud of the merchandise she sold.

After a long time, Jane said, "Are you two married?"

"No."

"Good. We like nonmarrieds."

"I don't think we want to include Shaver in this story, do we?"

"Cleo, he is fantastic."

"I know, but it's just too, too complicated."

"Is it an open relationship?"

"We've never discussed that," I said a little frostily. "Besides, I don't think he's in any shape to be playing around."

"What about you?"

She didn't take her eyes off the Kramer.

"I feel everything I want or need is right here."

"I believe it. I absolutely one hundred percent hear and believe every word of it."

"It would cause chaos and heartbreak and misunderstanding if we included him in this story. It wouldn't be fair to him, to me, to you, or to them."

"Did you know him before he was in this thing?"

"Slightly," I told her.

"That's the most beautiful face I've ever seen."

"Thank you."

"And I love those pajamas."

"Orchard Street. Go down on a Sunday."

I had the feeling she was losing interest in the magazine story, with or without Shaver.

"You ought to get some kind of pendant for around his neck," she said. "I don't know, something spiritual. A dove or whale."

"It might clash with the tube in his nose."

"I see what you mean."

"The tube is so powerful it would overwhelm anything in the vicinity."

"Silly question. Do you take care of him yourself?"

"Yes, I do."

"I'd love to see his eyes. Can we?"

"I don't think we ought to, Jane."

"Just lift one lid a teensy bit?"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question."

I was surprised by the amount of somber authority I was able to put into this remark. I sounded like the Dean of Discipline telling some sophomore she couldn't have an on-campus abortion.

"What is this thing called?"

"A Kramer."

"Will he be in there forever?"

"I doubt it."

"If he were mine, I'd keep him in there as long as I could. I'd do whatever it takes. Court orders, forged documents, anything. I guess that sounds selfish and cruel, doesn't it? I'm sorry."

"Don't be hard on yourself, Jane."

"What about life beyond the Kramer, if it's not permanent?"

"I don't know," I said. "That's something we'll have to work out."

"Can it last, Cleo?"

"We'll just have to see."

"These bottles are impressive. What are they called?"

"Bottles," I told her.

She said she wouldn't mention Shaver in her report. I thanked her extravagantly. She suggested I hide him well from the story team. Story teams were notorious for turning houses upside down, looking for just such things as people in Kramer cubes.

I thanked her again.

In return, she asked if she might spend a moment alone with the Kramer. Quietly, I left the room.

Hard to believe it was already June. A new month. Time to take stock.

Take stock of what?

I detached and cleaned all the tubes. I scrubbed the metal undercarriage of the Kramer. I trimmed Shaver's sideburns and beard, and then lifted his head and ran the vacuum nozzle along the pillow to get the little blond hairs off. I washed his privates with a soapy cloth.

A gorgeous day presented itself. A Saturday. Hard, blue sky and pleasant breeze. I grabbed the phone and called Dr. Glass. He said it couldn't hurt to remove a patient from a Kramer and place him in the fresh air for a while.

Patients need "to breathe," he said, like cotton goods.

"He mustn't exert himself, of course. And he shouldn't be kept

out for more than a couple of hours. The sun will do him good. Let him sit in the sun. There is nothing better than sitting in the sun. I'm always astonished to see people sitting in the shade. It's just as easy to sit in the sun and a great deal healthier. The sun is life-enhancing. What is the shade? What did the shade ever enhance? The sun is the source of all life in our solar system. Life didn't begin in the shade, did it? So why sit there?"

"Is there any risk at all in taking him out?"

"It depends on how you define risk," he said. "There is always risk. But I encourage risk. Risk can cure a person faster than medicine. A relative or concerned friend caring for a patient in an American home takes a risk every minute of every day. It is literally a life-and-death risk. I encourage this. It brings people closer together. Remember, Ms. Birdwell. 'I am a jumper, I am a jumper.' "

"I am a jumper," I said.

"Just be sure to keep him out of the shade."

I asked Dr. Glass where I could rent a wheelchair. Sick Wheels, he told me. And he was nice enough to look up the number for me.

Half an hour later, Washington Post buzzed to say a package had arrived. He didn't like to identify objects. He was paid to announce.

I asked if it had wheels and a seat. He grudgingly said yes. After a lot of begging and pleading, I talked him into bringing it up himself. I disconnected Shaver from the Kramer. The doorman came in with the wheelchair and he helped me get Shaver out of the cube and into the chair. It took some doing. Droplets of sweat appeared above Mr. Willie's upper lip and he gave me a put-upon look I would have to rank among the classics in that field.

I put a plaid coverlet over Shaver's legs and wheeled him out the door.

I see the rest of that day from various distances and angles.

I see myself pushing Shaver up Park Avenue. I have to stop

now and then to straighten his upper body or move his head back or keep his rear end from sliding along the seat. I feel a rising excitement as I walk. I am elated and scared. It is like the first time on water skis and I want to go faster. I always go faster when I'm scared.

People on the street pay no attention. I guess they assume I am pushing a sleeping invalid or a dead man. Park Avenue runs slightly uphill here and this means I don't have to worry about Shaver pitching forward onto the pavement. This would cause people to notice. It is not true that New Yorkers walk right past victims of cardiac arrest and other misfortunes. They will inspect to see if it is someone they know. If he is dead and has a nice apartment, they will try to sublet his apartment until the lease expires and the rent goes up.

I walk right past the doorman in Floss's building and take the elevator to her floor. I'm happy to note her face brightens when she sees who it is. She is wearing black leotards. There's a bicycle propped against the wall.

"How *are* you two? Come *in*. I'm so glad to *see* you."

"We're going for a walk and want you to come along. Put some clothes on. What are you doing in leotards?"

"I feel nauseous," she says.

"You feel nauseous. That makes sense."

"If I'm going to vomit, I don't want to do it on my made-to-order silk taffeta drawstring pants, do I, with matching two-hundred-dollar spinnaker shirt. Have a drink while I change."

"All right. But why are you nauseous?"

"I took my bike to the park. This is the first time I've ridden it outside the apartment. Two Hispanic roller skaters followed me everywhere I went. Then I was nearly run down by a horse."

"Where?"

"On the bridal path. I had to get off the road because of the European bicyclists in their padded helmets and short pants. They ride hunched way over, like bullets. It was very unnerving. I rushed back here and got into my leotards."

She changes into her drawstring pants and spinnaker shirt,



whatever that is, and we have a quick drink standing up by the door.

"This is my fourth since the park," she says. "Settles my stomach."

She runs into the living room, returning with a fancy-looking cane. She removes the little oblong handle and shows me the inside of the cane. The cane is hollow.

We fill it with Scotch and soda. Ice cubes won't fit. We decide not to wait around until the ice cubes melt to the fitting point.

Floss says, "If they don't melt evenly on all sides, they won't fit anyway."

We look at each other.

"That makes sense," I tell her.

In a hazy long shot, you can see us pushing Shaver west toward the park. We are careful to walk on the sunny side of the street. We decide to save the park for the trip back and we swing south on Fifth Avenue.

As we turn the corner, we crash into another wheelchair. It is a self-propelled model. In the chair is an angry little man with small, wrinkled, midgety features.

"What do you think this is, a fucking supermarket?" he says.

"We don't understand that remark," Floss says. "And it was you who ran into us."

"Take him back to the frozen foods," the man says.

"We're just learning," I say. "Don't be so excitable. You shouldn't be using four-letter words in your condition."

"That's right," Floss says. "We can't imagine someone in a wheelchair saying fuck. It's disgusting. You're a disgrace to your condition. It's because of people like you that the American public doesn't contribute to telethons anymore."

The man curses us in a high-pitched, irate voice. He sounds a little like a dolphin talking to a scientist. We watch his face go pink. He issues a string of obscenities that sound like towns in Illinois. Waukegan, Kankakee, Effingham, Rockford and Skokie.

"Decatur," I reply.

We wheel around him and head down Fifth. Floss slips into an embassy doorway and takes a drink from the cane. I put on the

wheelchair brake and join her. We look both ways, then emerge.

Shaver has been slipping this way and that. We agree we have to fasten him. Floss runs into the street and hails a cab. The driver screeches to a stop. She asks him for some twine.

"I know you people sometimes carry twine in your boot. Boot is British for trunk."

The man tries to come up with a remark that will capture the flavor of the moment. Perhaps some towns in Kentucky. Floss gets tired of waiting and comes back to the sidewalk.

We drink from the cane. I can tell Floss is exhilarated by the five or six drinks she has had since coming out of the park with her bike. It is the gay stage of inebriation. You become fixed on something that you must do or make or steal or climb. In this case, it is twine to fasten Shaver. You feel wily and daring. Nothing can impede your search. The more unlikely and stupid the object, like twine on Fifth Avenue, the more determined you are to find it.

She goes over to the doorman of a distinguished, old, granite-faced building. I watch them converse. Floss, in her glossy outfit, looks younger than her forty-five years, but not by much. I wonder if she is going through a mid-life crisis. I drink from the cane.

When she comes back, I see she has no twine.

"No twine," I say.

She holds her hand to her chin and narrows her eyes in concentration.

"Twine, twine, twine, twine," she says.

She stops people going by. Then she looks at me and snaps her fingers. The drawstring. She whips the drawstring off her pants. It doesn't fit all the way around Shaver's puck-blocking chest, but we can tie each end to one of the slats at the back of the chair.

It's not as good as having found twine, but we are willing to settle. We head down Fifth Avenue. The day shimmers with milky blue light. When we stop for a light, I look at Shaver. He looks good. He seems to have a little color already. Floss and I drink from the cane and then I wet my index finger with Scotch and put it to Shaver's lips. It can't hurt, a drop or two.

Floss wants to push. I let her. We walk all the way down to the

south rim of the park and sit on a bench there, facing into the sun. Floss buys two crabmeat sundaes at one of the gourmet push-carts that are always down there, and we wash them down with Scotch and soda.

It feels good to sit. The sun feels good. It is good to satisfy our hunger and thirst.

Floss says, "What's next for you two?"

Jane W. Schroeder, Jr., had asked pretty much the same question.

"I don't know. I haven't thought beyond the Kramer. The Kramer is now."

"You're taking the days as they come. I like that."

"I wouldn't even say days. I would say minutes, seconds. Our life has been very intense since this started. I think in minutes, seconds."

"We finished the cane," Floss says.

She turns it upside down and shakes it. We sit in the sun. People going by, women especially, take long, slow, unconcealed looks at Shaver. He is a striking figure in his wheelchair in the sun. Young and strong, yet a victim of some terrible affliction. The sun makes the hair on his head glow almost white at the same time as it deepens the darkish tint of his flaxen beard. It is the beard of a man who has been at sea, living on biscuits and water, with only a cat for company. A rough, salty, weathered beard. The beard of a man who has matured in solitude and hardship.

I briefly regret the plaid coverlet, but I didn't have one in a solid color.

"Floss, you were the first person to mention Wadi Assad to me. Do you think his books are pseudo profound?"

"This is the whole point," she says. "This is the man's charm."

"Did you ever want to write?"

"Beyond initialing contracts, no."

"Lately I've been getting little urges to write down some of the things that have been happening these past months."

"I think you should, Cleo."

"Maybe if I write these things down, I'll understand them."

"I can get you a book contract in a minute."

"Wadi Assad makes sense, even when he sounds like a fortune cookie. I like the way he compresses things."

"That's the essence of pseudo profundity."

"I wonder if I could do that with hockey."

"Hockey isn't important enough," Floss says. "It's only the large subjects and the big, sweeping themes that make cheap sentiment possible. That's what Glenway's mother says."

We get up and walk south on Fifth. The avenue is full of amateur performers. The good weather brings them out. We see a West Indian playing steel drums and a young fellow in a cutaway doing a magic act. People watch and listen. Further on there is a chamber quartet sitting outside a shoe store. Two women, two men. People toss money into a cello case. Across the street we see a white-faced mime. He seems to be imitating a man climbing a ladder that is missing a rung. His confederate passes among the spectators with a derby hat for contributions.

The people who watch these acts never get too close. There is a Zone of Contagion. Even in the midst of lively entertainment on a pleasant day, people observe the rule of fear and dread. They are always ready to move away. They are ready to draw back gasping. It is as though mimes and cellists are secret carriers of typhoid.

The Zone of Contagion is almost always a semicircle and it varies in size, depending on the performer and how typhoidal, criminal or potentially obscene he or she looks.

The Zone is absolutely huge, it is vast, for the solo performer we come upon in the shadow of St. Thomas's church. She is a violinist, about fifty years old, ruddy faced, wearing layers of cast-off garments. Next to her is a supermarket cart full of her possessions. Clothes, bath mats, pots and pans, shopping bags full of junk. I see a ball of twine, but I don't tell Floss.

The woman is playing some wildly romantic violin piece. Her bow is flying over the instrument. Her head is down, eyes shut. People come and go, but her audience never numbers more than eight. We give her plenty of room. She has dirty fingernails and swollen ankles. She wears slippers that are torn and shredded.

Her hair is long and stringy and full of debris.

“Wait a minute,” Floss says. “I know that woman. That’s Helen Hoffman. She used to be with the William Morris Agency. She represented a lot of Watergate authors. She was always telling me she wanted to develop deeper skills, become truly self-sufficient. One day she walked out on her husband, her boss, her job, her home, and her children.”

There are scabs and bruises all over her forehead and legs. She is probably mugged regularly by other derelicts. A roach crawls out of her coat pocket and moves along her sleeve. She is totally absorbed, playing emotionally, with tremendous, head-wagging flourishes.

A true story of women’s liberation.

“I wonder if I should say hello,” Floss says.

Instead she wads up a dollar bill and tosses it into the cigar box on Helen Hoffman’s supermarket cart. Then we go looking for a place to have a drink.

We find a bar just off Sixth Avenue. It takes us a while to get the wheelchair inside. The place is dark and semideserted. There is a program featuring celebrity pole-vaulting on the TV set.

We decide to sit in a corner of the bar. The bartender comes over. He is a short, compact, beefy man. He is quite, quite densely put together. He barely fits back there. His head is growing out of his chest. I can hardly see his eyes amid all the flesh in his face. They are like little, puckered upholstery buttons.

“What’ll it be?”

Floss says, “One cane, please. Cutty Sark and soda. Ice on the side. We’ll suck it.”

She unscrews the handle and gives the man the hollow cane. He looks inside.

“Do we need the soda?” I say.

“It’s ballast,” she says.

“That makes sense.”

The bartender regards the cane.

“Why don’t I give you two glasses worth? I don’t think we fill personal objects.”

His voice is a hoarse croak.

Floss says, "Where's your wheelchair ramp? It took us five minutes to push this poor man in here. That high step is a menace."

"I only do this to pay for my acting lessons," the bartender says.

He gives us two Scotches with soda. I look at Floss to see whether she will drink hers or pour it into the cane. She drinks. I get the fellow to put ice in mine. Then I put my finger in the glass and touch some Scotch to Shaver's lips. He definitely has color.

We sit there drinking quietly. At the other end of the bar, two deaf-mutes are having an argument. A man and woman. Their hands move rapidly and they glare at each other.

Floss and I trade disgusted looks. We expect afflicted people to be above this sort of thing. They're supposed to go quietly through life impressing the rest of us with their courage and perseverance. Besides, what are they doing in a bar?

We order two more drinks.

"So you've been getting little urges to write," Floss says.

"I want to do something that cuts right to the heart of this whole experience. The first woman. The road. The Kramer."

"Do you see it as a movie?"

"I don't even see it as a book. I see it as some scribbling I might do in my bedroom, sitting by the window at sunset after Nutrient Injection."

"I envy you that," she says.

"You'll have France."

"I'd trade in a minute."

"Where is the soup country?"

"Don't worry. I've ordered some lavishly illustrated books."

The TV set is practically over our heads. We're about to tell the bartender to turn it off when a commercial comes on and we see a trim, smallish young woman in jeans and a turtleneck come skating across an Iowa-type pond.

*"Hi, I'm Olympic figure skater Karen Lee Mickie and this is what I've come home to. The good, the simple things."*

Floss clutches my arm. I slap her hand. Karen Lee Mickie talks

about the loneliness and anxiety of the Olympic trials. Sharing her tiny room with a tobogganer and a giant slalomist.

*“... and that’s why it’s so good to be back among the Amazons. Amazon Ringos, Amazon Discos, Amazon Nuggets, Amazon Noshes.”*

Floss slaps back.

“You should have done it,” she says. “It doesn’t sound stupid.”

“It was stupid then, it’s stupid now.”

“It’s in the middle of celebrity pole-vaulting.”

“That’s stupid, this is stupid.”

“This is not stupid. That’s stupid. This shines by comparison.”

The little girls are skating around Karen Lee Mickie. Floss slaps my hand again.

“You’d have been twice as good. Look at her. She’s so pert and bouncy she’d cause cancer in rats. Where’s her tits? No tits, Cleo.”

I slap her hand.

*“... women-tested Amazons. The snack we packed for women.”*

As the thing goes on, Floss gets angrier at me for not having done it. It is half-serious anger. She keeps slapping my hand. The bartender brings us two more drinks. Floss is beginning to slur.

“Her breasts couldn’t shine your breasts’ shoes. She is a boy, Cleo, and you are a woman in the full, ripe flowering of your life.”

“Drinking Scotch from a cane.”

Snow falls upon the pond. The background is misty. There is nostalgic music. Karen Lee Mickie is skating figure eights in slo-mo. There is a close-up of her face. They have photographed her in such heartbreaking, snowy radiance I expect the bartender to wish us a Merry Christmas and give us a round on the house.

“She’s good here,” Floss says. “You have to give her the edge here. Nobody does figures like Mickie.”

I slap her hand. She slaps back.

*“... the new crackle-snackers from Kelloid’s.”*

We are caught up in a flurry of half-serious hand-slapping.

Floss stops long enough to finish her drink, then resumes hitting my hand.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” I say. “I want to settle down, have children.”

We laugh a little hysterically.

“This is exactly what I shouldn’t be doing. Running around town with Shaver. Drinking from a cane. Things were going so well. Life was sane and calm.”

A different commercial comes on.

“When is he due back?” Floss says.

“A couple of hours, Dr. Glass told me.”

“We’ve been out more than two hours, Cleo.”

“A couple of hours. Several hours. That means three, four, four and a half.”

“I beg to differ,” Floss says. “A couple means two. It has always meant two. This man should be back in his Kramer.”

“A couple means a few.”

“I confess to being a little surprised, Cleo, by your lack of concern in this matter.”

She is beyond the slurring stage and into early stiltedness.

“Dr. Glass was being informal. A few hours. Several or more hours.”

“I must take issue with that,” she says.

We call the bartender over. He moves toward us like a sea creature along the ocean floor. Something believed to be extinct. Scientists are lowering lights and cameras. Tourists buy plastic replicas of the creature. Local people have named it Deep Fat. A motel called Fatview Cabins is being built.

Floss says to him, “Help settle an argument. What does a couple mean? A couple of anything. Chickens, eggs, hours, minutes.”

“Two,” he says.

This man is trifling with my lover’s well-being. I laugh crazily. It’s a sound I don’t recognize. Then I start slapping the back of Floss’s hand. She slaps my hand. Some strange, quivering tension seizes the bartender’s body. We realize he is laughing. Floss and I amuse him. This taut spasm is the way he laughs. His eyes disap-



pear in his face. The lids are completely buried. His short arms start swinging back and forth. The world press headlines: DEEP FAT LAUGHS FOR CAMERA.

Floss takes advantage of his good mood to get him to fill the cane. She gives him a twenty-dollar bill and we push Shaver out into the street. Next to the bar is a theater that shows X-rated films. Playing today is *Sloppy Seconds* with Hugo Furst. I glance at the glossy stills under glass to see if my brother is featured.

We hurry north on Sixth Avenue. You see us in a dazzling overhead shot, dodging the yellow taxis. I laugh on and off. A tense, high-pitched, out-of-control sound. I have the wheelchair, and Floss is running to keep up. We race into the park and head in a northeasterly direction at the first opportunity.

"Slow down," she says.

"A couple is two. We have to get him back."

"A couple is two, but I'm sure Dr. Glass left some margin for error. There's the carousel. I wonder if they have a wheelchair ramp."

This is the first time I've seen the carousel.

"It's called the Delacorte Carousel," Floss explains. "Wait, that doesn't sound right. I think the carousel is Jewish. It's the Guggenheim Carousel. The band shell near the mall is the Delacorte Band Shell."

We look at each other.

"That makes sense," I tell her.

The carousel is impressive and the music is genuinely inviting, but I refuse to give Shaver a ride, as Floss keeps urging me to do. We keep hurrying east and then north.

"What about a taxi?" she says.

"The chair is too big and it's not collapsible. Sick Wheels said I was lucky to get this one. It's a weekend, remember."

"There's the Wollman Memorial Fountain."

"That's a drinking fountain."

"You're right, let's drink." She stops and tilts her head way back and drinks from the cane. "The Wollman Fountain's on Seventy-second Street. Why don't we take Shaver to the zoo?"

"There's no wheelchair ramp. Come, hurry."

"I wonder if they'd let us into the Sam and Bella Tishman Children's Zoo. We could say Shaver's a gland case."

I laugh briefly and frighteningly. It is almost a bark.

We see a film crew shooting a scene in a leafy glen. I want to stop and watch. This is how they make magic. But there's no time to dawdle. The Kramer is now.

"They're filming your book, Cleo. When they're finished, they'll postsync a Vivaldi soundtrack. This is called postsynching in our business. Have a drink."

"No."

"We have to stop. My side hurts and I have to go to the bathroom."

"I have to go to the bathroom, too."

"We should have gone in the bar."

"Deep Fat keeps his kelp in the toilet. It's got iodine."

We look at each other.

"That makes sense," she says.

Five minutes later, we are nearing Fifth Avenue. The Wollman Memorial Fountain is somewhere to our left. Behind us is the Damrosch Mall, according to Floss.

A kid about fifteen, on a skateboard, is keeping pace with us. His left fist is clenched and he is talking into it.

"Hi," he says to Floss. "Enjoying your outing in the park?"

He thrusts the fist in front of her mouth.

"Lovely day," she says into it.

He pulls the fist back to his own face.

"Where do you make your home?"

"Right here in Manhattan, Wally."

Wally?

"And what is your favorite charity?"

Floss pauses to wait for the fist.

"The Seventh Fleet," she says. "They're doing their best to meet the challenge of the Soviet naval buildup. I urge your listeners to send whatever they can to the Seventh Fleet, the Bangkok Hilton, Honolulu, Hawaii, oh one three six seven."

The boy takes this answer in stride and veers off. I try to identify this new stage Floss is entering.

We are out of the park. She stops to drink from the cane and then hands it to me and takes over the wheelchair.

"He has good color," she says.

"Dr. Glass said the sun would be good for him."

"You ought to let his hair grow."

"I give him occasional light trims."

"Let it grow wild, Cleo. Trim the beard lightly. Let the hair on his head grow wild. Believe me, it will look fantastic."

"I cut very, very lightly."

"Let it grow," she says. "And get a sunlamp. It's too much trouble to get him in and out of the Kramer every day. Get a sunlamp and safety glasses and lift the hood of the Kramer and shine the lamp on him a few minutes a day."

"That's a good idea."

"And buff his fingernails."

"I'll do that."

"Do you talk to him?" she says.

"All the time."

"It's good to talk to them. They hear it even if they don't seem to."

She has to get to a toilet badly. Since my apartment is closer than hers, we go over there together. Floss takes the wheelchair through the side entrance while I spin through the revolving door.

"Four people waiting upstairs," Mr. Willie says.

"Are they Arabs?"

"Not so you'd notice."

"I see. Can you give me a breakdown by sex?"

"Two of each."

"All right. Why are they upstairs?"

"They're carrying bulky stuff and I just got done with these floors. I left them on the rug outside your door."

I go up there. Sure enough, there are two men, two women lounging around the hallway along with tall lamps and cameras and other equipment. They are dressed for the Australian out-back. Safari jackets, bush hats etc. Then it hits me. Of course. The story team from *Success* magazine.

They all start talking at once. The elevator door opens and Floss comes charging out, half dying of imminent urination. She is all but clutching herself there to keep it in. She walks hunched over. I explain about the story team.

She makes that mean, nasty, pug-nosed face I have seen before. It is the storm before the storm. Her eyes narrow and she seems to be sniffing her upper lip.

“You people dare come up here without checking with me? This is my client and dear friend. You can’t just walk in here and exploit her life without notifying her agent. All exploitation crosses my desk first, you little shits. Just for that, we’re not giving her story to your magazine. This woman is going to tell her own story in her own words. We’re doing a book. This woman is a full-length book. She is not some three-page profile in your pissy magazine, photographed in her converted lighthouse in Montauk with her fucking cat Renaldo.”

Floss grabs the cane from me, unscrews the handle and takes a couple of deep swallows.

“Not only is she a book, but they’re already doing the movie version. Go over to Central Park if you don’t believe me and take those silly-ass outfits with you. You look like tourists at World War III.”

The story team does some grumbling, but they pick up their stuff and leave. I open the door and Floss goes racing into the bathroom. It is then I realize we have forgotten Shaver.

For one long, stunned moment, I can’t remember where we saw him last. He was with us in the bar. He was with us in the park. Did we bring him into the building? Did we put him on the elevator?

I run into the apartment and sort of hurl myself against the bathroom door. I hear Floss say, “Wait your turn, King Kong.”

I have bounced off the door. I stand looking at it, trying to remain calm.

“Where is Shaver?” I say slowly and clearly, with a little note of trembling suspense mixed in.

There’s a pause. She even stops peeing. Then we both laugh hysterically. It is an unhealthy sound, a little crazed, very much

out of control. It causes a fresh surge of peeing in there. There must be a muscle linkage.

I go rushing out to the elevator. When I emerge in the lobby, Shaver is sitting quietly outside the little office where Mr. Willie takes phone calls. He is still snugly upright, thanks to Floss's drawstring, and has not lost any of his color.

I say a soft thank you to the Force that controls the universe.

Later, the three of us have an early dinner in the bedroom. I take the Kramer off auto-command so that Floss can inject the nutrients. This is the last time she will attend to Shaver. If everything goes according to schedule, he will be out of the Kramer by the time she returns from France.

I wonder how they'll get along. I wonder how we'll get along. I imagine a series of scenes. In the first scene, Dr. Glass picks up his phone and dials my number. Nurse answers the phone as I stand by to assist if necessary. Nurse confirms it is the right number Doctor has dialed. Then she lifts the hood of the Kramer and puts the phone next to Shaver's ear. Doctor presses a button on the Butler box.

Shaver wakes up refreshed. The Kramer is airfreighted to a woman in Salt Lake City.

Over the next week or ten days, Shaver seems free of any symptoms of Jumping Frenchmen. He has a thorough physical with test results analyzed by Third World technicians in hospital labs high above the East River. Nothing is amiss. Dr. Glass tells me to call him immediately at the first sign that something is amiss. There is a Kramer in Miami Beach that is temporarily free and that Dr. Glass has first claim to.

Shaver walks around the apartment in his boxer shorts. He brushes his tongue once or twice a day. He eats Ralphies and drinks bottles of Wink. He has awakened with alternating thirsts for Sprite and Wink.

We take long walks in the park and talk about visits to Badger and Red Deer. We discuss his future. He is apparently well enough, and certainly still young enough, to play hockey again if he wants to. He thinks he would rather do something else. Something that will help other people. Community work. The young,

the poor, the disabled. I tell him the Kramer was repaired by a Mafia electrician, with him in it. He says from now on he will try not to judge people by criminal affiliation.

In the last of the scenes that I imagine, I am scribbling in my notebook one day and I see Shaver, out of the corner of my eye, which is how such things are usually seen, walk backward from the bathroom into the bedroom. A facial tissue is hanging from his nostril. There is the sound of two hands clapping.

I leap for the telephone. I am surprised at the eagerness with which I pounce on the instrument. I have dialed four digits of Dr. Glass's office number when Shaver rushes into the room and tries to wrest the phone from my hand. We grab, clutch, and pull. I am surprised at the intensity of our struggle. Our eyes meet for a long, sad, terrible moment, and then he relaxes his grip on the telephone. I rip it from his hands.

This is the series of scenes I have been imagining as Floss and I finish our Western omelets in the softly waning light. She says it is time for her to go and she gives the Kramer a little pat. She is obviously trying to underplay this parting. It is good theater and good taste, and I respect her for it, especially since it comes at the end of a day in which no one has underplayed anything. On her way out the door, I hand her the hollow cane and the drawstring of her silk taffeta pants.

Night falls on the city.

That night, in bed, I thought of the pictures I have of myself. I have pictures of myself, a small girl, skating on the pond in Snowy Owl Glen. My skates are *white*. I wear a stocking cap and half a ton of clothes. I am pudgy and fierce looking. Because of all the clothes I'm wearing, I have to hold my arms out away from my body, a little like penguin wings.

Maybe it was these pictures, and what they recalled, that gave me the idea of getting out my old Instamatic the next day. I blew the dust off it and found some rolls of color film in the butter tray in the refrigerator. Then I took dozens of photos of Shaver in the Kramer cube.

I set up these pictures carefully. I was determined to be delib-

erate and thorough, regardless of my personal genetic coding. This was a serious idea, even profound, even pseudo profound, and I wanted pictures that would do justice to the whole experience of Kramering. I kept the hood on the Kramer for some shots, took it off for others. I used different kinds of lighting. I stood on chairs, I shot in high-assed, awkward, side-stooping positions. For the last shot on the last roll, I straddled the Kramer like a crazy woman and peered down into that soft, calm, faraway face.

Click.

