
February 2004



Volume One / Issue Eight

strawberry press magazine

**Featuring *Intuition*, a short novel by Whit
Frazier**

**STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE
FEBRUARY 2004
VOLUME ONE ISSUE EIGHT**

Check out the new look of www.strawberrypress.net online. We publish print and online fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction. We are also accepting submissions for upcoming issues of strawberry press magazine.

Strawberry Press
Post Office Box 1873
New York New York 10163
www.strawberrypress.net

Strawberry Press is currently held down by:

whit frazier
whit@strawberrypress.net

Matt Andreas
matt@strawberrypress.net

Intuition © 2000, whit frazier

Volume One Issue Eight

With Volume One, Issue Eight I am doing something new with Strawberry Press Magazine. Instead of our usual collection of stories, accompanied by one or two perspective pieces, I am dedicating the entire issue to one novella. The winter months, as it turns out, have been the hardest on our press, and things have been extraordinarily busy. Right now we're sitting on a bunch of submissions that we haven't had the time to give proper review to, some of which, no doubt will be included in our March issue, others which will appear on the website.

The novella that appears in the February issue of Strawberry Press Magazine is a story I wrote almost four years ago now. It's an experimental piece that plays around a little bit with the murder mystery genre. It is called *Intuition*. A portion of it appeared in the December issue of our magazine as a blues piece in three parts. It appears here in its entirety.

This is actually something I would like to do with the work of other writers from time to time. I think it would be nice to publish an issue maybe once or twice a year that featured one longer short work by an author. With that much said, we are now not only looking for short story submissions, but short novel submissions as well.

Cheers,

Whit Frazier
Strawberry Press
www.strawberrypress.net
whit@strawberrypress.net

whit frazier is a writer and the founder of strawberry press magazine.

Intuition

Whit Frazier

#

FRANNY FRANCIS FRANCE strolled about one bumbling and bright beautiful day with a small and powerful joy beaming in her breast, headed nowhere in particular and her head everywhere in wild transports. The sky was bright and blue, the air was vivid, the sun followed her warm face with a strong, invisible brightness where no clouds clipped the top of the trees. The city around her was alive with the chatter of people, the deep smoky scents of restaurants and automobiles and the energy of life. The colors asserted themselves in bright rich tones, blue, gray, red and copper-ebony Franny marched down these colorful streets thinking upon whatever her thoughts might care to concern. She thought about her friend Rebecca, she thought about the very strange people that she passed, but most of all she thought about herself. She thought about herself, her thoughts, her thoughts on her thoughts and chased them around each other. She thought of herself a bird, singing, feathers freeing themselves from her feathery wings, herself, divorced from time and space and everything like a misplaced Red Riding Hood. She thought of the magnificent stars beyond the flat illusion of the sky and of all the different indistinct memories of words she might have or maybe did say to Rebecca and of her body, her own body as well, the soft living flesh beneath the wonderful chilly clothes she was wearing. She thought of childhood, her own and all those others she was, like a child, free to create, and beneath the weight of the world so vast it lifted itself light in a laughing vaporous sigh she felt her happiness like a gentle transformation of so many bright opposites. She thought of girls along crowded beaches, their youth, the fall, and oh, of course-the city!

The city passed all around Francis while she was engaged in this rapture of thoughtless thought, and it was fueling the fires of her bizarre imagination, though she couldn't have said why, even if she realized it at all. On one side of her gray old buildings did battle with new gray buildings, the final triumphs being lost blue above the sky while bells, obscure and loud sang hymns around her head and while strangers seemed to step by in their awful and unnatural rhythm. Here, on the other side of the street where the busy stands of fruit dropped color against the gray in clusters of spheres like large suspended snowflakes of red, orange, deep blues and green, voices bounced carelessly around, racing toward

all the magnificent structures and running up the towers, back and forth between buildings like artillery. The meanwhile sun looked from between the buildings and the clouds they clipped with a kind of curiosity, delighted by this spectacle it witnessed day after day after day. There were children. They strolled by, visionaries, you could see it in their faces, that they carried some secret pact with the moment, as if they'd learned to stretch it out to infinity on all sides, while their happy mothers and/or fathers held onto them like precious ancient texts, these conquerors of linguists. A thousand different deep and wonderful scents scented the air from restaurants, perfume, automobile exhaust, the delicious smell of fruit and the smell of the fall, crisp and colorful. And then like the progression of scenes in a play, the setting dropped off and a new one appeared in its place, where the streets were wide and sparse, decrepit old buildings looked out on the broken vistas like tired old men. Franny looked around awfully impressed while the sidewalk pushed back up upon her heels. More rapidly now the backdrops were falling away and then recreating themselves, sometimes into small and quaint squares or circles of shops and people, and sometimes into wide run-down alleys. Passing past these relics and settings, all at once the city seemed to draw very far back all around her, and she found herself crossing a long bridge where pale blue waters laughed light back onto the sun and the sky. Far away, all around her the city rose up, all encompassing, like a womb, and Francis felt a tremendous smallness, and a sudden security.

#

There was an old man named Freehand Fred,
He'd drink whisky all night 'til he seemed most dead,
Used to dream of Sweden and he used to dream of France,
And he used to dream a gal called Betty Aintgotsense.

Now I'm told old Betty was as foolish as he,
They'd drink whisky all night at the jamboree,
Start to cursin' and a'swearin' 'til the break of dawn,
And by the time they got to kissin' ol' Betty was gone.

Ralph

I used to dream of other places and I found an intimate and impassive city. Often, on nights very much like this one, alone, removed around others, I watched a vibrant life that refused to embrace me. For almost a year I was invisible, a young medical student driven during the frigid daytimes into a neurotic pursuit of my academia, and at

night a rebel against this blissful sadness, haunting strange centers of this city that haunted me. It culminated into a sort of madness. One evening, drinking heavily, and certain of my superiority over all these others who would not regard me, I began to insult everyone. I threw over my table and was raging. It was all nonsense. But I was dragged that night out into an alley, and beaten into a permanent hermit.

Do you remember that night we attended a lively swing party aboard one of those boats in the Baltimore Harbor? It was terrific fun- we'd both been drinking like sailors, and there was that fellow who continually cut in while we were dancing and took you away and I got angry and we almost had a fight on our hands he was threatening to throw me overboard and I said not if I threw him over first or the charming morning when we watched that outdoor performance of some or other Shakespeare comedy and you gave me a little purple flower you pulled and I tied it into my laces and you said I looked silly and refused to walk next to me or those evenings when I used to walk over to your house and you would smile and take my coat asking me did I want some hot mint tea and it was too delightful to say no although I can't stand hot mint tea and I would try and teach you chess and the night you got frustrated and upset the whole board- Cass, these memories are as delicious as my perpetual solitude- in these always vacant hours of my todays at the end of the day you are

#

"Ralph, are you dozing off on me?"

"No; no I'm awake."

"Ralph, do you remember me?"

Ralph put down the letters and looked across the desk.

"I'm sorry Cass," he said, "but you came so late."

Cass stood up and crossed the room, her back towards him, looking out the window. "Ralph, I need your help."

"Anything," Ralph said.

Cass moved away from the window and walked over to the stereo. "It's vinyl."

"I was feeling nostalgic. It's from when I was much younger."

"I suppose so."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Cass shrugged and turned to face him.

"An old friend of mine anyway."

"Is that right?"

Brief pause. "Cass, what's wrong?"

She sat down on the floor, her back propped up against the wall. "It's about an old friend of mine."

"Yes, and-?"

"She was murdered."

#

Rebecca had been very bitter and very cold, aloof, her one joy had been photography, she had loved to watch people, study them in the hurried moments, intent, pressed, not at all self-conscious, involved in lives that made them happy, anxious, worried, depressed, moments arose out of these photographs and created a world and Rebecca loved the world, she even began to love people, especially when she lost Richard and all at once important fragments of her life began to break apart, the days the lights were blue through her windows and ever more increasingly she became very much a stranger to herself and learned to love herself all the more because she found herself increasingly dissatisfied with herself, she became narcissistic, self-involved, involved with another girl when she had no such inclinations and could feel no romantic love towards her, and so all her love for people, for herself, for moments and for the world became twisted, strange, observant and silent, and Rebecca had become very bitter and very cold, aloof. She'd often thought herself no more than some oblique symbol in the lives of various people she'd been involved with. She started to spend most of her time alone, and eventually she began to enjoy it. She'd pace through the wooden rooms of her small downtown apartment, the dim light made more dim through the blinds, while all around her, always inescapable, the city thrived. The sounds invaded her windows, the people she loved invaded her hours and the time passed out there- and she was always sensing it. The place was like a tomb, and she felt like a spirit no one chose to believe in. Like a series of her own photographs it began to recreate itself still: the dark brown hallway, a table, square, wooden, small, a mirror, the lamp. The planks on the floor always more and more sensitive into the wide and empty living room as silent as tombs. Beyond this

room cluttered with relics, books, pictures, photographs, a small coffee table and a couch was the darkroom, a room Rebecca seldom visited. On the other side, back through past the living room, the hallway, the kitchen was small, messy, dark and almost always unattended. Two small windows barred by blinds looked out onto the city, although more often than not they didn't look outwards at all, and the little light the blinds allowed sank into a pale white pool on the floor. A short distance from these windows, three other windows looked just as dismally inward, and behind these large and vacant square eyes, Rebecca's bedroom, depressed in tones of red, brown and violet, spread itself around her, because this was where she spent most of her time: on her bed, sitting on the floor in revolutionary silence, Rebecca would talk to herself. She didn't work. She sold old photographs and received royalties off of old photographs and supported a young lady named Francis Williams, whose presence had been, if anything could have been called such, her sole pleasure in life. Francis, a photograph could stand, sit or usually pace in front of her for hours. Her copper-ebony skin, her brown eyes and her dark clothes complemented the color and light of Rebecca's apartment.

Francis loved to talk; and so Rebecca relied on Francis, her constant appearances and disappearances.

Nights without Francis the apartment sat suspended on itself, bathing over and over again in the silent melodious sadness. Sitting on the floor, helpless, like someone buried alive in a large, ancient tomb, while the hallway, the living room, the kitchen, the darkroom and even the bathroom all spoke to each other with dark cool passages of air drafting through the blind windows, Rebecca, inside herself, talked to herself, while in her bedroom the heavy violet bed, the lamp, the dim green shade, the dark oak night table, the floor and the rug all sat perfectly still, listening.

The Detective

"I am above all else," said Inspector Bridge, puffing leisurely upon his pipe and looking across the room through enormous blue rings of smoke, "a man of reason and observation; although when the moment calls for action I never, like a Hamlet or John-a-Dreams shy away from my duty. It is because of the happy meeting of these two

qualities that I am perhaps the world's greatest living Private Investigator. But tell me Clyde, you heard what they had to say as well, listening over the speakerphone. What do you make of our two latest interests?"

I had been pondering this very subject for the last quarter hour while Bridge had been going over various topics, not one of which I had the presence of mind to listen to. Now he was challenging me prematurely for my conclusions. I had none to offer.

"It's clear to me that it has been occupying your mind from the moment I hung up the phone. Certainly you've come up with something."

"I don't know where to begin," I said. "I've always stood somewhat in awe of your methods, and I never know how to piece them together. You must forgive me, but I really have no conclusions to offer you."

We were sitting in a small downtown office that belonged to Bridge. Bridge had worked for many years as a police detective, but it was a job that he hated. He said it was unbearable dealing with the inconsistencies, hypocrisies and ineptitudes of the police force. He saved a good portion of money over the years and finally opened his own Private Investigation practice. He himself was its sole employee. That meant working almost all waking hours, but he'd learned not to trust most other people. I helped him out with some of the paperwork and data entry when I had the time, and I enjoyed accompanying him when he was out working on a case; but most of my time was devoted to my own occupation as an art restorer.

Bridge's office was small and very cluttered. There were books, papers, two computers, a typewriter and a litter of other miscellaneous items scattered around. The walls were undecorated, the light was harsh and white and his desk was large and metal. A glass storefront let in a lot of sunlight, and he often didn't bother to turn on the overhead light until it was absolutely necessary.

"I find it disappointing," Bridge said, standing up and beginning to pace, "that for as long as you've been working with me you haven't been able to pick up on any of my methods. But really I suppose the fault is mine. I've never given you a formal explication of them. I shall do so now, while we wait for our guests to arrive. But first off, let me tell you something about these very guests so you won't be distracted by questions during my lecture. Obviously we know, because we heard them speaking, that one is a man and the other is a woman. These two were once lovers,

they are so no more. They have not seen each other for quite some time. Someone very close to them- let me say to one of them, has either been murdered or has disappeared. I am certain of this, despite the fact that they refused to give any details over the phone."

"But how can you be sure?" I asked.

"They said as much themselves. There are more facts that I suspect I know, but I will not put them forth, for they are uncertain. But listen closely to me now, while I go over with you my methods, and when they arrive, try to put what you've learned to practice. You will find it surprisingly simple to observe many details of their lives."

I shall try."

"Then follow me closely Clyde. This simple little problem I'm about to begin you with gives good example of the error that leads many people, when trying to reason, astray:

"Three people check into a hotel. Let us say they are charged thirty dollars. Each one of them pays ten, and they go upstairs and check in. A few minutes later the hotel clerk realizes he charged them five dollars too much, and sends the bellboy up to return it. The bellboy goes to do so, but he can't figure out how to split five dollars even three ways, so he pockets two of the dollars and gives each of the men one dollar back. That means that each man spent nine dollars on the room, a total of twenty seven. There remains the two dollars that the bellboy kept for himself, which makes twenty nine dollars. Where is the other dollar?"

I sat a moment looking at my friend perplexed.

"Do not struggle with it," Bridge said, continuing to pace. "I would rather you focused your attention on my following discourse. If you're still interested, and if the answer hasn't made itself obvious to you by the time I finish, I will explain it to you then. For now, listen to me:

"Every good detective is first and foremost a philosopher. That may seem strange to you, but you must realize that both of these professions demand, as their primary tool, a discerning and analytical method of reasoning.

"To my mind it was Aristotle who first really penetrated the intricacies of the art. It can be argued that Socrates or his disciple Plato developed an intricate system of reasoning before Aristotle, but again, to my mind, the dialectic process employed by these two only points toward a system; a system which is fully revealed in the works of Aristotle." Bridge paused in his pacing, and lighting his pipe anew, threw his gaze at me. He stood tall and slender in the sunlight, clouds of smoke running lazy blue around him.

His eyes, harsh and bright, burned with an ecstatic blue fire gazing fixedly above where his nose jutted out like the beak of a hawk.

"That system," he continued, "is the syllogism. Now for Aristotle, logic allows for two basic methods of applied reasoning. Those methods are deduction and induction. Deduction is the logic applicable to the syllogism. Now a perfect syllogism is laid out in such a manner that when three propositions have been laid down, the first two propositions being givens, or premises as they are often called, the third proposition will logically follow."

"And how," I asked, "do you mean logically follow?"

"Let me give you an example: if it is fair for me to say that all divine creatures partake of reason, and it is also fair for me to say that Man partakes of reason, does it not follow, by the Law of Identity, that Man is a divine creature?"

"I suppose so, and I think I am understanding better already."

"No it does not, and I had hoped you would consider that syllogism more carefully."

"How do you mean?"

"In that syllogism, is it not possible that other creatures besides divine ones partake of reason, and that man is one of those creatures? It is over-hasty to jump to the conclusion that you did. However, if the syllogism goes as such: all creatures that partake of reason are divine, Man partakes of reason, therefore Man is divine, then the syllogism is fair."

"Ah, but you are trying to trick me again, am I wrong? For how do we know that Man is a creature? I wasn't over-hasty this time; I was clever. You see, I'm learning already."

"What?" Bridge stopped short, confused, and suddenly grasping the misunderstanding, flew into a rage. "You are impossible! How dare you laugh at-" and turning away again he became calm. "But I suppose you are right, eh? I should have said Man is a creature that partakes of reason, and made the distinction clear right then and there."

"Yes."

"But it is a question more than anything, of grouping. I suppose you've heard of a Venn diagram?"

"I don't believe I have."

"It's not important, and I believe the mind is more astute if one learns to reason without such aids. But the syllogism becomes more complicated. There is negation. For example if I should say, horses are not creatures that reason,

and I also say, Man is a creature that reasons, it follows that a man cannot be a horse."

I paused to consider. "Yes, naturally."

"And so on," Bridge continued, waving his hand in the air. "The syllogism, as you see, can be a very powerful tool for the analytically deductive mind. But there is one very strong problem with it, and this is evidenced in the work of a much later philosopher by the name of Sir Francis Bacon."

"Yes, I've heard of him. It's said that he wrote many of Shakespeare's plays."

"It is not Clyde," sighed Bridge, "such inanities as that are important about him. If Bacon was at all interested in theater, it was the theater that philosophy, in his mind, had become, primarily because of the works of Aristotle. He believed that philosophers were simply choosing systems to believe in based on their own disposition, and developing clever ways to support these systems through Aristotelian logic. Bacon's response was to do away with the syllogism and focus on that other method of reasoning, namely induction." Here Bridge became more animated, his eyes gazing straight ahead, his pace quickened, and his puffs upon his pipe doubled. "Aristotle's induction was puerile at best, always upset by unforeseen contradictions, and not very thoroughly developed. It seems clear why his focus was on the syllogism. Bacon on the other hand developed a system of induction that analyzes experience, and through a rigorous process of exclusion and rejection, arrives at an inevitable conclusion. And what is his greatest new tool? It is the experiment, something important to both the philosopher and the detective. Indeed, this method developed by Bacon is considered the basis for the modern scientific method."

"But I'm still lost. I don't know how to apply anything I've learned here to philosophy, and especially not to private investigation."

"That is simply a matter of reading the works these men wrote, and then putting the habit of logic to practice. But I myself do not rest where these two masters left off. I have developed my own system of reasoning that is more suited to my occupation. In my mind, reasoning is largely a matter of determining where one's goals are, and the best method to attain them."

"Yes, but how does one reason which method of reason one should use?"

"That is a good question, and I can see already that my training has made your mind somewhat more analytical and astute. There is, I believe, a quality of Intuition, which is spoken of by another

philosopher who wrote just slightly after Bacon. You have heard of him; it is Rene Descartes."

"I think therefore I am."

"Yes. Cogito ergo sum. Descartes tried to develop a pure scientific deduction. He had a brilliant and extraordinarily analytical mind; he developed the basis for our modern geometry, and starting with the premise that he could premise nothing, began the Herculean task of recreating the entire world. I do not have very much to say about this method however, because it seems to me that he can do nothing that is absolutely certain save posit his own existence, which, in any case, he would have no choice but to do anyway. For how absurd would it sound if I, who am speaking to you now and who beyond doubt in all reality exists, were to posit to you that I had reasoned it out that I did not exist, as if I were no more than a character in a book?"

"But Descartes' idea of intuition, or clear and distinct knowledge, deserves a lot of attention. His cogito ergo sum is due to intuition. So is knowing that we are awake. Often when we dream everything seems so real to us that we believe it to be so, even when logic starts to bend in upon itself. But when we are truly awake we have more than just the emotions we carry with us into our dreamworld scenarios, and the belief that we are truly experiencing these scenarios, we have a clear and distinct knowledge that we are awake. Moreover, our world stays subject to certain laws of nature and logic, which is certainly not true of the dreamworld. And most importantly, there is a continuity that exists when we are awake which does not exist for our dreamt lives."

"You sound as if you are trying to convince yourself and not me."

Bridge's face colored slightly. "Don't be ridiculous. All this talk of mine has allowed you to believe you could put my methods to use prematurely. I was merely reciting it the way Descartes writes it. But tell me my astute friend, have you worked out that little brain-teaser I gave you earlier? I'm afraid I've given you little time to concentrate on it."

"I have not, Bridge. And I must admit that it distracted me at times during your discussion."

"Well the answer is simple. In their haste (as you did with the first syllogism that I presented you with) people have a tendency to group things together in the wrong place, and therefore become entangled in logical whirlpools. Listen: while it is true that each man paid twenty seven dollars, the two dollars that the bellboy pocketed were a part of that twenty seven. Twenty five are with the

manager, three are with the men, and two are with the bellboy. Quite simply, no money is missing."

"I hadn't thought of it in that way. It really is simple."

"Yes it is, and remember this lesson. You will have a chance to apply it now, for if I am not mistaken, here come the two people who contacted us earlier."

#

A Washingtonian, a Bostonian, a New Yorker and a Man from Chicago sat around a table one night drinking whisky and playing cards. They were in a medium sized kitchen somewhere downtown, a couple of old friends from college getting together for some drinking, gaming and conversation. A single lamp cast a dull orange brown glow over the white kitchen, and through the open window a cold breeze rushed through with the sounds of the city while the radiator hissed back a steady, monotone warm steam of air. The table was small, round and wooden, the finish was scarred and the surface was badly scratched. A few glass ashtrays hung around the sides of the table, maybe one in the middle, smoke running upward from lit cigarettes left sitting in the ridges. A half-empty bottle of whisky sat near the center of the table, a little off to the side, in the area of the Bostonian. Cards were spread out face up, with a deck face down sitting somewhere nearby.

The Man from Chicago sat back in his chair looking bored and displeased.

"Well it looks like another hand for you," he said, smoke rolling from up out of his nostrils. "I'm not sure what to make of that." And he took another long sip from his glass.

"Don't make nothin' of it," the New Yorker suggested, smiling slyly.

These men were not old but they were no longer young. They'd been talking of certain things, wherever the spirit of the night carried them, and they'd been through drinking, gaming, smoking, whoring and a whole list of other vices. The only thing left for them to talk about was murder.

"A long time ago," the Man from Chicago said, "I killed a man for cheating at cards."

The nervous looking New Yorker leaned forward; his eyes were light.

"Keep your cool," the Man from Chicago said, lifting his hands into the air. "I'm not insinuating that you've been cheating at cards. I'm just telling a story."

"Well go on with it then," said the Bostonian.

"It was when I was a very young man, and I didn't know any better," the Man from Chicago began. "There was this fellow I knew from the suburbs. We grew up together. The two of us liked to get together and play cards, have a good time. The incident in question happened pretty soon after we all graduated, and I moved back home to Chicago. I met up with some of my old friends and he was one of them. A group of us used to get together on the weekends, just like we are now, do some drinking, talking and gaming. Something'd happened to him, though. Before I went away to school I couldn't have pointed out to you a more stand up guy- now he was just another dirty bastard. We all knew he was cheating the cards, but none of us could prove it, and none of us could catch him. He thought what gave him the advantage was that we were all old friends. Most of the other guys wouldn't even let themselves believe it- they didn't want to lose faith in an old friend like that. It makes you a little older, friendship is sacred, you don't fuck with it."

"Well," and the Man from Chicago paused, letting the smoke roll up from his nostrils again, and took a moment to finish his glass, lean over the table, take the bottle and pour himself another. He looked around at all the silent faces, took a good long sip, and continued:

"Well I'm not the kind to let anything pass me by, I don't care who it is." And his eyes caught the eyes of the New Yorker. "I knew what was going on, and I was determined to prove it. So at the end of one evening, a particularly successful night for my friend, I grabbed him by the collar and turned up his sleeves. Sure enough, a bunch of cards slipped out and fell onto the floor. He didn't know what to say. He stood there gaping like a fish out of water. Everyone started screaming, and my blood got to boiling. The way that coward melted under the pressure made me hate him. When he started begging for mercy I lost my head; I took out my knife, and in a fit of rage I stabbed him in the neck. He died instantly."

The Man from Chicago finished his story and the other three men looked around. No one said

anything; there was a silence that hadn't been present all evening

The Bostonian was the first to break the silence:

"It don't do for us to be getting worked up over our friend's story. He ain't the only one among us that's got a human life under his belt, and I'd be surprised if I'm not the only one besides him. But since we seem to be in the mood for sharing tonight," and his voice fell, "I will tell you about how I killed my own old man."

"There's no need to tell stories that shouldn't be told," the Man from Chicago said.

"Or stories that are lies," the little New Yorker added.

"It's no lie," the Bostonian continued. "And it's time that the truth were told:

"When they found my father he'd been rolled up in a rug, shot twice in the head, and left in a city dumpster. No one could figure out who'd done it. All the law officials figured that it was a dealer on the black market, cuz they'd been trying to bust the old man for a while- never had anything on him. I was only fifteen then." The Bostonian paused and looked around.

"I guess I thought I was pretty clever for getting away with it. The old man- he liked to drink. And when he drank he liked to beat up on me and my mother. He was a savage. No one ever said nothing- no one called the police- everyone in our neighborhood was afraid of him. Everyday was a nightmare. Well I decided at last that I'd have no more of that damn old man. I plotted it out real good: I stole one of the pistols from his drawer- I forced it open, and then I broke open the liquor cabinet, and left a trail, like I was drunk, and been spilling it all the way back to my room. I waited up, stayed up real late. I was lying in bed- in my room, all the lights were off. I just kept looking up at the ceiling and all these terrific shapes cast through the window by the moon. Sure enough that mean old bastard came barging in my room in the middle of the night screaming about my drinking up his liquor. He was so drunk he never knew what hit him. I heard him coming and hid behind the door. I wrapped a rug around his head, jammed the barrel up and fired twice. I could hardly keep the blood from spraying everywhere- I thought the rug would catch it all. I dragged him out the window that night, carried him a good mile

or two, and tossed him in the dumpster. I cleaned up real good after, burned my clothes and everything. They never caught me. To this day don't nobody know who killed him."

The Bostonian poured himself another glass of whisky.

"Well that ain't nothing," the New Yorker decided. "I killed a man too, and there's no reason to sit here like I'm ashamed of it, 'cuz we're all capable of it, and we all might do it again. Man that I killed wasn't no relation to me. He didn't cross me neither. He just plain was. He used to walk the same street as I did on my way home, my first job out of college. That damn guy- I don't know what it was- I just didn't like the look of him. He used to whistle sometimes too- some silly happy little song- I never could stand it. So one day I just got the thought in my head- what if I killed him? Well that was all it took. Him not being there anymore every day when I walked home, and only me knowing why. I had to do it. So I laid plans.

"I knew this guy's route like the back of my hand, and I got to know it even better. There was almost nowhere he walked where he wasn't safe- he was always in a large populated area. That was fine by me. I figured out a way to kill him in the public eye and walk away Scott-free. It all happened right in front of his apartment. See, I knew he had to call up to his wife every night to come throw him the keys. He'd shout, 'Martha!' and she'd shout, 'Henry!' and the keys would drop out the window. Well that was all I needed. I beat Henry by minutes to his apartment and shouted, 'Martha!' imitating him best I could, and standing out of eyeshot. A moment later the key came flying out the window onto the sidewalk. I let myself in and waited in the darkness of the foyer to the stairs. Here comes the real Henry, and I pull the door back slow, showing him that someone must've left it open. It's happened before, so he thinks nothing of it. In he comes, and I tie a wire around his neck. I killed him with my bare hands. " The New Yorker paused and looked around, drinking the contents of his glass all at once.

"So it ain't no use talking about justice or morality. I killed that man 'cuz I wanted to. I killed that man for fun.

"And what about you, eh? What's your story?"

The New Yorker was addressing the Washingtonian who, up to this moment had been looking silently at each of his companions respectively as they told their stories.

“What’s my story?”

“Yeah,” the drunken New Yorker drawled. “Who have you killed?”

“I did kill someone once, but it was not like you all.”

“Just tell the damn story!” said the Bostonian

“Don’t be ashamed of your vices,” offered the Man from Chicago.

“Vice is a virtue,” added the New Yorker.

“Well I will tell you about it then, but it’s against my better judgment, and I’ve never told anyone this before. As you all know I was married once. Dear June was such a lovely girl, I don’t know if any of you ever met her. She was the ideal of Beauty herself, and wherever she went she spread that magic and charm that only Beauty can deliver. We were married very young, just after I left college, while you-,” he pointed to the New Yorker, “were killing innocent strangers,” and you,” he pointed to the Bostonian, “were suffering for your father’s murder and you,” he pointed to the Man from Chicago, “were killing people who slighted you.”

“Well,” said the New Yorker

“Well,” said the Bostonian.

“Well,” said the Man from Chicago, and they all three shrugged.

“Yes we were married, and I never believed what happiness could come to my life. She was perfect in every way- in every virtue, I’d met no one like her- that should be obvious because I only kept company with others like myself- namely, you gentlemen. Day to day I watched her bloom in beauty and virtue, and it changed me. I myself tried to attune myself to these mystical gifts, to these givers of peace and wisdom. Day after day I felt my joy grow with her, and in her, and I looked up to her as up to an Ideal- for she was nothing less.

“But a secret despair was growing in my heart: the more perfection I saw in her, the less I saw in myself. And never- not even once did she chide

me for my shortcomings- so perfect was she- she only helped me, developed me, was patient.

“One spring morning we went for a quiet walk through the park. The traces of winter were just dying, and it was still a little chilly. She was holding onto me, talking such sweet things they don’t seem like a part of this world we’re trapped in. I listened to her with tenderness, but the despair was eating through me- I hated her, and loved her and hated her again. We were standing at the edge of a lake, shivering, she whispered she loved me, and I swung around, away from her. My movement was abrupt and she fell into the water. It was nothing, only a trifle- she even laughed, like a good lover should. But I didn’t laugh- I watched her- and said nothing.

“She couldn’t swim. I dragged her out just before she drowned and took her home. She contracted pneumonia. She didn’t have the strength to move, to walk, to do anything. I refused to get her help- to take her to the doctors. I watched her, day after day as she lay dying in my bed. Most of the time I wasn’t around, and when I was, I didn’t speak. I just watched her with love and with hatred as she tried to call out to me.

“She died, shivering beneath the cold weight of my impassive eyes. I called the coroner- a service was arranged. I duly paid my respects- and now here I am with you fellows, drinking whisky and playing cards. So as you see, while I have killed a person, it was not the kind of murder that you monsters are capable of.”

But there was a hush in that room which did not lift again all night.

#

But Betty Aintgotsense ain’t around no more,
She got killed one mornin’ round three or four-
Fred come found her cheatin’ down at Chestnut
Lake,
And when he shot her from the trees he felt his
poor heart break.

A Song Heard Again in a Bar

She could be a mirror, a girl who does not look like her at all. She is pale and erect, in great distances her eyes vanish. Her face is pale and her lips in the light are pale orange. Her hair is black and falls loose to her shoulders.

(Francis is fully seated in the song.)

She's nervous, but she's determined because she doesn't want to lose the song, who knows if it will ever return- and it delights her. Why?

So she stands, and the whole world dips, as light as her clarity.

Will she recognize herself in me?

Terrified: "Do you- will you- do you- dance?" And she smiles, shy and sly.

"You're a girl."

"Girls always dance together. I see it all the time."

"Yes but they know each other."

"My name is Francis."

"You're very insistent Francis. But I really don't know the steps."

"Neither do I."

"Then how will we dance?"

France smiles, and there's a pause.

"I'm not into other girls."

France smiles. "You don't have any eyes."

"Alright, I'll give it a try if it will get rid of you."

"And are you always so mean?"

They walk out onto the floor, Francis feels brave, but she shivers against the girl's fingers.

"Here- you're doing it wrong. Take my waist-like that."

"I thought-" France starts, her lips in a pout.

"Well don't," and for the first time she smiles.

"Your eyes are green," Francis says.

The moon plays a pale tremolo of white light.

"You're falling asleep Francis."

Francis opens her eyes and squints. "No, I was just having a very good time."

"You follow well."

"You dance well for someone who doesn't know the steps."

The girl smiles.

"What's your name?"

"Rebecca."

"That's very pretty."

"It's not unusual."

Francis smiles. "It's classic."

Rebecca turns her head.

"And you're very pretty too, Rebecca."

The entire night passes over Franny, a dark erotic wave, and without quite realizing what she's doing, or that she's doing anything at all, copper-bony Franny throws her hands on pale Rebecca's shoulders, pulls her up close, and kisses her on the lips.

Rebecca pushes back. "How dare you!" she whispers loud, her eyes green and wide and focused.

"You don't like girls, but you will like me," Francis mumbles, surprised herself, trying to

make sense of what she's just done, but not herself enough yet to realize what she's doing or saying.

"You will like me, only you don't believe it." And softly but desperate she takes the still dazed Rebecca's hand, pulls a pen from her pocket and scribbles her number on the white palm.

"I'm sorry Rebecca. Please do call me. We could be great friends."

Explanation

The entire day I felt uneasy. Plus I kept thinking of the previous night, of the past and of Ralph and when he would forget me again. After we met the Inspector and saw the body, Ralph decided we should go discuss the case over a drink somewhere. The idea didn't appeal to me, it seemed to make light of the situation, but I didn't say anything. I started feeling tired on the way there, we walked, it was very close. The city was unsteady, my stomach was upset and my head was swimming. Light gray clouds pulled over the sun, the sky was very blue, but the swift clouds, dark and light gave the whole city an ominous air, and the air suggested rain.

We stopped at a place that the Inspector, I think his name was Bridge, said that he liked. The Inspector was a tall lanky man; most of his features were small, but his nose was large; large and long and he looked over it as if he thought he were a hawk, staring sharp down its beak. It gave him the most peculiar expression, and whenever he spoke, I couldn't pay any attention to what he was saying, I just looked at his funny little face with the large nose.

The place we stopped at was just a bar/grill, but it had a real vintage look to it, like we stepped into some old bar from the forties or the fifties. There was some jazz music playing in the background, and all the waiters and waitresses were wearing dark blue button up shirts with red and black polka-dot ties.

Bridge lit his pipe and immediately bellied up to the bar. He ordered something strong, and I don't remember what it was, but it pissed me off. Ralph smiled. He ordered a strong drink too, but not as strong because he knows he can't handle strong liquor. I think he was trying to impress the Inspector.

But I didn't feel together, and a sense of loneliness really began to get hold me when we sat down. I ordered a milk- to spite everyone, and no one, not even Ralph noticed or cared.

"So tell me about this case."

I talked; I talked a lot, but the loneliness was spreading: it started out as just a faint shiver, a chill somewhere in my chest, and the more I talked, and the more farcical everything seemed, the more the chill spread throughout my chest and into my limbs, and before long it'd taken complete hold of me. My voice shook a little bit, and I thought of the happy image, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud,' and I was shivering, and almost felt like crying. A tear did escape, and Bridge was moved because he thought it was from talking about my friend's death, when all it was really

And the bar seemed really close, but wide, and I started to think about Ralph again, and the night before, and when he would forget me again.

"Ralph I don't feel so good about this anymore."

We must've been there for hours; it felt like days or even weeks. Bridge wanted to know everything. Right down to the relationship between Ralph and me. I told him we were lovers, and Ralph blushed, looked flustered and gazed down at the floor. I only said so because I wanted to see his expression. Bridge wanted to know how I knew the deceased, my relationship with the deceased, etc. It seemed to drag, and by after the first hour or so my distance was so great, it seemed I was looking at everyone and everything through a telescope. And in the middle of this loneliness, something very wild and strange suddenly broke out in my heart, like a scream somewhere heard in the middle of the night, and I could feel it growing, full of some furious frenzy, moving outwards, and I was afraid because I knew that when it reached the surface something would happen to me, that I wouldn't be in control of the things I did and said.

"Ralph I don't feel so good about this anymore."

The waiters and waitresses were passing back and forth.

"I'm really exhausted Inspector, I can't go on with this."

Ralph and I had known each other for a long time, and we had quite a history together. We met randomly, casually, on a street corner, and somehow we started talking. He invited me out for a drink, and I thought he looked nice so I said okay. We walked that day for a whole hour, just to find what he thought was the perfect place to stop in for a drink, and I was tired and fed up with him. But then we started talking, and he was so witty and amusing and charming that I knew I'd found someone that could really be important to me.

So for a long time we were lovers, and then things stopped working out, and then for a long time we were only friends, and then things stopped working out, so we'd become lovers again. Ralph loved me very much, I'm sure of that, but he couldn't always believe in me. Then there'd be this silence in me so tremendous I could walk around in it for days. Everything grew real still, and it didn't matter, nothing I did: I could write him letters- they 'd just confuse him. I could telephone, and that would frighten him. I could come to see him, but that frightened me, and then I thought of it- memory and sensation, and suddenly I knew what to do. I needed Ralph more than ever, and it was more than just the death of a friend, it was everything- the moments I waited for when, like at the end of films, the images vanish and for a moment there isn't anything. For a long time I'd been able to confront them, I got used to them, sometimes I could delight in them, so delicious and lonely, spreading all around on all sides, like black walls that aren't solid. And then one morning I woke up in the middle of one of these black stars and I couldn't, like a cloud, wander lonely and happy, looking down over everything with a child's tenderness. It was this, this cry from my heart that felt it would finally free itself at that moment in the bar; this cry that was pounding against me, and for a long time, and through what seemed like a thousand reborn disbeliefs had waited, pounding, maniacal, as if it were some horrible child trapped indefinitely inside its mother's womb. And in my state of panic, everything came to me at once, memory and sensation.

I read over one of his letters, and it was there: logic of images.

"Ralph I don't feel so good about this anymore."

I started to hate Ralph because I needed him, I relied on him to break me from these shells; after all he created them. I started to hate Ralph because when he did believe in me, his love for me, the daylights he created were so wide and wonderful that everything else passed by me as things pass by sedate alcoholics. It didn't matter to me that my friend was dead, no more than a voice in any case, like the blood of ancient Biblical texts that cry from the ground, a monotonous pounding in my head which, in my solitude made everything unbearable, but with Ralph seemed barely even present. It didn't matter to me if Bridge were the best or the worst Inspector in the business, nothing mattered except the fact that Ralph, whom I sat staring at with hatred, loved me and believed in me.

I stood up and grabbed Ralph's hand. He jerked back and looked at me surprised.

"Ralph, we're leaving."

"Go ahead, I'll catch up with you."

I started to shake, and I could feel the tears rushing up to my eyes, and I knew I didn't want to cry or make any more of a scene, but everything was so urgent.

"Ralph, we're leaving."

"Cass, what's wrong with you?"

And then the cry, building up in me, broke completely free, flinging itself violently, I don't know where, it seems everywhere at once, and I was crying and screaming and pulling at him. "Ralph we're leaving."

"Alright, let's go. Bridge- I'll call you later."

"Certainly."

I dragged him out into the street, the broken light of gray clouds falling around us like long streams of bright rain, concealing nothing, and crying uncontrollably.

"Cass, what's wrong with you? Is it your friend?"

I buried my head in his shoulder, and he pulled me up close. "Ralph, you can't leave me alone. I love you."

#

It rained all morning, and underneath the gray sky, Fred found himself feeling about as weary as he could get. His room was dark and cluttered; beside him sat an almost empty bottle of whisky, an overturned ashtray, and a glass of melted ice. He got up and his head began to pound, and even the bright dull of the gray sky was too much for him. He squinted, turned around, and collapsed back onto the bed.

He thought he was going back to sleep again, but every time he tried to lie still, his head would start to pounding against his head, so violently that his whole body seemed to wanna shake in rhythm to it. So Old Fred dragged himself up out of bed, stumbled out of the bedroom, into the bathroom, turned on the sink and splashed his face with cold water. Then he took a good long look in the mirror.

Old Fred was getting kinda thirsty, his whole body felt all dried out, like he was dying of the bubonic plague or something, so he wandered back into the bedroom, picked up the glass of melted ice, and carried it back with him to the bathroom where he'd left the cold water running. He poured out the old contents, rinsed the glass, and let in the new. As quick as a drummer breaks beats, Old Fred had drained himself an entire glass

of water, and was filling his glass up again for seconds. The phone rang.

Fred let it go. He didn't know what time it was, especially with the sky being all gray and rainy, but he figured it was too early for him to be receiving phone calls, no matter what, and with each new buzz, his face frowned fresh.

Down went the second glass, and Old Fred was beginning to feel better. He made his slow way back to his bedroom, sat on the bed and lit up a cigarette.

Now that he no longer had anything he was actively engaged in doing, Fred started to regret his decision: 'I wonder who that coulda been,' he thought to himself, and kept looking back at the phone curious, as if it might jump up and tell him if he looked at it funny enough.

Nothing happened, so Fred got up and waved it off. 'Ah, makes no difference anyway,' and he stumbled his way on over to the stereo, put on a tape, hit play and sat back down on the bed.

'Now that's alright!' Fred thought, listening to the muted jazz coming from his stereo. It was his own band that he was listening to; Old Fred was the flute player. 'That's not bad at all...' and he thought of all his bandmates the night before, and he thought of himself, all of them up on the stage playing- playing and swaying while the rest of the world did just whatever the hell it liked.

And given the chance, that's just what it did.

'I wonder where that girl ran off to anyway...' Old Fred muttered to himself.

But the music was changing again, and Jimmy was going off into a beautiful piano solo, running up and down the keys like little drops of water splashing in a pond in the rain, and that's just what Old Fred was thinking about, because directly outside his window there was a little pond, and he could see all the raindrops, and he heard the lucid piano, and the two of them seemed to have some kind of secret understanding with each other.

'Well that's nothing the musician doesn't know about already. After all, who do you think creates that secret understanding?'

And then Old Fred was really pleased, because the flute chimed in for its solo, and it seemed to sing in a key so pure and so pretty that to compare it to the songs of the birds would be to do it a harsh injustice. It was more like, or to Fred's mind at least, the singing of angels under the hypnotic spell of a perfumed night, or even the ghastly and beautiful lure of the sirens, calling away the souls of whatever poor listener chanced by.

'I wonder where that girl ran off to anyway...' Old Fred muttered to himself.

And suddenly he was tired of listening to the band. He turned down the stereo and stood up. He looked to the left, looked to the right, and then began to pace, back and forth. He picked up his empty glass of water, broke his pace routine, and strolled towards the bathroom. He took a long look in the mirror as he filled up his glass.

Old Fred had just exhausted his possibilities, and he didn't have anything left to do until he finished his new glass of water, at which point he would have to go get another, but until then- and he began to pace anew, and his head was still pounding, even though he felt a little bit better. After a while, having done some reflection, and finding that he couldn't figure out who'd called him through pondering alone, he stopped next to his telephone, gave it one last curious look (just in case) and then picked it up and put the receiver to his ear. He heard the dial tone, which was what he expected, but maybe he was hoping the phone might let him in onto some kind of secret that he was overlooking. He put the receiver back slow, always looking at it kinda out of the corner of his eye, because he didn't trust it.

So she had to have left during the set, he decided. Because she was there backstage, right before he went on, and she'd been there the whole night up until then. She'd been with him. Hell, she came with him! So she must've run off during the set, because after the set he couldn't find her. I know I'd been drinking and all, Fred thinks, but- and then people seemed like they didn't know anything all of a sudden, and- I know she's up to something, and I got all these friends of mine helping her cover her tracks!

Old Fred was beginning to get himself worked up, and his pacing quickened. His anxiety, the gray sky, the monotonous tune of the rain, the untidy and small cluttered room and the sound of the tuned out jazz captured in the background were all building up on him, and he was getting agitated and morose.

She can't have a problem with my drinking! Old Fred decided. Not the way that girl drinks herself, and I don't know what it could be. The flute player, that's what. The flute player never gets any respect, although if you ask me, it's one of the prettiest, hell, noblest instruments that a jazzman can play. But you know how it is with them young girls these days, they have to have the sax player, or maybe the pianist- man, even the drummer gets the better deal than the flute player!

So went Old Fred, back and forth, just like his pacing, until he decided to give up thinking on the whole matter, and breaking his pacing route,

turned around towards the bathroom where he could get himself another glass of water.

Old Fred emerged a moment later, sipping his water and frowning. He stopped just at the almost empty bottle of whisky that was lying on the floor. Looking at it just as curiously as he'd looked at the phone a few moments earlier, he stopped, picked it up, and began inspecting the bottle.

That's how a man ought to begin his morning, thought Old Fred, and he pulled out the cork and gave it a long sniff, his nose jutting just into the open tip of the bottle. Good Lord, now that's good whisky. He corked it back up. Old Fred will make himself sick drinking this poison so early after last night's excursion.

And again the night started to reassert itself, and feeling a little better now, Old Fred made his way back over to the stereo, leaned forward and turned it back up. Another song was playing, but it was still his band, and everyone started to take shape in his mind again. Little Tommy was sitting behind the drums, keeping that cool pace that he was famous for; most young drummers just want to beat away at the instrument. Little Tommy sure knows how to treat that instrument right though; like it's a woman: he has the tenderness.

Though it does a man no good, thought Old Fred, to treat a woman with that tenderness. A lot of thanks you'll get back in return. Disappearing acts in the middle of the night while you're breaking a sweat trying to earn your bread, butter and whisky. Hell! I don't even remember rightly who was there that she might've run off with, coulda been anyone really. At least I know it wasn't no one from the band, cuz they were all there. Sure was one hell of a jamboree! That's probably the best one we've had down here in the past twenty years. Hell, but at least it couldn't have been one of the bandmembers. But that's how jazz fellas are- they're tight and can trust each other- they stick together and look out for one another.

But sly Frankie's sly trombone started to creep out of the sides, playing a low, sultry, lilting rhythm and it struck old Fred as kind of tricky. It was certainly very pretty. It seemed to creep around the edges of the piece, and slide unnoticed beneath, like it was up to something, and Old Fred got to thinking about sly Frankie's thin little mustache, and his small sharp eyes, and he thought, but what if it was a band member?

What if she slipped off during the show to go see a bandmember later on- meet up with him somewhere, and since the fella woulda been playing with Old Fred, Old Fred would be none the wiser. In which case it could be anyone. It

could be sly Frankie, with his thin mustache and his silky way of talking.

“That scoundrel,” Old Fred muttered, “but it can’t be true.” And he realized he was getting upset again, so he stood up, finished his water, and continued to pace, back and forth, just like his thoughts.

He stopped thinking up conspiracies, and started remembering the good times hanging out the night before, after the show, playing cards with sly Frankie, Jimmy and Little Tommy. Old Bo was there too, not to mention Slide guitar Clyde. They’d been talking and joking, talking about women and talking about drinking and talking about all sorts of different things, and that’d been all right. Old Fred hadn’t let his mind wander once all evening, wit poured from his lips like wine from a man who’s had himself a little too much of it. He’d made himself a good amount of money on the cards, and he’d just been laid back, whistling, drinking and not doing too much thinking.

That’s how a man ought to carry himself, Old Fred started thinking again, and broke his pace for the bathroom to have another glass of water. He emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, the glass filled up in his hand while he looked down at it with a kind of distasteful frown.

“I’ve had too much of this stuff,” he grumbled. “The Good Lord knows its no good for me.” And having arrived at this conclusion he set it down on the floor, and in exchange picked up his bottle of whisky. Again he uncorked the bottle and took a sniff. “It’s like jumping into a pit,” he said aloud, “but I’m about ready to make that jump.” And with that he took a good long swig off the old bottle. Old Fred got dizzy right away. His head felt light and he had to sit down. He reached for his glass of water, and he thought to himself, oh I’ve done it now. He finished the water off in seconds flat, but feeling just a little too funny to stand back up, he collapsed backwards onto his bed. Now there was no getting away from it:

So if she run off with someone, isn’t there any way to figure out who? Hell, I don’t know what she did one way or the other. For all I know she was out saving a bunch of goddamn children from a burning church. Hell, when I find out whoever it is!

And Fred began to concoct in his head a wild idea of how he might trail her while she thought he was still playing onstage. Well I got to know that Slide guitar Clyde isn’t the guilty party first, but he kinda has my build and look. If he could dress up like me, and you know, he can’t play flute, but if he just pretends he’s real drunk no one

will suspect it’s not me up there, and then I could slip out real quiet like, and follow her out- at a safe distance of course, and then- if I bring my pistol, just in case I get attacked- or she does, or who knows what might happen in the middle of the night, well then I can be at the bottom of the mystery once and for all.

Old Fred felt much better about everything having come up with this plan, so much so that he even regained the strength to sit on back up, look around weary, move toward the stereo and turn it up. Some other band had come on, and the tape had been left running.

These guys ain’t so bad, Old Fred thought. I mean, they don’t play like we do, but they’s young guys, what do you expect? I hardly even remember them playing. Yeah, I remember now, they were alright. Old Jim and I were drinking shots backstage, Little Tommy kept trying to find someone who would go outside with him and smoke some reefer. Hell, I woulda even gone, but I had my old lady to find and attend to- a lot of reason that turned out to be!

So Little Tommy had gone out all by himself to smoke his reefer, while the rest of the boys sat backstage and drank down shots. Before long, the cards were broken out, and the gambling man that he was, once the deck hit the table, Little Tommy came stumbling right back inside, a silly old grin across his face, and a bottle of beer in his hand. He flipped a chair around and looked at everyone, his eyes shot blood red, his face wide and relaxed in the orange light with his slack grin. “So what’s the game?”

“You’re asking to lose money tonight, High Time Tommy!” Old Fred had laughed.

“You’ll be the only one losing tonight,” Little Tommy grinned back.

Cards were dealt, plays were played, bets were made... Old Fred lay back on the bed.

It’s a rough life I make my poor old body live. I got to give it up. Maybe retire someplace quiet. Set down with my flute by the water or something, and only drink when I’m thirsty. It’s a rough life, I tell you. It’d be better just me and my old lady. Where the hell did she run off to last night anyway!

And the thought got Old Fred so agitated all of a sudden, that he stood right on up, and started to pace like it was the last thing he had left to do on earth. Back and forth, back and forth, not very much like his thoughts, because in his agitation his thoughts were all over the place, and he could only keep a slow linear pace, like those blues songs, he was thinking, that describe the most complicated and convoluted sorrows and

anxieties in a simple, melodic rhythm that lull deceptively back and forth, the voice of the singer crooning on a smoothness that cracks with confusion.

It does me no good, anyhow, to think about this girl. She does whatever she does, and it doesn't bother me. For my part, I just wish I had some way of killing the time. I wish I knew who it was just called me a minute ago. And he shot another curious glance at his telephone.

The telephone gave a little shudder, and almost as a response, rang.

Old Fred looked at it curious, wincing and thought, there's no reason to bother answering it anyhow. But he was already making his way towards the phone. His face broke into a fresh frown each time it rang. On the fourth ring he picked up the receiver, put it to his ear real slow and said, 'hello? This is Fred speaking.'

He paused for a moment while the speaker spoke.

"Betty!" he yelled. "Where the hell did you run off to last night? How did you get home? You know you were supposed to come with me!"

Again he paused while Betty answered, his eyes rolling all over the room and his jaw pulled back in a proud snarl. Slowly, the snarl dissolved, his eyes stopped going wild, and sitting down on the bed, reaching way over to pick up his bottle of whisky, he said a little softer, "wash and dress."

Again he was silent and this time looking a little sobered, sad and maybe broken, he took a good swig out of his whisky bottle, finishing, for all practical purposes, its contents.

"Yeah baby, I'll be there. Of course I'll be there. Just give me an hour okay?" And sadly set down his receiver.

A little while later, looking clean, dressed and whipped into submission, like a dog with revolution in its heart, he opened up the door to his apartment, and went to go pick up Betty. Say what you will of him, he didn't forget to grab his pistol.

June 29, 1999

The only person I know anymore's Francis. I spent the day with her, and she's a really charming girl. I think she's in love with me. I met her in the strangest way, and I never meant to call her. The days passed and I started to think about her a little bit, her strange innocence, and the childlike way she carried herself. I thought about her, and I think I admired her a little bit, but I don't know why. Almost a week passed, and soon the thought of her got me nervous, the way I used to get nervous

in school when I was around a boy I was in love with. That got me kind of curious and I decided I should call her. I was super nervous. I sat for an hour like a bashful girl, just thinking about what I'd say, how she might respond, how I could sound disinterested.

When I called I think my voice was shaking. I could feel my hands trembling the phone against my cheek. Francis sounded surprised, but she was happy and easygoing. She wanted to see me as soon as possible. The next day we met in a park and walked. It was very sweet, but I felt strange the whole time, strange about her and strange about the way I behaved around her. I was so nervous! She tried to kiss me at the end of the day, but I wouldn't let her. She started to pout, and she looked so wonderful, with her eyes downcast and her lips in that cute little frown that I kissed her real quick on the lips, giggled and said goodnight.

I've seen Francis lots of times since then, and I'm more and more liberal with her each time. Her advances can get pretty aggressive: she's so charming, so helpless and so determined! Sometimes she's irresistible. Besides what reason is there to resist? I've been so in need of change for so long I'm willing to try almost anything and I really don't care what happens.

Anyway Francis stopped by my apartment late this morning. She was wearing a khaki skirt and a loose white blouse. She looked great standing there on my doorstep, smiling, her soft brown skin caught between the sun and the shadow of the door while her dark wide eyes refused to blink. I invited her in. She looked distracted. She wanted to go see a show in the park, and she wanted me to come with her. I didn't want to go, I tried to make up excuses, but she can be so aggressive when she wants her way, she really is, in many aspects a child. So at last she convinced me, made me change my clothes, and we were off. Francis tried to pet and kiss me as we walked, and at first I reproached her, but the sun, and the chilly breeze, and the scents of all the flowers, and this sudden wide bright feeling made me feel weak underneath all the photographs, and suddenly I was embracing her embraces, and by the time we got to the show we were being really indiscreet, right there in the middle of the park. Francis wanted to undress me. Naturally I wouldn't let her, and I haven't ever let her, not even in private. But her hands were moving all over my blouse, inside my blouse, unstrapping my bra, and then I was doing the same to her, kissing her pretty

serious the whole time. In the end I just felt low and embarrassed. I made her leave the show early, and I was so upset I was nearly in tears. Poor Francis tried to be brave and strong, and get me to talk about what was wrong, when she was suffering so much because she loves me. She couldn't keep it up, and by the time we got back to my apartment we were both in tears. It was such an absurd scene it makes me smile. The day wasn't close to finished, there were still a few good hours left of sunlight, and as we sat in the apartment, two ridiculous girls in tears, Francis started to laugh through her sobs. Her laughter was contagious, because soon I was doing the same thing, and before long we were both laughing heartily, like a couple of guys sitting around watching television.

Anyway we decided to make the best of the daylight, and go for another walk. This time Francis was modest, and she didn't even reach for my hand as we walked. She was strolling with a subtle spring, and she was talking avidly, her thoughts wandered from one subject to the next. She talked a little bit about her family, and I tried to pay attention to her, but she was so charming to look at, and to listen to, just the rhythm and the rapture in her voice that I missed almost everything she said, hearing her voice only as a kind of music that enhanced her aesthetic. Francis made us walk through the park again, because she thought it was daring, and she wanted to walk back through what had been for her at least, a very happy memory. We weren't in the park long, and I wouldn't have minded if we were. The falling day was gorgeous: the sky was gold and orange, and violet jets of clouds were hanging on the horizon. I thought of the tranquility of being a cloud, free, joyously alone, looking with grace on the whole world.

Francis wanted to go to the lake. We sat down next to it and she curled up against me. It was pretty cold. She was talking low, I couldn't hear her. It was starting to get kind of uncomfortable, so I told her we should go. She did what she always does when she doesn't get her way: she pouted. I was so tired and uncomfortable that her pouting just made me angry. I felt bad doing it, but I stood up and told her that I had to go. She looked worried and stood up too.

That just made me lose my patience. I hate it when people act pathetic, sometimes I wonder if I don't just pity her, that's all. When I turned around to leave she grabbed my arm. I shoved her, and she

fell back into the lake. I felt so bad I rushed to help her out, and when I pulled her out it looked like she was crying. I put my hand under her chin and told her to raise her head and that I was sorry. When her head was raised I saw her eyes, and they really flashed like sly dark rubies, it was the funniest thing I've ever seen. She was laughing. Her eyes peered gloriously through her wet black hair, and her skirt and blouse clung to her body with the grace of statues. I couldn't do anything but stare at her and smile, and I felt really tender toward her all of a sudden, and I wanted to protect her. It's all so silly. I even kissed her. She looked ecstatic, but she wasn't speaking at all. I asked her if she'd like to spend the evening with me, and she said yes.

She stood in place and looked at me once we got back here. I went up and kissed her. Her hands moved across my shoulders. I let my fingers slide into her skirt, and heard her giggle. I pressed her backwards, up against the wall, and all I could feel was her body sinking. And then she slipped from under my kiss and sat on my bed. I've never been with a woman, I was pretty nervous. I walked over and sat down next to her. I noticed that she was trembling. I took her hand and looked at her. When she turned her head I saw her looking at me- in a way that broke my heart and I don't think I'll ever forget- like she didn't know who I was.

And then before I knew what was going on she was standing up, saying goodnight, and thank you. I think I asked her why she was going, but I don't know. Nothing feels worse. I feel like a whore. She was gone before I could make any sense of what happened, and there I was, sitting on my bed, my legs spread, and wanting to fuck Francis. I was thinking of Francis the whole time, trying not to think of her, and then afterwards, I felt even shittier.

I think the whole thing's silly now, but I showered and cried for almost an hour.

#

Past tall arches of concrete walls, shuddering into the light, steel and wood, the subway pulled up onto the bridge and Francis shielded her eyes. The pale afternoon sun sank into the windows in large white rectangular patterns, and beyond the windows, hanging suspended beneath the bridge, beneath the sky, the river, bright and blue stretched wide with rhythm. The rumbling of the train was making Francis sleepy and sentimental.

Small white sails were gliding across the surface of the water, and the sun, and the river, and the rhythm of the train, of the day, of her morning and her memories, a drink, thinking about Rebecca gathered around her, and she started to daydream again. She was still remembering the bar, she was still remembering her memories of the song, and of the first night she met Rebecca.

And the subway seemed to her thoughts, her life, a passage, crossing from one dark tunnel into another, gliding carelessly into azured heights above deep and magnificent rivers. She felt sad, the way a subway can inspire such a feeling, in its grand silent symmetry; the row of empty black seats facing her beneath symmetrical wide windows gazing lazily upon whatever whorish setting offered itself, fading as quickly as it arose. She felt sad, and there was the same melancholy symmetry in everything: in the stereo of sound of the rumbling of the train, in the depressed and vacant faces of the other people, looking out on... what? In the absent scents, all things, heavy, steady, monotonous and droning, rolled her back into herself, into her memories, her thoughts, symbols, the train, tunnels to tunnels, over bridges, and beneath everything this lingering distress.

There had been a morning, Rebecca once admitted to Francis, the train shuttling past where tall buildings stood stark sterile in the sun, that she'd fallen in love with her, or not a morning, or not in love, a day, enamored. An image, like the white sail of a boat caught trapped in the sun. Francis thought about this day, with the sun crawling past in lazy large squares, it had been a very sunny day. Francis had come by in the morning, she was excited to see Rebecca, and she could feel Rebecca's coldness warming: slowly, but certainly warming: it wasn't like that first night at all, all the lighting and all the colors were very much different, despite the difference of day and night, of sun and clouds. The light was there, crawling over her like some field of energy as she stood at Rebecca's door and knocked, everything was a part of her and she was smiling. Rebecca smiled too, and that's what Francis expected.

Francis' lips traced the smile, the corner of the sun alighting on her bottom lip, and making it warm, where she gently bit. She'd been so bold and careless, the way we appear to ourselves in our memories, regret for the past. She'd marched right up to Rebecca's door, it was still early in the morning and everything, and demanded that they

spend the day together in the park. Rebecca had just come out of the shower. She was dressed, but her hair was still wet. It hung down her face and shoulders in long satin black strands; Francis was enthralled, but she didn't like Rebecca's outfit. The way Rebecca looked, the indescribable majesty of her prettiness could have been much more nicely complemented.

"You could change!" Francis said softly, but loud enough so one of the other passengers overheard and gave a quick disinterested look in her direction.

So she made her change, and Francis started to smile even more, looking down, blushing at her own memories of herself, ecstatic that she appeared suchwise to herself in her own thoughts, and then the sadness, regret for the past.

Rebecca changed, but she wouldn't let Francis watch who'd paced about with so much nervous excitement she could hardly remember anymore that it had really been her. And she picked out what Rebecca would wear, and she was so impatient. The two of them left, and the whole world seemed to Francis a stage, but not in the way that Jacques had talked about it, because it wasn't about the passing of time and stages in one's life at all, but rather quite the opposite; the suspension of time in a moment that was in itself a play, or better yet a poem, the two being almost identical; the suspension of a moment in image and imagination, a filter, if it were fair to say such a thing, placed over life to create within it, through it, an art, which perhaps was not necessary, it being impossible to look at life through anything but different shades of filters, and this one being the most magical and elusive because it obliterated time, and you see, she was there again now, here, where above the city, above the river, everything stood still in synch with everything then, memory, sensation, image, and the ideas started to chase each other so fast, and it seemed at once so beautiful and ideal that she felt a pleasurable strain of sadness rush cold through her chest, and her eyes warmed with insignificant tears.

Rebecca had been divine. They'd walked, hand in hand through the street, walking towards the park like two young children in love, and Francis had been so enchanted she was very bold, like if she'd been drinking. And the enchantment was spreading to Rebecca too, because she was beginning to accept France's advances, and she

seemed to be enjoying herself. They arrived at the park, and there was music playing somewhere, and absolutely nothing had the aspect of the real- if it were fair to say such things, and Francis smiled at the passing sun. They'd been kissing hard, Rebecca was allowing her to do things they'd never done before, and there were astonished passerbys watching, trying to appear disinterested. She wanted to undress Rebecca- of course it was insanity! Rebecca had enough presence of mind to deny her this, but they were getting pretty carried away, and everything seemed to rush by in breathless waves as she felt Rebecca's fingers moving over her breasts and unlacing her bra.

It was too much too soon, Francis thought, gazing out blank onto the blank river. Like when you get drunk for the first time, and for a while it seems really wonderful, and then you push that dangerous boundary. We must have our transports, but we mustn't overindulge in them too soon: but she felt a thick formation of saliva settling in the back of her throat, like she didn't quite believe herself.

Rebecca was the first to start crying, France thought fiercely, and it wasn't easy to deal with her, so hysterical and all. Rebecca had wanted to be alone, she was going to go back to her apartment to sit around by herself in the dark, like she used to do a lot before they'd met, and probably still did too much. France had often encountered her this way, the apartment too dark, and pacing, she would talk frantically, hoping to awaken something in her frigid lover. The image was frightening to Francis, particularly that day, where the sun and their lovemaking and this mysterious spell had all been working together into an enchantment that made everything so wonderfully unreal. And so she started to cry too. By the time Francis had followed Rebecca home, the two of them were completely helpless and in tears, and then a ray of sunlight reached back into the apartment and tapped Francis on the shoulder. She'd turned around, a little startled, and then she thought she could see her reflection lingering in the subtle colors of the ray, and then the whole apartment seemed to rush past in this strange light, and suddenly she was laughing hysterically because the image hadn't dissolved at all, the enchantment was working at full force, and a lightness sped over her. Rebecca saw her laughing, and must have felt something of the same thing because she started laughing too, and then, like two children that have been fighting

bitterly for an hour who forget their differences forever because there's still more time left to frolic in the daylight, the two of them raced from the house together with a mutually silent joy and understanding.

Francis didn't need to flirt with her anymore, because it seemed like they were somehow already in the utmost ecstasies of sex. She demanded that they return to the park, to challenge the sensation, but there was nothing to challenge. The spell had been quite thoroughly cast, and nothing, not memory, time, the setting of the sun, which in itself was so pretty, smeared pale pink against the sky, could upset the delicate and chaste lovemaking of these two girls. They walked around in this dream for a while, and then they sat next to a lake, happy and tired. Francis curled up into Rebecca, she knew it was the wrong thing to do, they shouldn't have even touched, but she couldn't help it.

Francis remembered being frantic, and that was a mistake too, but she was laughing the entire time, Rebecca thought she was near tears. Then Rebecca pushed her into the lake, everything had built up so wonderfully, Francis acting at being frantic, and only half acting, half laughing, the wonder of the day, and the wonder of the strange spell it had cast; the fight in the middle of the day and the fight at that moment, where again all these ideas of the stage of the moment came rushing back, not this time in thought but in pure sensation, like sitting down and crying for no reason at all, that when she felt herself off balance, ecstatic and free, falling, she sighed a scream, and felt herself plunged into a dynamic drenching. Rebecca had gotten worried and she'd dragged Francis from the lake, mumbling apologies quickly and incoherently. Francis couldn't stop laughing, she tried to keep her face down, but Rebecca wouldn't have it. The game was up!

Her face, thought Francis, when she saw that I was laughing and not crying was so spectacular, I wish I could've had a camera. Even she'd appreciate it, and she said that she gave up photography and couldn't stand it anymore. Her face- it was caught between wonder and love. Rebecca! She wanted to take me home right away, and how could I say no? She wanted to possess me right there, that day, in the middle of that immense spell, and nothing could have been more perfect.

Francis flushed, and the city was quickly speeding by, the subway descending, the squares of light

shrinking with the angle of the train where the upturned face of the river looked up, reflecting back a pale, fading glow. The smile on Francis' lips was wavering; in fact it was disappearing altogether.

Her face, thought Francis: she wanted to possess me right there, that day, in the middle of that immense spell, and nothing could have been more perfect. Nothing was more perfect, her lips against mine, her body pressing up against mine in the apartment, her fingers thrilling, and she was so sinful, she's never been with a woman before. There was nothing like it at all, and I don't understand myself. I was so entranced, every part of me wanted to be with Rebecca, every part of me wanted nothing more, there was no world, there was nothing else, it was love, dark and powerful. But more and more often I find it hard to commit myself to sex like it's hard to commit myself to death, against constant seduction until I'm desperate for both, I was afraid.

And through tall arches of concrete walls, shuddering into the dark, steel and wood, the subway plunged down into the tunnel and Francis closed her eyes.

Death and The Maiden

Except here the orders are not angelic. Not in the way we'd generally think of them at least, but still, preserved, silent and chaste, this bizarre couple seems to embody the same idea. Because Beauty is the beginning of terror we're still just able to bear, and supposing, in its still embrace, it does to some extent destroy us- I am approaching the problem from a different angle. It's because of the youth that created you that you intrigue me. How could I go about this restoration, how could I reconstruct, from your cringing shadows, that light which is the center of my study? You're damaged when you're perfect, cowering, dark and close, the jagged edges vanishing into the same mundanity of the absent setting. There are the dark arms, always long and too emaciated, the fingers, like the fingers of skeletons, frigid and terrified, an extension of the hollow of the eyes, the nose becoming skeletal in the lifeless fingers that fall helpless on a shapeless patch of muted brown and red. Her lips are bright, bright and red, and her eyes, her nose, the angle of her face turns away from you, disinterested, lovingly, but with disgust as muted as the atmosphere.

It wouldn't be impossible to fall in love with her embroidery. The colors are delicate and soft, they're intricate and puzzling and absorbing. Maybe they've frightened you. She doesn't shrink to touch you, to hold the black folds of your cloak, where trembling beneath, your emaciated flesh stinks with the pride of a God. It's her purity then, or her sinful purity, that gives you this expression, at once hollow and struggling to catch a glimpse of that light which you're trying so hard to deprive her of- and which she's already too willing to give.

There could have been other nights between the two of you, this one isn't necessary. Sometimes, when walking through a summer night, where the heat of the day fades into chilly breath, and vacancy begins to reassert itself everywhere- these inner animals, wild and unseen, screaming distant into those skies, I think I've come across the two of you. Maybe it was only in myself, the breeze licking my face, and this frantic desire to love- casting everything out into a heartless moment, wild and unseen. The embrace was there, everything. My fingers were afraid of her too, they were afraid of you. The jagged angles described by your limbs were well known to me, contorted into an awkward Z, embracing, gazing not at her, but not the way she doesn't gaze at me- at you. Your eyes give you away, because they're in revolt. Hers are turned, her face is turned, she's sickened and overjoyed. Did she love us, brother?

There are no longer those noble limbs of classicism; they've shrunk into jaundiced skeletal structures. The majesty of your tones is lost- the gold and the brown and the red, because everything's taken on this nauseating luster, and all that's left is a sallow sickness. Where the powerful limbs could once display, in their frozen two dimensions, a triumph of man, in his struggle, in his indefatigable glory, side by side with gods, now the two dimensions plaster themselves hopelessly to hopeless figures, like squashed insects, and you play the god- some God! - everything you signify turns everything that could retain its beauty, her, silent and afraid, her, overjoyed and saddened- her- into some wretched farce of human beauty, too horrible to laugh at.

True, it's strange to be dead. To abandon culture and custom, irretrievably exiled, to no longer understand flowers, to no longer spring from them that uniqueness of vision, to interpret them, and all other things which carry this mysterious relation into some profound pondering of our

human future- to no longer understand objects- or even names, to no longer understand yourself as a part of this grand linguistic scheme. To pass through these nights, vague and so much with the chill breeze, unseen and radiant, removed, but glowing with this pale destructive fire. Who are they then that are living, and how am I to restore you, if like myself, a restoration is in a sense a re-decomposition.

Because she desires us, because she's drawn to our absence, because her beauty's death, there's something more like her about you than there is yourself. The same strangeness is apparent in both of you- isn't it clear? The awkwardness, the terrified, shy unspoken desire, they're so present the picture could almost be split in half, and despite the struggling color tones, the two pictures would make a similar impression. She's alone, it's clear, terrified; if there's one difference in her it's nothing more than her error in judgment: she wants to be loved because she believes that it will give her back her life. Another time she might have been right, but look at her victim! Clearly you won't give her back her life, who are already dead, and she should know this: her pose suggests a cool and sad intelligence. It's because she pities us! She doesn't pity us to patronize us: she pities us because she sees in us so much of herself. She sees this, understands it, and without looking further into this monstrous question, believes it is grounds for love.

Of course it's ridiculous, but so are you, and the two of you together make a wonderful pair. Looking again at the picture, I even start to sympathize more with your hopes. Some love exists between the two of you, only it's not the love of two people who give to each other that life which transcends everything else, that life that actually stands as proof that we're alive- unlike those solitary moments where, beneath a breathing sky, and with all of the liveliness of nature surrounding us, we throw our faces into our two cupped hands and force tears, hoping to feel, within the cold tear at our chest, that sign that we somehow really do exist, finding only in this gesture the absurdity of the stage, and that, if anything, proves that we don't. It's not the love of two people who give each other that life, a love I knew once, where embrace builds on embrace, the eyes, lips, hands to miss, all transcend, even- or especially, in sexual contact, the usefulness of the body, of the mind, and to some extent even of the heart. Your love is a dead love, and nothing arises from it but the double pity of death- the one that

the other is dead- the other that the one is dying. It's beautiful maybe, maybe it's even touching, but it's useless. And of course, it destroys both of you.

I'd noticed earlier that the picture could be split in two, to create two halves of an almost identical idea, but I'm reconsidering that idea. It seems more likely to me that the two of you together, now with these new considerations, make an unusual kind of creature, one that requires both of its halves to be complete. The juxtaposition of color, the juxtaposition of posture, the way that she leans forward, towards you, the way you huddle away, the edges of your body at one moment accepting her embrace, at the next moment refusing it, the groin of course, pulled far back, a further representation of your sterility, the way one of your hands pushes her shoulder back, while the other pulls her head close to your breast, the way her white arms wrap around you, barely touching, the fingers postured almost as if she were about to pray, the way your eyes carry horror, while hers are serene, and how she is on her knees, her posture suggesting the motion of her head slipping downward... all of these things together create perhaps one of the most perfect creatures: dead and living, sterile and fruitful, cowardly and brave- and idiotic.

How could I restore a work like this? She loves you.

A Discourse on Method

"There are innumerable ways," said the Man from Chicago taking a long puff on his cigar and sitting back slow, "to go about a murder such as you've described to us. It depends on the man, really. Every murderer's got his own style to him. But let's have at it again, eh? Just like everyone else, the Murderer generally can be classified into a type. Maybe we can figure something out about his style if we go over this scene again, a little more carefully this time."

Inspector Bridge looked back down at the photograph. It was a picture of a body, lying crumpled in a heap of black clothing, stuffed under dark blue blankets, blood running in thin geometrical shapes over the blankets and the floor.

"I've given a lot of thought to this," Bridge said. "I've been through every type of available reasoning that would be reasonable to employ,

and I've found, like the philosophers of the Enlightenment, that reason is unable to push forward beyond certain levels. On all sides I'm reaching a dead end. You say we should go over this case more carefully. What I really want to know is how? I've reasoned it out that the only way for my reason to continue pursuing this case is to get into the thinking of the killer. I find this impossible, as there is no reasonable way to approach this with reason. The thought of actually killing someone is odious to me, and moreover, it would not be reasonable. It is as you say, every killer has his own way, and instead of descending into the thinking of the killer, I would be moving even farther away from it, my sole motivation for murder being nothing more than the desire to know why someone would murder, which defeats the purpose, since obviously the killer did not kill for this reason."

"What makes you so certain?" said the shifty little New Yorker, leaning in, his eyes sharp and bright.

"What makes me so certain? Why, because it's absurd."

"Not necessarily. We have to begin with no assumptions. Only then can we be sure we're moving in the right direction. We have no givens, only, as you say, reason. So where does that leave us?"

"I suppose you're right," Bridge said, looking upward and lighting his pipe. "I'm getting careless and forgetting all my principles of philosophy."

"Be that as it may," said the Man from Chicago, "it doesn't do to say we have nothing. We still have that photograph, and we still have the deductions you made when you took the photograph."

"And we have the story that girl told you," the Bostonian offered.

"Yes," Inspector Bridge said, "that's the most interesting part, really. Tell me Clyde," Bridge said, turning to face me, "what did you make of that whole scenario?"

And I had been thinking of nothing else, or rather, if I had been thinking of something else, which I had been, it was only in connection to the strange scene made by Cass and her lover earlier that day. The two of them reminded me of a painting I'd

seen a while back while visiting Vienna and studying Rilke; the way Ralph and Cass interacted brought up some interesting questions, questions which were so fascinating to me that I wrote a short essay on the painting, and questions that resurfaced again seeing this unusual couple. And so while they'd been occupying my mind for the past several hours, caught up with old impressions, I'd been unconcerned with any kind of formal logic.

"I really don't know what to say, Bridge. I found them extremely odd- and the girl, the way she ran out on us all of a sudden. I really can't make heads or tails of it."

Bridge frowned at me, his eyes narrowing, and his head nodding downward in a subtle shake. "But it is clear to me that you've been thinking of nothing else this entire time. What of my discourse this morning? Surely you were able to spot clues and pick up on subtleties."

"I'm very sorry Bridge, but they just reminded me of a painting."

Bridge laughed and sat back, but it was clear he was disappointed. "You are ever faithful to your passion," he smiled, "and that is admirable. But reasoning is really second nature. Their case, it is true, is a difficult one and perhaps, of the whole process, knowing what things to look for as clues was the most difficult aspect of our meeting with them; but I will outline it for these gentlemen here so that they might be as well informed in the matter as we are."

Bridge turned back around and addressed the Man from Chicago. "As I was saying, it was impossible for me to commit a murder-,"

"Anybody's capable," said the New Yorker. "And I think that's what you shoulda done."

"Perhaps, but as I chose not to," the Inspector was trying very hard not to get irate, "I decided I should come to you gentlemen, whom I have worked with in the past, and all of whom I suspect know a thing or two about these types of matters."

"Not that we've ever killed anybody," the Bostonian said.

"No, of course not. But let's get to the matter at hand. I would like to tell you a little bit about this couple we met today."

“Sure, go ahead,” said the Man from Chicago.

“The man’s name was Ralph. He’s a psychiatrist. The girl’s name was Cass. She never actually told me what she did for a living. She seemed nervous the whole time. Apparently, before last night, Ralph hadn’t heard from her in a very long time. They had been lovers, but for whatever reason it didn’t work out. She said Ralph would forget about her. I interpret that as meaning Ralph was sleeping around when they were together. She wouldn’t get any more specific about it than that.

“Anyway, she comes into Ralph’s apartment last night, and tells him that a friend of hers has been killed. Ralph doesn’t know what to say. He still loves her, probably feels guilty and stupid that he lost her, probably lost the other girl too, and so he says he’ll help her. Let’s have another round of drinks.”

“That’s a good idea,” said the Bostonian.

“So anyway, Ralph naturally wants to know more detail. Now here’s where it gets really tricky. She says that nobody’s found the body yet, she just knew it was going to happen and there was nothing she could do to stop it.”

“Why didn’t she call the cops?” asked the New Yorker

Bridge blushed, taking a long drag off of his pipe and blew a few large rings of blue smoke into the air. “She said she wanted me to be there before the cops messed everything up.”

“And you believe her?” asked the Man from Chicago.

“Naturally I’m skeptical. It is the nature of my profession to doubt everything. Nevertheless, I don’t see it as an impossible explanation, not even as an implausible one. It is well known that I am the best Private Investigator on the east coast. The cops are inept, and there is a great advantage to having a professional such as myself observe the scene of a crime before the cops arrive, and, as she put it, mess everything up.”

“Just get on with it,” said the Bostonian.

“So the two of them waited until this morning, when they called me first thing. I went down to

the crime scene and saw the body: the wounds look like they were inflicted with a knife or some other sharp edged object, the person was probably killed sometime late last night. I took this photograph and several others before the police arrived. (I called them as soon as Ralph and Cass got to my office, and I still beat them to the crime scene, which is really no surprise) I talked with the police a bit, the police talked with Ralph and Cass a bit, and then the three of us left to have a drink and discuss the case. I asked Cass a lot of questions, but she wasn’t cooperating, so I tried to talk to Ralph. Ralph was a lot more receptive, but he clearly didn’t know as much about it as she did. I never got the information I needed. She threw a fit, said she needed to get out of there, and left, dragging Ralph along with her. And that’s where we stand with it right now.”

Brief pause.

“She did it,” said the Bostonian. “It’s as clear as water.”

“You’re so certain so soon? Tell me your theory,” said Bridge.

We all looked at the Bostonian.

“Well it’s like my friend was saying earlier,” the Bostonian began. “Every criminal has his or her own way. It seems to me that we have this girl Cass. She’s been seeing this guy Ralph for a little while, but as of late things haven’t been working out. I’ll even take your theory that Ralph was having a little bit of fun on the side, that whole bit about him forgetting her and all. So she figures that she’ll get him back by sleeping around herself. So she meets this guy, they get together, start having some fun, and then all of a sudden he turns sour on her. He starts to beat her, calls her nasty names, demands to know where she’s been, the whole nine yards. Anyway, from what you said, this girl doesn’t sound much like your cold-hearted killer type, so that’s why my theory makes sense. What drives this girl to murder? It’s the goddamn beatings. She goes over there, and he starts to lay into her. Maybe she planned it, maybe not. Those are just the details. He finishes with her, and when he’s done, he goes, sits down, gets a beer or something and watches the Red Sox game, who the hell knows? Anyway here she comes with this big fucking kitchen knife, sneaks up behind him, wraps blankets around his head, and lays into him. The blankets are a nice touch because that keeps the blood from getting

everywhere. She drags him into the bedroom, and then she leaves in a fluster. What does she do next? You know how women are, they always need someone to turn to, and she thinks of Ralph. Ralph is looking about as saintly as Jesus Christ himself to her right now, after that last savage, and she knows he feels bad- guilty and all, so he'll take her in. Only thing is- she starts getting panicked about the murder, so she tells him about it- but she doesn't actually confess. It's all between the lines. That's how the case gets 'round to us. Only we're not attached to the girl, so we can see what's going on clearly."

We were all quiet for a while.

At last the New Yorker piped up and spoke: "I like that theory, I really do- it's got moxie to it, and it's realistic too- that's the best part. Simple and realistic. That's the way things usually go down. But I have some problems with it. I've worked out my own theory, and I'll share it with you. It's not too different from yours:

"I agree with you that this girl Cass is the killer. All the evidence points to it; it makes the most sense. But it's like this: granted, she and Ralph have been seeing each other for a little while, then things go south, probably 'cuz he's having an affair, sure, granted, that much we know. She goes and she finds herself a new man. But here's where our stories get different: I say that she goes off, and gets all psycho and shit. I mean, look at the evidence. There was no evidence of bruising on this girl Cass, so she wasn't getting beat by this guy, and there'd be no other reason to stab a guy to death like that unless you was just plain crazy. Now it's like this, I think they were just dating, and she hated men 'cuz of Ralph and all, and she got the idea, what if he wasn't around anymore, and only I knew why? She got sick like that, started thinking of getting back together with Ralph, knowing the whole time that she'd killed somebody because of him, and him never even suspecting. So she comes by one night, says hello to this guy, then, when he's not looking, she gets the drop on him. The knife does its dirty work, and in no time she's on her way to Ralph's apartment where she can begin all over again. She tells him this cockamamie story about her friend and the cops and needing a private investigator, and the sorry sap buys it. Simple as day and night. What do you make of that?"

A couple minutes passed before the Man from Chicago spoke, leaning forward and putting out his cigar.

"I like that theory. I like it even better than the first one. But I think both theories are fundamentally flawed. I'll tell you how and I'll tell you why: I don't think that she did it. I think that Ralph did it. And here's why:

"Sure, Ralph and her had been lovers, Ralph had been fooling around some. That's the only part of her testimony I'll take at face value. I don't think they split up. I know Ralph's crazy about this girl, whatever. But anybody would realize that she was up to something coming in with some story as wild as that after not having seen her for God only knows how long. I don't care if he loved her more than a dope fiend loves his needle. And he'd know that by buying into her story and taking her in he'd only get in trouble, 'cuz a story like that one, just like you two fellas said, points the finger at her right off. So it's all too incredible to be true. You were the one that said it- the best explanation is the one that's the simplest and the one that's the most realistic. Plus, I don't buy that shit about her getting the drop on him with that knife- I just don't think she could do it. What really happened is she started partying to get back at Ralph. Meanwhile her and Ralph were still going at it, Ralph had reformed his ways, he was sorry and he was trying to do good by her. Well somehow or other Ralph hears about some other guy, he reads a letter or something. Now this guy happens be one of Ralph's friends, otherwise he wouldn't have killed him. A regular Joe you figure, he'd go, beat the living hell out of him, and call it all in a day's work. But the fact that a friend of his would betray him like that got his blood to boiling. He went over there, maybe intending to kill the sonofabitch, maybe not, but he sure as hell was ready for anything. They start shouting. There's a fight, Ralph grabs a knife, maybe a big fucking kitchen knife, and lays into his buddy. He kills him right there and then. Once he starts to come back to his senses he panics. He goes back to Cass and confesses everything. She feels guilty too, so the two of them sit down and work out a story that reverses everything, to throw everyone that much more off track. And if the cops suspect Cass she probably has some airtight alibi that will prove she's innocent and get her off. This way they both walk, and no one is the wiser as to what really happened. Consider that alternative."

But there was no need for him to give that final suggestion. For a long time none of us said anything. Finally the Washingtonian, who up until this point hadn't spoken a word, said:

"I'm intrigued by that theory the most. But I think that all of the theories are essentially flawed. It seems clear to me that Cass is the killer, although the last theory gave me much pause. The two of them had been lovers it's true. But Ralph never slept around. He sounds, from your description Inspector, like a very weak willed man, and one who is at the whims of others, not one whom others are at the whim of. I take Cass literally: he would forget her. Maybe he loved Cass, but there was another woman, one whose beauty and whose charm, whose elegance, innocence and purity made her nothing short of the ideal. This girl was unknown to Ralph, he couldn't approach her if he wanted to. In these spaces Cass vanished. And when he forgot her, nothing could make him remember her again. She would telephone- it would frighten him; she would write or email him- he wouldn't respond; the correspondence would confuse him. She would come by- but those were the worst times ever- and in these spaces she began to feel herself die. She would follow him, hoping he might illuminate her world again, but he wouldn't even glance at her. I am scandalizing you all because I am violating your rule of realism. But I find that all the other theories are impossible, because the deceased is female. The picture does not make it very clear; Bridge asserts that the deceased was a male. I have studied this photograph and I am convinced otherwise. Where does that leave me? When you have ruled out every possible solution your only option is the impossible.

"Cass noticed this girl, she noticed that Ralph noticed her. She herself began to become entranced with this girl, this image of the ideal. She noticed that Ralph would remember her again when the girl was absent for a long time. She found herself yearning for this girl as well, dying in her even when Ralph remembered her. So finally she decided she could do nothing but kill her. She followed her home one night. She opened the door and made her way in; I do not believe this idyllic girl ever locked her door. Cass confronted her; she probably wanted to kiss her; in those last moments I can imagine her strength giving way- followed by a sudden furious hatred, intense and overwhelming. It was at this moment that she killed her. I believe Cass would have stayed with this dead girl all night- without even the slightest

fear or regard of capture- but then she realized that she still had her life to seize- that she still had Ralph, that she would always have Ralph from now on, at what terrible price... she probably returned to him in a daze. She made no sense, she might have read old love letters of hers to him. At long last, in a sad and dreamy voice she would say it: a friend of mine has been murdered."

The Necrophiliac

The first sketch is the corpse: the body crumpled into a pile, twisted, the features mangled. The corpse is lightly dressed in black clothing, but the clothes have been shredded by violent gashes that cover the entire body. Heavy blankets cover most of this up. The blankets are dark blue. Blood is running over them onto the clothes and the flesh.

Then there is the room around the corpse, dark blue. The bed stands directly over the body, unmade, there is the appearance of a struggle. The sheets are badly tussled, the pillows are haphazard, and the cases are half pulled back off of them. The bottom sheet has lost its grip on two of the corners, and the mattress shows through in the moonlight like the shoulder of a lady removing her slip. Beside the table there's a nightstand. Various articles clutter the nightstand, a small lamp, a glass through which the moon reflects a wide distorted oval onto the corner of the bed, a pack of cigarettes, an ashtray, a book or two, other miscellaneous articles. The nightstand has a drawer, which is open. The drawer is almost empty; in it there's a lighter and an unopened box of condoms, maybe a little bit of money. Behind the nightstand the room lifts upwards, and two enormous windows sit wide open, a heavy breeze drafting in. Outside the moon casts a glow into the room, a glow that illuminates a small ladder of light through the panes that lead over the floor, climb ambitiously up the nightstand, through the glass, over the corners of the bed, and lead directly up to the corpse. The glow of the moon is the only thing that gives the room light, and although they're indecipherable in themselves, the colors of the room, made unnatural in this glare, throw dark blue and purple shadows everywhere, while underneath, the bloody floor lights up a red luster, giving the entire room that aspect of certain nightmares, where the colors are indecipherable after waking.

And then of course the Necrophiliac. The Necrophiliac is pacing slowly, moving through the unnatural tones of light and color. After a

while the Necrophiliac sits next to the corpse, fingers tracing through the dark hair, over the torn flesh, maybe saying a prayer.

The Necrophiliac is chaste. The body is this inconceivable boundary. The two of them there, Death and Lover, the distinction is getting uncertain. The Necrophiliac has embraced the beloved, and the two of them together, joined in a feud of blood and flesh, become a single picture. The body of the beloved is limp and rolls heavily in the arms of the Necrophiliac, who struggles to maintain it. The Necrophiliac's head slips forward and down, and the body of the deceased reclines, it's in the contortion of a Z. The Necrophiliac is unable to look, averting face, head paused in the air, maybe saying a prayer.

#

You ain't seen America until you seen it from a train. Well, bullshit, thinks Old Fred, winding his way down the highway in a dirty red Chevy Nova, so old it still has four doors, and would once have been considered something of a luxury car. The thing still runs as smooth as butter though, and he and it have memories that go a long way back, back to when he was still a young man. Well, fortysomething anyway thinks Old Fred, and he smiles ironically to himself. Sure, a fine summer morning in your trusty old car can sure stir up the memories.

And a fine summer morning it was indeed. Out here, well outside Chicago and driving in, the Illinois sun beat powerful down on the glowing maize fields, the bright colors complementing each other, and doing so quite politely. The fine warm breeze chasing you into the city, and all the music made by the invisible orchestra of crickets and birds, locust and lawnmowers way off in the distance, letting you know that somewhere around here someone is living their life. You sure don't see 'em, Old Fred thinks to himself smiling full smile now, you don't see no one, and there's no shame in that. Hell. This was Fred's favorite type of weather. It started out raining all morning long, so bad it looked like it wasn't gonna ever stop, but here it was, late morning, soon enough it would be noon, and the rain had gone, and the sun come up, and there was the coolness of a passing rain mixed with the warmth of a late Illinois summer morning mixed with the battling humidity that swept in and out in waves with the breeze. But Fred was romanticizing too, and he knew it. He liked the country, sure that was true enough, he loved the air, he loved the rich smoky smells, he

even loved the insects- and even the mice. He'd an old saying that it was a clever man came up with the tale of the country mouse and the city mouse, because he'd be damned if there wasn't a world of difference, like country folk and city folk.

Truth was, Old Fred loved the city with all his heart. He loved Chicago, really didn't have much of an opinion on many other cities, on many other places than Illinois to tell the truth. But Chicago was alive, and Chicago was where his jazz was, and his clubs, and his entire social existence, and if Old Fred had been forced to live in rural Illinois all his life he'd a let the whisky do him in long before now. Besides, Betty lived in the city.

This was a sore point for Old Fred, and he didn't like to go to pondering it too much, 'cuz it got him down, but Betty and his music was about all he had left in life. And it wasn't the same with the music anymore anyhow. Not like when he was young, and he had all these aspirations and dreams and hopes, and he and the guys would sit up playing dice and jazz and drinking whisky and talking about how sure, Lady Day had Soul, but Bessie Smith had Power and she had Soul, and how sure, what Dizzy and Bird were doing was revolutionary, but it wasn't Mingus, and listen to this new sound I'm working on now. It had lost that excitement because it had lost that hope. Not that Old Fred didn't love playing still, loved nothing more, except for Betty maybe, and even that was different from back when he was young- he'd a never put a gal before his music.

Betty was young. Betty was only twenty two, and Fred got kind of weird about that sometimes. He had no problem, of course, with enjoying the caresses of a beautiful young woman, but really she was the boss, because Fred didn't have money, he sure didn't have looks, although back in his day he didn't do half bad for himself, and she knew that he was getting more out of the relationship than she was. So he was always scared she was running off with someone or other. Old Fred just smiled. Don't make sense anyways, he'd say to himself, why would she stay with a broke old man like me if she didn't like me? And that seemed to satisfy him.

Sure, a fine summer morning in your trusty old car can sure stir up the memories, but Fred's approaching Chicago now, and he's on his way to see Betty. It's not too far now, right up the street, and here he is. He gets out of the car, heads on up to the apartment and buzzes her. "Who is it?"

"It's me, baby," Fred says.

"I'm on my way."

"Let me on up," Fred says.

The buzzer goes offline. Fred sticks his hands in his trousers. Must not a heard me, he mutters to himself, and so he steps outside and lights up a cigarette.

A moment later Betty comes down, looking very pretty and coy in a long blue dress, cut low in the back, cut low in the front, her firm brown breasts just barely visible, and straps on the shoulders. Her hair is put up, she's wearing no makeup because she doesn't need it and she knows she doesn't need it, and her hourglass waist swishing, but high class high society style, real subtle. Fred almost forgets that he's still angry with her when he sees her come out the door, not that he remembered anyway, the ride had done him so much good, but now he's not even cynical about Betty, he's hugging her and kissing her and asking her how does she do.

"I'm just fine Frederick, but how are you?"

That's when he remembers about last night and he steps back slow, with dignity. "Well that's a good question," he says. "Just how am I? I don't know Betty, you ran off on me last night."

"Aw, you're not still sore about that are you?" she coos, and climbs into the passenger side of his car. Fred walks around and gets in himself. "Hell, what do you think baby? Of course I'm still angry about that. We were supposed to meet up after the show, and there you go doing disappearing acts on me. What am I supposed to think? Anyway," he gets real quiet. "I know who you run off with."

"How dare you!" she says. "What's that supposed to mean? I told you over the phone this morning I wasn't feeling well, so I took a cab home."

"With what money? I was paying for your drinks all night. Remember, you left your wallet at home."

"Oh that; I was just putting you on so you'd buy the drinks."

"Goddamn baby!" Fred starts the car and they go racing off. A couple minutes pass and neither one of them says anything. At last Old Fred speaks up. "Where are we going anyway?"

"I don't know, where ever you want to go."

"I don't want to go anywhere! I wanted to stay at home. It was you called me. Goddamn baby!"

"Aw, you're not still sore at me are you honey?"

"Yeah, I'm still sore. I don't even know what to believe from you anymore these days; you're lying about not having your wallet, disappearing in the middle of the night- after I bought all the drinks- Goddamn, baby!"

But Betty is laughing, and Old Fred gets a smile at it too, although against his will, because

he must sound pretty funny, but all in all he knows he's in the right. But what's he gonna do anyway? It's like he was thinking back on the rural roads, Betty's the boss, and there's no other way it could possibly be.

"I'll let it go this time," he says, suddenly remembering that he's got his gun, "but it sure ain't too much for a man to ask that his own good gal lets him know if she's gonna take off in the middle of the night- or at least leave a message."

"Well next time baby, I'll leave a message with somebody," she says. Old Fred looks over at her, and he doesn't like the way she said that, and he doesn't like that sly little smile she's wearing- well, that's not quite all true, he does kinda like that sly old smile, in fact he likes it a lot, he just doesn't like what it might be insinuating.

"Well there won't need to be a next time baby, that's all I'm saying," Fred says, and again he's smiling in spite of himself.

"Never know."

"Well don't make it tonight at least," he says and looks over at her again. Betty doesn't say anything.

"You do remember tonight don't you?"

Betty doesn't say anything.

"We're playing down at the Blue Beats club. It's a big gig. I'm gonna need my best gal there."

"Of course I remember Fred!" Betty says at last, "and what do you mean about that best gal bit? Are there other gals I should know about?"

"Oh baby if you only knew the half of it!" Fred laughs.

"What kind of thing is that to say?"

"I think it's damn nice of me," Fred insists, smiling. "All those gals, and I'm straight telling you you're the best. You got some heavy competition."

"I can believe heavy."

"Now baby..."

"You started it."

"And I ain't leaving you a dime when I die."

Betty laughs. "There goes my fortune, baby."

"Just wait, I'm gonna be famous. I mean, sure Dizzy and Bird were the tops, they were revolutionaries, right baby? But they weren't Mingus after all, and wait until you hear what me and the boys are gonna break out with tonight."

And Old Fred is in hysterics, and Betty would be too, you can tell by the big smile on her lips, but she's looking at Fred in a way that arrests her smile, and Fred sees those eyes and he stops laughing, he's still smiling, turns his head away and says through a big grin, "goddamn, baby!"

"I wish I coulda met you when you was younger," Betty says very softly, like an

accidental sigh escaped, and she looks away, blank ahead immediately after.

"Hell, and what does that mean?" Fred says real quiet, which descends into another silence. The city is speeding by them at Fred's breakneck speed, and suddenly they shoot through onto the highway and head towards the sun, where Fred knows the rurals of Illinois await them.

"Where are we going Freddy?" Betty asks softly.

"I thought I'd just take us for a drive, just me and you and this here old car. A lot of memories in this car. It's not much we get time to be alone like this anyway, we're always places, bars, jazz joints, hanging out with musicians. It's fun, baby, sure, but we need our own time too. With me living way out here, and you in the city. A man gets to thinking."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You know, I've been getting to thinking. Maybe I should move into the city. We could get a place. Don't worry baby, I'd pay all the bills. I need to be closer to my music anyway, it's hell sometimes, living all the way out where I do, and I take chances all the time. Hell, baby, I drove home last night. I know that doesn't strike you the same it strikes me, but you didn't see how blind I'd got myself by the end of the night. And there I was, driving all the way out of Chicago into the rurals. And it ain't the first time I done it either. Probably won't be the last. Not unless I move. No one can beat the odds forever. And then there's you, reason number one. Reason number one, baby, and I'm being dead down straight, painfully straight with you."

Betty doesn't say anything.

"Well there's no need to say nothing yet, baby, it's just a thought. Hell, however you think. If you don't want me in the city I won't do it, there's no point complicating things. But you should think about it some."

"I want to dance tonight Freddy," Betty says.

"Dance? Sure baby, sure. Why not?"

"You know, like we used to do? You can do your set, and then we should just get drunk and dance and be fools like we used to do, and get laughed at, but still be having a better time than anybody else there."

"Well it's a plan."

"And I want to play cards."

"Play cards?"

"Yeah, with the boys, like you do, and lose too much money."

"What are you talking about baby?"

"And smoke reefer with Little Tommy."

Fred laughs. "Who told you about all that?" And then he gets serious. "How do you know what he does anyway?"

Betty looks at him stern. "Not this again Frederick. I saw him go out last night and smoke on my way out."

"But you were gone before he went out to smoke."

"No I wasn't. I saw him plain. Your band took about a five minute break and he went out and smoked a reefer. He saw me out there and asked me if I wanted a little bit, but I said no."

"You've got it all wrong baby, he smoked that reefer after the show, right before we played cards."

"Maybe he did and maybe he didn't. But I know he smoked one during the 'pause for the cause'," and she giggles.

"And you didn't smoke with him?"

"No Freddy, of course not. You know I don't do that stuff, and besides, I was sick already, I didn't want to make myself really ill."

"No, I guess not."

"You're paranoid, that's what's wrong with you honey. I'm with you and I trust you. I wish you'd do as much for me."

Old Fred just grunts. "It's beautiful country out here, isn't it though," he says a moment later, and looks over at Betty who is staring straight ahead.

"Sure Freddy."

"Anyway, we'll do some dancing tonight. We'll tear the place up. But today's special too. Just remember that, you don't have to say anything. It's just nice having you here."

And that's exactly how Old Fred feels, because suddenly underneath the rural Illinois sun, and in the middle of all the long stretches of corn fields, and inbetween the songs of the locust and the cricket he feels a slow lazy peace creep up on him, inside the car, blowing through the car, in the warm breeze pushing them back into the city. And for just a little while, with Betty there in the car beside him, and with all this space and speed and freedom, he really does feel as if he's young again, as if there are still hopes beyond being allowed to move into the city and be miserable, beyond a few more drinks, a few more times with a pretty girl, a few more tunes turned out at the bar, and death. Betty looks like she's feeling something of the same thing too, but Old Fred doesn't want to push his luck. She's sitting there, all tucked away and silent, gazing ahead, slightly smiling... of course she doesn't have to feel young again, she's already young, she still has hopes and ideas and futures to plot out. But Old Fred starts

to think that maybe that's worse because she's still got something to lose. All he has to lose is her, and if he ever does lose her he'll know he never had her to lose to begin with.

It seems like it should be sad, but Fred thinks all these things, and he's feeling very happy and contented. Sure, a fine summer morning in your trusty old car can sure stir up the memories. And he turns to Betty thinking for the first time in a long time that maybe he can create new ones:

"Say Betty, nothing like a day like this in an old car. You don't have to say anything or anything, but it sure can give you a feel of life, of the world, of America and where you are and what you've been doing you're whole life just driving around like this, with no particular place to go."

Betty laughs and looks at him sheepishly. "Silly old man. Everybody knows you ain't seen America until you seen it from a train."

Scene

Cass spun around on her heel, her black hair flying around her head with the same rhythm of her foot hitting the ground. She was smiling slyly, looking up and past Ralph, into the sky where the sun broke through and where the last fragments of once gray now white dissolving clouds sank deeper into the blue. It had rained, and the city was drenched, the sun, bright and caught in a deep blue sky, over the wet streets, created a fresh and dreamlike atmosphere, and feeling overjoyed by it, by the sensations this particular afternoon was inspiring her with, Cass became manic. "You have a habit of not believing me," she accused her lover, who had come to an abrupt halt as soon as she spun herself in front of him.

"A habit," he mused, thinking himself sounding very severe and removed, and feeling pleased that he could pull it off, but he saw Cass' smile, and he looked at her bashful because she was onto his game, and he knew she was and she knew he knew she was and he had wanted her to be anyway. The day was gorgeous, and the air had that quality to it that inspires a profound and happy melancholy, right after a heavy rain, and the sky is bright, and the sun is out, and the fading clouds looked to him like little gentlemen smoking pipes and fading in their own clouds of smoke. "A habit," he said again, and Cass was looking at him, smiling, he said, "how could I possibly believe something as silly as that. You sound like a madwoman."

"Like a madwoman! If only you knew!" Cass stressed, and she turned just as abruptly away

from him, spinning on her foot again, and crossing her arms. She was playing a game and she knew it, but she felt suddenly young again, and she wanted to explore the sensation as thoroughly as possible.

"I should know, after all this time."

"You've only been there half the time."

"That's no way to talk to somebody."

"It's the only way to talk to you."

"The things you say!"

"The things I say!"

"Are you going to stand there like that forever?"

"Quite possibly."

"Then I should go on."

"Quite possibly."

"Then I will."

"I won't miss you."

"I will forget you."

"Oh..."

Silence.

Ralph: Let's keep walking

Cass: I agree. Let's.

Silence.

Ralph: Why so quiet all of a sudden?

Cass: It's you that's being quiet. Pause. Why so quiet all of a sudden?

Ralph: Because I'm starvin' like Marvin.

Cass: You're stupid.

Ralph: The things she says!

Cass: The things I say! Pause. Are you really hungry?

Ralph: I could eat.

Cass: I should hope so.

Ralph: Then do by all means.

Cass: Do what?

Ralph: Hope so.

Cass: You're stupid.

Ralph: I should hope so.

Cass: Where should we go?

Ralph: In the larger sense?

Cass: No, of course not. We all go the same place in the larger sense.

Ralph: Really, where's that?

Cass: Hell.

Ralph: Hell, eh? Doesn't sound pleasant.

Cass: Of course not, it's Hell.

Ralph: Well then in that case-

Cass: Or depending, you go to Heaven.

Ralph: So we don't all go to the same place in the larger sense.

Cass: No.

Ralph: But you just said we did.

Cass: I said nothing of the sort.

Ralph: There's no point arguing.
Cass: No.
Ralph: So who decides?
Cass: Decides? Decides what?
Ralph: Where we go.
Cass: Oh, I don't care. You go ahead and decide. So long as we can sit outside.
Ralph: I don't mean restaurant-wise, I mean in the larger sense.
Cass: In the larger sense?
Ralph: Precisely.
Cass: You mean you don't know?
Ralph: That's why I'm asking.
Cass: The author, naturally.
Ralph: The author?
Cass: The Author of All Things Great and Small, Weak and Strong.
Ralph: God?
Cass: Who?
Ralph: God. That's all you mean. God. How boring, I was hoping this theology would go someplace new.
Cass: Sure, you're the one that called him God.
Ralph: Well what's his name then?
Cass: Frank. He's from the Bronx.
Ralph: Before or after?
Cass: The flood?
Ralph: No, silly, the creation.
Cass: What about the creation?
Ralph: Was he from the Bronx before the creation, or did he move there afterwards?
Cass: He was always from the Bronx. I didn't say he moved to the Bronx. I said he was from the Bronx.
Ralph: Then it's Heaven?
Cass: The Bronx?
Ralph: Precisely.
Cass: Precisely.
Ralph: So in the larger sense some people go to the Bronx.
Cass: You catch on quickly.
Ralph: And hell?
Cass: What about it?
Ralph: Where is it?
Cass: Down, just like Heaven is up.
Ralph: The Bronx is hardly the farthest north you can get!
Cass: Who said anything about north or south?
Ralph: East or west.
Cass: Northeast northwest.
Ralph: Southeast Southwest.
Cass: Let it rest.
Silence.
Cass: Annapolis.

Ralph: I beg your pardon.
Cass: Annapolis.
Ralph: What about it?
Cass: Hell. You wanted to know where hell was.
Ralph: I rather like Annapolis.
Cass: That's fine.
Ralph: So it can't be hell.
Cass: Sure it can. Why not?
Ralph: How could I possibly like hell?
Cass: Why associate hell with bad necessarily? Maybe heaven's the one that really needs work.
Ralph: The Bronx? No!
Cass: Annapolis?
Ralph: Perhaps they're indifferent.
Cass: I'm indifferent.
Ralph: To what-choosing Heaven or Hell?
Cass: Same thing. To you.
Ralph: Same thing goes for me?
Cass: You're stupid.
Ralph: The things she says!
Cass: I meant it this time.
Ralph: What's gotten into you?
Cass: You've forgotten.
Ralph: Forgotten what?
Cass: What we were talking about.
Ralph: We were talking about Heaven and Hell.
Cass: In a manner of speaking.
Ralph: No, literally. It's you that's forgotten.
Cass: It's not likely.
Ralph: You mean a place to eat. Well fine, I'll decide.
Cass: Please don't annoy me by talking about restaurants.
Ralph: Annoy you?
Cass: How do you consistently miss the point of everything?
Ralph: It's a gift.
Cass: You're a gift.
Ralph: A gift?
Cass: To me, don't worry, you'll remember soon.
Ralph: Remember? There's nothing to remember. You're nuts.
Cass: You have a habit of not believing me.
Ralph: A habit. Pause. A habit.
Cass: You see, you've remembered already.
Ralph: Is that why you were so moody?
Cass: It's always the same with you. You're like a record player needle. You keep getting dustier and dustier and then just when you get to be so dull and faded out it's unbearable, someone comes along and brushes you off, and then you play as sharply as ever.

Ralph: Yes, I feel that way sometimes myself.
Cass: As you should. As you should.
Ralph: I am learning from you Cass.
Cass: That much is clear.
Ralph: What did you think of the detective and his friend?
Cass: I liked his friend.
Ralph: And the detective?
Cass: Ralph, you know I don't want to discuss this.
Ralph: But it's relevant. I'll tie it together. Trust me.
Cass: Okay, shoot.
Ralph: The detective.
Cass: Indifferent dislike.
Ralph: His friend.
Cass: Pathological.
Ralph: The bar.
Cass: Pretentious charming.
Ralph: The drinks.
Cass: Milk.
Ralph: Milk?
Cass: You didn't even notice. You were in love with that detective.
Ralph: Don't be silly.
Cass: I speak the truth.
Ralph: You hated him. Pause. It wasn't because of your friend. Why did you run out?
Cass: I've told you.
Ralph: You didn't make any sense.
Cass: You know the language as well as I do. You didn't believe me.
Ralph: There was nothing to believe.
Cass: Nothing to believe.
Ralph: I like the looks of this place. Let's sit down here.
Cass: Sure, as long as it's outside.
Ralph: Choose a table.
Cass: Order drinks.
Ralph: A milk?
Cass: No. Something strong.
Ralph: As you say.
Cass: Well, go! I don't want to wait for them.
Ralph: Alright, I'm going.

Silence.
Cass: Are you flirting with me?
Louis: Naturally. I see a beautiful woman sitting at a table, having sent her friend off for drinks, and at once I find myself irresistibly intrigued.
Cass: Yes, he's my lover.
Louis: Is he indeed! Well that's too bad.
Cass: Yes, it is. Would you like to join us here?

Louis: Certainly. Pause. That's better. Why, you're even more beautiful up close.
Cass: You'll make me blush.
Louis: I should hope so.
Cass: You're very bold. What gives you the audacity?
Louis: Nature.
Cass: Nature?
Louis: I know that I am a superior make of man, of the finest qualities of human ingredients. I can feel it swelling in my chest, and it makes me very proud. I can approach anyone. I can say anything. I never feel bad about myself. I never regret my actions. I never act unwisely. I never reconsider- I never second-guess. I achieve all of my objectives via the most direct possible route. I am efficient. I am virile. I am wealthy. I have beliefs but I do not allow them to interfere with my actions. I am highly intelligent. I am well read. I am well known and highly respected in my community. I am an expert at lovemaking. Pause.
Cass: Don't you have any rivals?
Louis: None. Whatsoever. I do not feel jealousy, remorse, anger, hatred, awkwardness, ineffectuality. Those emotions that most hinder the individual in modern society I am immune to.
Cass: You sound like a commercial.
Louis: I am a commercial. Any product so well produced as myself automatically becomes an advertisement for itself, and for the product as a whole, although often, and especially in my case, the advertisement is misleading with regards to other products of the supposedly same make.
Cass: I think I'd like to go to bed with you.
Louis: Of course you would. There isn't a woman who wouldn't. It is a simple matter. We shall abandon your boyfriend. He will have an extra drink, which, he will need, and if he has money he can continue to drink all afternoon. Is that not what he would do if he were to come back and find you missing. Well let him drink and be merry! Let's us go and be merry ourselves.
Cass: I have no desire to go to bed with you.
Louis: My dear, you have just contradicted yourself.
Cass: No I didn't.
Louis: No matter. Let's go.
Cass: If you had a subtler mind you would see past the contradiction. I would like to go to bed with you so that I could see your reaction to my tireless yawns, but at the end of the day, the sacrifice is too great, because the thought of sex with you is unbearably revolting.
Louis: I am in love!
Cass: Good, you will have to pine. Pause. Ah, good, here is my lover.

Louis: He hasn't forgotten you.
 Cass: No.
 Silence
 Ralph: Who is this gentleman?
 Louis: My name, good people, is Louis.
 Cass: Louis is it? Do you know Ralph, that Louis here just tried to make love to me?
 Ralph: You son of a bitch!
 Cass: Boys, there's no need to fight. I get no thrill from it. Pause. There's no reason to be upset Ralph. He didn't know how close we are.
 Louis: Indeed not! And to show my deepest respects for each of you individually and for your mutual bond, I am cordially inviting you to a party at my house this evening. I will give each of you one of these. It has the address on it you will note, please try to dress outrageously, but with class.
 Ralph: I don't know about this.
 Cass: We will be there!
 Louis: I will wait and wait impatiently.
 Cass: Please do.
 Louis: Good day!
 Cass: Until tonight!
 Ralph: Good riddance!
 Louis: Cheer up, she loves you.
 Silence.
 Ralph: I didn't like that guy.
 Cass: Of course not, you were jealous.
 Ralph: Jealous!
 Cass: Anyway, I want to go to this party.
 Ralph: Sure, we'll go. It sounds exciting.
 Cass: It could be.
 Ralph: It could be.

#

Francis, who up until this point had been sitting pensively on the curb, watching people as they passed her by, and feeling somewhat melancholy what with all the young, pretty and carefree girls, stood up and began to ponder what she was to do with herself. She looked up and down the street and no ideas came to her, so she finally chose a direction and began to saunter off slowly, her head hanging down, and kicking stones that she passed with her dragging feet. The air was fresh and cool and she was enjoying it, the aftermath of a heavy rain that she'd taken no measures to avoid. She'd been soaked for a while, but she felt more comfortable now, dry, and the feeling of walking again, the cool air on her still

damp clothes was returning to her her previous joy.

It was as she was walking that she passed by a beauty parlor on some or other corner, and she looked into the window. The place was empty for the most part, save for the employees, but there were a few customers, early birds who'd probably made early appointments. This, Francis remembered was what she had intended on doing, and so she walked around to the door, pulled it open and entered. It was very cool inside. Cool and bright, and somewhat uncomfortable to the damp girl. In the background an R&B station was humming melodically. The place was large, one large room with a lower and an upper deck. Directly to the girl's left was the register where a dark, fat burly man sat watching Francis curiously. Out beyond the counter there was a line of black barber chairs, only one of them occupied, and by a large woman with squashed features, her hair being massaged into a shapeless mass. There was a small yellow door behind these chairs, but it was closed. Further to the right there was a large pillar that had mirrors on all four sides. On every side of the pillar there was another barber chair, and one of these was occupied as well, but Francis couldn't see by whom, because the pillar was blocking her view. Even further to the right, next to the wall, which was covered by mirrors, were more barber chairs, but these ones were completely empty. Next to the chairs, attached to the wall was a long counter that spanned the wall's length. Directly to Francis' right, in front of the pillar, were plush chairs and sofas where customers apparently waited for their turn, because there were magazines lying around, and a television was on in the corner, muted, flashing images of something or other of no interest to Francis.

The radio was interesting to Francis, and so she took a seat, looking around for a few moments, and then let her head sink back to listen. Her eye caught a beauty magazine. She picked it up and began to flip through it absentmindedly, although not completely, her absentmindedness was more of an affectation, and she felt guilty and perverse, looking at the women gracing the pages. But she had more of an interest in the magazine than just looking at the women. She was looking at the hairstyles the women were wearing, and trying to decide on something, her mind racing through images of girls on magazine pages and herself, wearing new hairstyles, strange, sexy, narcissistic.

A little bit of time passed, the R&B was becoming hypnotic and making Francis sleepy,

and she was lost in some kind of dream state where images of herself, magazine girls, and the charming, hip hop driven beat on the radio made up a bizarre mesh of color and light, when a pretty young Puerto Rican girl tapped her on the shoulder. "Were you waiting?"

"Yes," Francis said. She smiled and looked up into the smooth Latin features of a delicate girl. "Yes. I want to change my look, but I don't know what I want to do."

The girl screwed up her face, looked Francis up and down, smiled slyly and said, "Come on."

Francis accompanied her to the second deck, which was separated from the first only by a few wide steps, and closed in with a metal rail running past where the width of the stairs ended. There was nothing special to it, it was smaller than the first deck, another pillar with mirrors on each side sat in the center, and there were chairs on either side of the pillar, just like on the first deck. The girl directed Francis to a chair and motioned her to sit. At the other chairs a couple of the barbers, just sitting around with nothing to do, were conversing.

Francis felt the hands of the girl touch her face from behind, and she shivered. "I'm tired of myself," Francis said. "I want to look different. Very different. I want something drastic, new and sexy."

The girl walked around in front of Francis and looked at her square. Francis lowered her eyes. The girl smiled, and nodded her head. "I know exactly what I can do for you. There is a style that will suit you very nicely. I have a picture of a girl with it in this magazine-,"

"No!" Francis interjected somewhat more emphatically than she'd meant to. "I mean," and she lowered her voice, "I want to put myself in your hands. If you say it will look nice I believe you. Surprise me."

"Is this Prince?"

"Yeah man, it's one of his old jams."

Francis relaxed herself into the hands of the girl behind her, and let her mind wander listlessly along the lines of the music and the conversation running through the room, through her head, through her hair, massaging fingers, the rhythms and the sensations, until finally, a transformation.

"See Prince don't make the type of jams he used to make anymore."

"It's The Artist man."

The voice of the first man was firm and steady, it was older, more melodic. The voice of the second man was deep and serious, younger; it carried with more rhythm than melody.

"No, I'm serious. This shit is tight, but what he's been coming out with lately just doesn't have it anymore."

"Man, leave The Artist alone. He still puts out good jams."

"What the hell are you talking about? He hasn't put out anything decent in five, six years."

"See that ain't even true. What about that slow jam they used to play on the radio last year?"

"Yeah, that was alright, but it wasn't even like his old jams. He don't got the soul or the funk to him these days. That boy's career is dead."

"Man, whatever. I bet you he put out an album today it'd sell millions of copies."

"That's just because he's Prince, man. That doesn't say shit about the quality of that shit."

"So his career ain't dead."

"Man, if the Beach Boys and shit put out an album today it'd sell."

"Shut the fuck up man," laughing.

"I saw the Beach Boys a few months ago," Francis' hairdresser piped in, "They were tight."

"Now!"

"So people go and see them 'cuz they're the Beach Boys. Not 'cuz they're still any good."

"That's what I've been trying to say, man!"

"How do you mean?"

"Man, you're getting me agitated and shit now. Prince's career is dead. People just go to see that shit because of who he used to be, man. I bet they even yell for him to play the old jams at his concerts and shit. His new jams aren't worth shit. The boy's day is done."

"He's still making money. He's still selling records. He's got a huge career."

"I'm not talking about the money aspect man. I'm talking about the artistic integrity of that shit. And it plain ain't got it no more."

"The artistic integrity of The Artist? We're not talking about Shakespeare and shit, man. This is pop music, and pop music is supposed to sell."

"You know what I'm trying to say! I'm not trying to say he's Charlie Parker or some shit, I'm just saying his jams ain't tight anymore!" This last remark was delivered loudly.

There was a pause in the conversation, and Francis sat still, listening to the suddenly silent voices, and the thoughts in her head, and in grasping this strange isolation, feeling just a little bit like Prince.

"You right, man. You right. You know, we ain't had a fight all week. I had to get a good one in before the week was over; you know man."

"Yeah."

The hairdresser leaned over and whispered into Francis' ear, "they're both so full of shit. They're always like this. Men!"

Francis smiled. "Yes, men!" she whispered. "I don't like them either!"

To which the girl laughed.

"Bet you though, if The Artist came and played downtown, that show would be sold out."

"Man, who do you think's going to those shows anyway, and buying those albums. Sure as hell ain't you and me. Sure as hell ain't the kids today. That's how you got a career. When you got the younger generation diggin' you. Not when you got a bunch of old diehard fans coming to see your shows every year and buy your tired old albums you keep putting out."

"Whad'dyou mean young kids ain't buying that shit."

"I didn't see you buy his last album and shit."

"I didn't want to."

"Now!"

"That don't mean nothing. Everybody got different tastes. People listen to whatever they want these days."

"I'm not even into what them young kids be listening to, and I still won't buy no damn Prince album."

"It's The Artist, man!"

"Whatever."

"And anyway, it's like I said. Kids don't all be listening to the same shit. What, you think everybody out there's listening to rap and hip hop?"

"Black kids are. Maybe it's the white kids be buying Prince albums."

"Man, see that's just ignorant and shit. Plenty of black kids listen to The Artist, man. And a whole lot of other types of music too. Not everybody wants to listen to the same thing. Some people don't even like rap or hip hop. Won't even buy a goddamn album of that shit. There be people only listening to shit like The Artist and Michael Jackson and shit."

"You don't even know what you're talking about."

"There's people I could ask today if they'd buy a new Artist CD, and they'd be like, hell yeah."

"It ain't you and me."

"Naw, I'm talking about people my age."

"There may be one or two."

"See man, I'm gonna go out and buy the new Artist CD when it comes out, just to spite you." He stood up and started to walk off.

"You may buy it, but you ain't gonna listen to it."

"So?"

"See what I mean."

"Voila!" The hairdresser spun Francis' chair around so that she faced the mirror. Francis thought that the girl looking at her was stunning.

#

It was impossible of course to be upset with him, exasperated as I was, because that's the way Bridge is, and I didn't have to accompany him if I didn't want to. It was just the energy of it all that exhausted me. I'm sure my interest in Ralph and Cass was just as great as his, but a moment's rest would have been appreciated. Bridge dragged me mercilessly from place to place through the pouring rain, inquiring about the two missing lovers. I tried to reason with him, that seems often to be the only way to speak to him, but I got so tangled up in his logical subtleties that at last I could do nothing but continue to follow him, and hope that we would catch their lead soon.

It began the moment that we finished discussing the murder in the bar with "The Irregulars", as Bridge liked to call them. I believe it was the Washingtonian who'd spoken last, and this speech of his had done something to Bridge. There had been a very deep silence after the Washingtonian gave his account of things, and I was willing to brush his ideas off as the least probable of the lot, his whole argument beginning on what seemed to me to be the absurd assumption that the deceased was female. Already I had called the waiter over and ordered another drink when suddenly Bridge was on his feet, called to the waiter and told him to cancel the order.

"We have work to do Clyde!"

And that's when everything became blurred and hurried. Immediately we were in the street with the heavy gray clouds hanging above us, and all I could think was that it was going to rain like hell and I didn't want to get caught in it. We ran through the wide city streets; I didn't know where we were going and nothing was familiar. I questioned Bridge, but he wouldn't speak. I argued with Bridge, but he wouldn't respond. The buildings went past us with the desperation of a maniac pacing around in a cell in a hallucination. People seemed to look at us curiously, but their faces were nothing, only smears of colored ovals against an already smeared backdrop, and before I knew it, we were at the building of the crime scene, which loomed up, dark and red and eerie underneath the dark sky. The windows of the apartments looking out seemed to be square hollow eyes, and the hanging vines suggested a

heavy sadness, memories flooded back, dark, tones of dark color, a dead body, blood, police, Cass and Ralph, Bridge wanted to go inside.

So we did. Up the staircase to where the apartment sat in its depressed corner. Bridge jimmied the lock on the door, and in we went. Nobody was there, but it was obvious the police intended to return, and there was still blood staining the floor and the sheets of the bed, and then there was the horrible absence of the body, which when we'd been there only hours before lay as the center of this grotesque scene. I got sick, and had to stagger into the bathroom and vomit. Bridge laughed and told me not to flush it because it would be funny to confuse the police, and see how they interpreted the vomit in the toilet, wondering how they could have missed it on their first search of the place, and probably some hot shot police detective would lose his job because of it, and eventually even he himself would start to believe he fucked up, when all along it was just because we broke in and I had a weak stomach.

We left almost immediately. Bridge had to know the identity of the corpse, male or female, if they had a positive ID. Who was it, what was the history of the deceased? Why would the deceased be murdered, did the deceased have any enemies? Before I knew it we were back on the street and headed toward the police station. Again we went past buildings and people, and everything was blurred and hurried. And then the sky broke, and rain started to pour down heavy and relentless. It was the works: thunder and lightning, big torrents of cold rain, going around in circles that made you dizzy and think you were lost in a hurricane. It seemed like a blurry forever before we reached the police station, and they had the air conditioner on in the building, and I was soaked and shivered uncontrollably. I asked Bridge didn't he feel cold, wasn't the rain unbearable? He just turned around and looked at me sharply before saying, and I'm not making this up, "Was it raining, Clyde? Why I hadn't even noticed."

So much for logic and observation. Anyway the next thing I know Bridge is hassling the police detectives about ID's on the body and they're telling him that that information is not yet available for public knowledge, and he's yelling that he isn't just anybody, he's the famous Private Investigator Bridge, and that he will have all of their cheaply earned badges for this outrage. The whole time I'm just standing there, freezing to death in this too cold and too bright police station, wishing they'd just go ahead and tell him so that we can get the hell out of there, and hoping like hell that the rain has stopped by now.

Bridge just wouldn't give it up. He was on a mission to know for sure, so he pushes his way past the police, into another room, and people are running and screaming everywhere, and here come the security guards, and people are hassling me now too because I'm with Bridge, so I get into the whole fight as well, and just when a group of the guards pile up on me, and really start laying into me, I feel someone grab my arm and drag me down the hallway with a crowd of angry screaming police officers chasing after us. It was Bridge of course. He was grinning like a pig in shit too, and I knew that meant he'd found out what the sex of the corpse was, and he wanted to keep going.

"Bridge," I plead, "vomiting made me hungry again. I'm exhausted, I really need to sit down and eat."

"No time for that old man!"

And so we were off again, back into the rain, where I didn't know. I don't think Bridge knew exactly where he was going this time either; he was hoping to find the two lovers. The first thing we did was retrace our steps. We went all the way back to the office, went into the office, left the office, and headed towards the restaurant where we had all shared a drink and talked about Cass' dead friend. We even had another drink there, and I tried to convince Bridge to let me get something to eat, but he said that would ruin everything, he was trying to get into their thinking. Then we left and we were both lost again. We ran around the city, stopping in places and asking about them, but no one had seemed to see them. I thought if they were really guilty as all that they were probably hiding out somewhere. Bridge thought that was splendid reasoning on my part, and I lived to regret it, because we checked every hotel, one by one. Of course they wouldn't have booked under their real names anyway.

"But let's think this through Clyde. Why would they be on the run? They came to us. They must trust us."

"Yes, but maybe they've reconsidered. You saw how that girl darted out of the restaurant."

"Yes."

"What did you find out at the police station?"

"Nothing I shouldn't have been able to reason out. In fact I had reasoned it out, only I had to be certain. I apologize if my behavior came off as irrational."

So he wouldn't tell me what he almost got me arrested or even killed to find out himself. He said I had to reason out the sex of the victim myself, just as The Irregulars had done, and so I found

myself in the midst of baffling and circular questions that came to no possible conclusion.

After we checked all the hotels we knew we were running out of options, and the chance of just running into them on the street was minuscule. So we stopped at another bar and at long last Bridge allowed me to get something to eat. For his part he just sat in a depressed silence, meditating over his pipe. The rain stopped and the sun was starting to come up and I was grateful. The restaurant was warm and friendly and I was doubly glad to eat. I didn't even stop to ask Bridge what he was contemplating. It was unnecessary anyway, I already knew. He was trying to deduce a way that he could track the two lovers. Bridge is like that, and I think it's extremely irrational of him. When he gets his mind set on a task he's incapable of dropping it. Supposing Bridge just called it quits and went back to the office, he couldn't, like a normal man, sit back, smoke his pipe, enjoy a cup of coffee, watch some television and forget the whole thing like a normal man would. He'd pace around his office, puff that poor pipe frantically, and try to deduce some way that he could get to the bottom of the mystery. That was the thing about him: mysteries tormented him.

I, on the other hand, was just happy to eat, and in a sense, the mystery of the situation was very satisfying to me. Just earlier that day I'd considered the two reminiscent of a certain painting that I'd once seen the original of as a young man, and the mysterious and eerie quality of the two lovers was in perfect fit with the painting, it was almost as if the mystery were one that the very art of the situation would not allow to be solved, like those writers who create stories in which one of the character's perceptions are called into question, and at the end of the story it's impossible to say whether the events that the writer wrote as having taken place actually took place or if they were just intended by the writer to be instruments of the disordered and deluded mind of his character. To some it provides infinite amounts of satisfaction, this ambiguity. Others it can drive to madness akin to the madness of the character himself.

I wasn't to enjoy this sensation for long. Because just as I was thinking these very thoughts, who else should come strolling into the bar by himself, but Ralph. I have to admit that I didn't notice right away. Bridge most certainly did, and this was what I first noticed. I was in the middle of saying something delightfully stupid to him, so much was I enjoying a warm meal after such an erratic day, when I saw in his eyes this strange glow and they widened: as if he doubted

his own perceptions, and thought what he'd all this time been dreaming had forced itself so directly into his consciousness that it suddenly took corporeal form in his conscious mind. In fact I'm sure this was what he was thinking, because he turned to me, albeit with the greatest calm and said: "Pray tell me Clyde. Is that not the man Ralph right there?"

I looked in the direction that his eyes were focused and whispered with no small surprise, "My God Bridge it is!" To which Bridge's eyes caught an ever purer light.

"Look down," Bridge whispered. "But do not lose sight of him. We will follow him when he leaves."

It turned out that Ralph was just getting drinks. A moment later he was headed outside. Bridge wouldn't let me finish my meal, he threw down some money, grabbed me by the arm and pretty much dragged me to the door. "It is important that we are careful not to be seen."

There were three of them now, Ralph, Cass and some very well dressed gentleman. Ralph seemed to be getting into an altercation with him. Bridge thought it was probably over Cass. He nudged me and said that this was our chance. We slipped out of the bar and headed quickly down the street. By the time we turned around the two were calm again and all three seemed to be talking amiably. We were at a safe distance where we could watch them without worrying about being seen ourselves.

Only a few moments later the gentleman stood up and walked off. Bridge wanted me to talk to him, so I made myself visible as he passed. "Hello."

The man replied only, "Good day," and continued to walk.

"If only there were more of us," Bridge muttered, "we could trail them both."

"I could trail one of them on my own," I suggested, but Bridge said he needed me with him.

After the gentleman left, Ralph and Cass sat at that place and drank for a while. They didn't stop at one drink either, they had three or four. By the time they actually did get up to leave they were laughing a lot and falling into each other. I thought it was very unprofessional for a couple of murderers to behave in this fashion, but it was also obvious they weren't professional killers. Often people will behave very strangely if they've done something that sits with them, a horrible feeling of guilt in the bottom of their hearts. Getting drunk, talking to strangers, fighting in public, all

of these seemed to me tell tale symptoms of the guilty conscience.

As we trailed them Bridge asked me what I made of their behavior. I told him what I thought and he nodded slowly, looking off. "I'm not sure if you are right Clyde, but I certainly can't dismiss it."

The two were swaying, and they even began singing, and it kind of made me sad, remembering my youth and of a young girl I once was in love with. And then I got to thinking about Bridge, who, to me had seemed for the most part asexual, when of course I don't believe that's possible. After all every human being has sexual urges, so I turned and asked him, "have you ever been in love, Bridge?"

There was a long pause, and Bridge puffed on his pipe a few thoughtful times before he spoke. "Yes of course, Clyde, and it seems from what I've taught you that is something you should have been able to reason out on your own. Perhaps your powers have not developed as much as I had thought over the past few hours. But to answer your question, let it suffice to say that every great man of reason has in his time been in love, because love is the antithesis to reason, and to understand something fully, one must also have an understanding of and experience with that thing's opposite."

"I see. Was she very pretty?"

"I do not see the relevance in this line of questioning. Perhaps watching those two has made you sentimental. Let me remind you that although these sentimental pleasures may be touching to you, this couple is guilty of a horrible crime, and while they while away the time in each other's glow, the best Private Investigator on the east coast is in direct pursuit of them, and they don't even realize it. That is something we will soon remedy."

"I'm not sure I understand you Bridge."

"Watch them, what are they doing?"

"They are walking arm in arm."

"Yes, but what else are they doing?"

"I don't know. They seem to be trying to hail a taxi."

"Exactly."

"I don't understand."

"You will, and we will get to learn more about this happy couple now that they are intoxicated and their defenses are down. This opportunity is golden Clyde, and I don't think you realize how lucky we are to get it."

So I decided to be quiet and revel in my own thoughts, memories and failures, while Ralph and Cass walked ahead of us, arm in arm, hailing

taxicabs. I think it was probably a very absurd scene. Eventually, and it did take a while, a cab stopped for them. It was at this moment that Bridge sprung into action. He grabbed me by the sleeve, screamed for me to run, and ran himself, directly at the taxi, with me running bewildered behind him. We got to the taxi just as Cass was closing her door.

"Fancy seeing you here!" Bridge smiled. "It's just our luck!"

"Inspector Bridge?"

"Of course," Bridge answered. "And my good friend Clyde, whom you most certainly remember as well. You wouldn't believe how difficult it is to get a taxi in this city. We saw you getting into one, and since we're all friends, we didn't think you'd mind if we shared the cab. It would cut down on the fare as well."

Cass had gone silent and pale, and I thought it served her right. A moment before she'd been strolling along without a care in the world, when she was supposedly mourning a dead friend and was more likely the perpetrator of a horrible murder. Now that she was faced with its consequences the tables had turned. Ralph on the other hand was more laid back: he even seemed to welcome the occasion.

"After all, I don't usually do this, but under the circumstances..." Bridge was explaining as he climbed into the cab, beckoning me to follow.

The Spy in the Cab

"I don't usually do this, but under the circumstances," the girl plead, out of breath, knocking on the window of a cab that held in it the famous Inspector Bridge, his sometimes assistant Clyde, a young lady named Cass and a psychologist named Ralph.

"Take off," ordered Bridge. "She can catch the next one."

"You said yourself," Cass objected, "that it's very difficult to catch a cab. We should let the girl in."

"Cass is right, Bridge," Clyde observed, thinking more about how he was still famished than anything else. "It wouldn't be polite to leave that young lady stranded out there when we ourselves are guilty of the same impropriety."

"Yes, open the front door for the young lady," Ralph said, leaning up to the cab driver. "There's still room enough for one more in the front."

And on this order the cab driver did exactly that, while Bridge sat glaring angrily at Clyde and muttering under his breath.

"Thank you very much, it's impossible to find a cab out here, I've been hailing for more than a half an hour now. I don't usually do this but under the circumstances, and when I saw those gentlemen do the exact same thing it gave me courage."

"The trains are running young lady," Bridge said as amiably as possible, "certainly you could get to your destination that way."

"Am I unwanted?" She frowned, turning herself in the seat to face everyone behind her.

"Absolutely not," Cass said smiling. "The more the merrier. What's your name?"

"Francis."

"That's a pretty name, my name is Cass."

"Thank you," Francis said, and her eyes lit up. "There were other people that I cared for very much who liked the name a lot as well. But they're all dead now." And she smiled slyly.

"I know how that is," Cass said. "I just lost a friend of mine as well."

"Recently?"

"Just last night."

"That's horrible! What happened?"

"My friend was murdered."

"Murdered?"

"Yes," Bridge chimed in, sounding solemn as church bells, "murdered."

"But by who?" Francis asked.

"Are you folks going to tell me where we're going?" the Cabby said irately.

"Yes, where are we going?" asked Francis.

"Where were you guys going?" Ralph asked Bridge.

"Ah, but where were you going?" Clyde said slyly, casting a smiling side-glance at Bridge, who just turned his head and rolled his eyes.

"We were just going to go for a drive," Cass said. "We can drop you off wherever you want to go on the way."

"Yes," said Ralph. "It doesn't matter to us where we go."

"I'm in the same predicament," Francis said.

"We were headed back to my office actually," Bridge said.

"And where's that?" the Cabby asked.

Bridge gave him directions, and they started off.

"So you're not going anywhere in particular?" Cass was asking Francis, having suddenly seemed to take an interest in her.

"No. Nowhere. I never have anything to do anymore. All my days are free, all my nights are free. My life is unspeakably boring."

"Where do you get money from?" asked Clyde, who was hoping to learn the secret to an indolent life.

"I am taken care of by someone," Francis said smiling. "She's my benefactor."

"She?" Bridge asked.

"Yes, she. I don't see what's unusual about that."

"Yes of course you do," Bridge said, pressing the question. "Usually when a woman is taken care of, she is taken care of by a man, not a woman. It is nothing to skirt around, sexual relations often precipitate other such relations as the one you speak of."

"Well I don't think it's any of your business!"

"No, of course it isn't. But since we're all stuck here in this cab together—"

"It's because she likes girls," the Cabby said, startling everyone. "I know it ain't right for me to come out and say it, but I've been driving a cab in this city for twelve years, and I know every type of person. Francis here is a lesbian."

Nobody said anything for quite a while. Francis turned around in her seat and stared out the window. The others fidgeted nervously. The cab driver seemed to be chuckling to himself.

"And so what if I am!" Francis declared at last, turning back again and staring at the others indignantly.

"I think it's wonderful," Cass said.

"Do you?" Francis said, and Ralph pushed up closer to Cass.

"Yes."

"Do you like my hair?" Francis asked. "I just had it done, and I think the lady did a wonderful job of it."

"A wonderful job," Cass said. "And so you have relations with this lady who takes care of you?"

"Of course she does," Bridge declared. "I'd reasoned out the whole situation from the beginning. I'm just more polite than our cab driver here."

"Don't blame me, fella. I just call it the way I see it."

"Aren't you concerned about your tip?" asked Clyde, who thought the whole situation was going very strangely.

"My tip? Maybe I am and maybe I'm not. Maybe I got other things to be concerned about having the all of you in my cab."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ralph demanded.

"Hey fella. I just call it the way I see it."

There was another long pause.

"So," the Cabby said at last. "Who did kill that friend of yours?"

"Me?" Cass said, looking up.

"You did?" Clyde was breathless.

"No, of course not. I asked if he was talking to me."

"Well who else in here just had a friend murdered," the Cabby said.

"No one knows who killed her. We've hired this man over here to find out."

"Yes, perhaps you've heard of me. I am the famous Inspector Bridge."

"Oh, yeah. I've heard of you. Something of a nutcase the way I hear it."

"Yes, well people often attack that which is beyond their comprehension. My powers of intellect, deduction, reasoning and observation are unmatched." He gave a sly look across the cab at Ralph and Cass. "In fact if the killer were in this cab this very moment, I would know it as certainly as I know the day of the week."

"Me too," the Cabby said. "It's like I say, I can tell every type of person."

"You have demonstrated admirable skills. Please tell me of your impressions of the people in this cab at the present moment."

"My impressions, eh?"

"This is a very nervous game Bridge," Ralph said, leaning forward and looking at the detective.

"Yes of course it is, but I will make it easier for all of us." And having said this he produced from his coat a pint bottle of whisky. "There is more when this one is finished. I suggest that we pass it around while we have a pleasant discussion."

"This is fantastic!" Francis said.

"This is a very nervous game Bridge."

"That, my dear Ralph, is why I am the greatest Private Investigator on this side of the country. Because I am not afraid of confrontations with uncomfortable truths. We will all drink and we will all talk. Who wishes for the first drink?"

"Well, since I've got to give my impressions of everyone first, I think it's only fair the first drink goes to me."

"But you're driving!"

"That's never stopped me before. I'm a professional."

"Drinker or driver?" asked Francis.

"Both."

"Give the man a drink!" Clyde said laughing.

"He's going to need one given the circumstances," Cass was explaining to Ralph.

But Bridge was ahead of everyone and had already handed the Cabby the pint. The cab jolted a little to the left as the Cabby took a hand off the wheel and placed it around the bottle. He turned it up and drained down a good amount all at once. Then he passed it to his right, which was to Francis.

"I'm ready to talk!" the Cabby said smiling, and belched. "Now let me see. I already covered Francis. She's a lesbian, and she's got other things going on too, but she's a hard case to crack. Lesbians always are; it's hard to see much more past that if you're a straight guy. Moving on there's that fellow there, the friend of Inspector Bridge."

"My name is Clyde."

"Yes, good. Clyde. Clyde's the killer type. If anyone in this cab killed your friend young lady, it's him. Can see it in his eyes. Sure, he's a good fellow on the surface, but he's one of those Baudelaire types or whatever. He sees the beauty in evil, ha! ha! Then there's Inspector Bridge. He's the easiest to read of all, because he's just a frustrated man turned into a machine. He wouldn't kill anyone unless he went absolutely nuts, which most people think he is already, but he'd have to be raving. Then we have Cass. She's a weird one if I ever met one. She was probably a punk rock chick when she was young, or something like that. She probably figures she's artistic; she believes in mystical shit, ha! ha! Probably even believes she has signs, and can see the future. Crazy lady if you ask me. And last but not least we have good old nervous Ralph. He's the most regular guy of the group. He's a professional of some sort, a lawyer maybe or a doctor. Something ridiculous, not down to earth and honest like a cab driver or a bartender. Anyway he's attached to this girl Cass because he believes that she can add dimensions to his life that his imagination isn't powerful enough to construct for himself. Probably feels all old and empty without her around, like he doesn't even have a soul when she's gone. And she's a good complement for that kind of thing with all her mysticism and what not. And there you have it. Those are my impressions of you folk, and I'm as ready as ever for the verdict."

Francis, who'd just taken a long sip of whisky, was looking at him with glowing eyes. "You're a magician," she whispered loud. "I bet you hit the mark exactly with every one of us."

"Well I certainly killed no one!"

"Hey, I didn't say you killed anyone; I just said if anyone in the cab did it was you."

"Cheer up," smiled Francis. "It's your turn for the whisky."

Clyde took the bottle savagely and turned it up.

"I have to disagree with you there. I've known Clyde a long time, and while, yes, he does have his pretensions, he is not capable of actually confusing art with reality, and forcing ridiculous

ideal ideas onto a very serious and real word. I think there are others in this cab more capable of committing murder.”

“I agree,” said Francis, nodding at Bridge who was taking the bottle from Clyde. “I think that Cass is really the most capable killer in the cab. I think she might have even killed someone before, and no one knows about it.”

“Well that’s rather presumptuous.”

“But you mustn’t take it the wrong way- and look, it’s time for you to drink. I meant it as a compliment. You could kill someone because you have passion and fire, like some ancient Greek heroine, proud and majestic in what she’s done and yet suffer horribly. And then you could walk around with this secret knowledge while all the world was oblivious and it would wear you down and make you stronger, and that’s why you’re such a wonderful girl.”

“Thank you- I think,” Cass said, drinking down a good portion of liquor, and passing it on to Ralph who took only a small nervous sip and passed it back up to the Cabby.

“And it comes full circle!” the Cabby said jovially. “But go on now. We haven’t finished examining everyone yet.”

“Well there may be a little bit of truth in what you said about me, but it’s nothing I’m proud of. All my life I’ve struggled with my fatal awkwardness, from my youth up until this very day. I’ve often believed myself the superior to others who seem to take what they want of life, as if it were made exclusively for them. And yet I know how foolish these thoughts are, and still I can do nothing to banish them. It’s a constant torment to me, and the only thing in this world that I have is Cass, before her I can remember almost nothing, as if time were some vacant wash of movement and nothing more, bringing me always towards her, the center. But look at me. I have already drank too much. Why am I drinking more? I will only make a fool of myself.”

“You’re a gem,” Francis smiled at him.

“Well I disagree,” Cass said.

“That he’s a gem?” laughed the Cabby.

“That’s quite rude of you!” Clyde said laughing too.

“No of course not. He’s most definitely a gem, but sometimes a very dull one. The only thing I agree with about what he said is that he’s making a fool of himself. He doesn’t know himself any better than you know him,” she directed this at the Cabby. “I am certainly not his center, and he certainly doesn’t find his spiritual salvation in me. He is quite autonomous. Too autonomous. Often

times he will forget about me and I’ll wander around in a black void...”

“Wait, repeat that,” Bridge said, looking in Cass’ direction.

“Often times he’ll forget about me,” she said annoyed. “And then,” her voice dropped, “I walk around in a black void, and I almost don’t exist, and I’ll do anything to make him remember me again.”

“Anything?” Clyde piped in, realizing that his friend was onto something.

“Of course. Anything.”

“You see, I was right then!” Francis giggled happily. “She will do anything. That makes her the most capable of murder because she’s the most passionate. Her lover forgets about her!”

“I never forget about you!” Ralph objected.

“Always. You only remembered me last night.”

“What do you mean, he forgets about you?” asked Bridge.

“Precisely that, he forgets about me.”

“You stop existing,” Francis nodded. “I understand it. I’ve been forgotten about too.”

“It’s like death,” Cass said.

“Like he was dead,” Francis said.

“Like I wish he was dead,” Cass said.

“Exactly,” said Francis. “And yet he’s still alive.”

“This is getting weird,” said Ralph, taking a larger sip on the bottle that had found it’s way back to him.

“Tell me something Cass,” Bridge said, “you didn’t get to talk to us much about your friend.”

“I know, it freaked me out.”

“Tell me one thing I must know. What was your friend’s name?”

Long silence.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Clyde said incredulously from the other side of the cab.

“Maybe her friend was using a nickname,” offered the Cabby.

“I don’t know,” Cass said.

“Well let me ask you this,” Bridge said. “Was your friend a man or a woman?”

Long silence.

“I don’t know.”

“Well this is plain ridiculous!” Clyde near shouted. “Do you think we for one moment believe you?”

“It doesn’t matter to me one way or the other.”

“Cass we’re just trying to help,” Bridge said. “Tell me at least how you came to know your friend.”

Long silence.

"I don't know."

"None of this makes any sense!" Clyde yelled, in hysterics.

"I told you she was the mystical type," the Cabby said putting back another good amount of whisky.

"Tell me the slightest little bit you do know about this friend of yours. Tell me why you came to see me about her. Tell me anything. Tell me what you can, no matter how little it may be. Everything counts when it comes to an investigation of this kind."

"Why do you humor her Bridge?" Clyde demanded. "She'll tell us nothing. She herself probably killed her friend just like The Irregulars-" the liquor had obviously begun to do its damage on Clyde.

"Clyde, you've said enough." Bridge said, turning towards him. "I will conduct the investigation on my own terms, and perhaps you will learn something by watching me." He turned back to Cass. "I'm sorry Cass. I'm accusing you of nothing. I'm sure this is very confusing for you, but as evidenced by Clyde, think how confusing it is for us too. It is on the border of making no sense."

"But it makes perfect sense, too much sense," Francis protested.

"Perhaps," said Bridge. "But I must have more answers."

"You say, Bridge," Cass began, "that I should tell you everything that I know, no matter how little it might be. I tell you now that the amount that I know is so great that it would take up more days than either this Cabby or this cab have left on earth. I don't know my friend's name. I don't know my friend's sex. And how could I possibly know how I came to know my friend? It is after all, no more than blood that cries from the ground, a choir of children, shivering and pale, bloody entrails hanging over the bed, blood on the walls, blood on the floor, cries from the ground, a choir of children, and on again and on again. What am I supposed to tell you Bridge, that you could understand or that would not further upset your friend Clyde, when it doesn't even make sense to you that Ralph forgets me- that he'll always forget me-,"

"Then he'll forget you again?" Bridge asked.

"Again? Of course, how couldn't he?"

"Your friend-,"

"And do you think they have any connection, the two? The lapses and this voice, or rather choir of voices? Maybe they do, because, as I said, I don't know everything but I know probably too much."

"Your words are cryptic," Bridge pressed, "but I think I am understanding them more and more. What you are essentially saying is that you are tormented by the voice of this dead friend- that you've divined this death, and the friendship was nothing more than the kinship between you and this tormenting voice."

"Bridge, really!" Clyde interjected. "This is preposterous."

"Not at all Clyde. There are more unusual things; but let us hear it from Cass herself."

"That's a poor way of describing it. My friend was my friend, not connected to me by tormenting voices or anything of the sort. I remember the days we used to spend together, sitting pensively, often not speaking a word for hours, and yet so much in tune with each other that a mutual language of love and joy sprung from our hearts. I remember mornings when we used to talk, do things that friends would do, perhaps go out for coffee and see a movie. There were so many things that my friend loved- a true lover of life and all the rewards it offered. Then the days got very dark and our time together was less frequent. There were times when we would argue bitterly and go away unhappy with each other and unhappy with ourselves. There were times when I wished my friend dead, it's true, although I would have never gone so far as to actually kill anyone. And there were times when we were so close nothing could be dearer to me than spending hours together, enjoying each other's company, and basking in the glow of this too true friendship. And now all of that is gone. And I felt it leaving me, like an old woman feels life leaving her body. I felt it leaving me last night, and our friendship had been the only thing to sustain me for so long- Ralph had forgotten me, you see. And I was willing to let Ralph forget me forever because I was angry with him, although I know it isn't his fault and I know that he never remembers when he forgets, but once my friend was gone I had nowhere else to turn. But maybe I am responsible for the murder, because it's true that even those close moments together with my friend, they were nothing compared to the world that Ralph recreates in me when we're together."

"I told you she was the mystical type," the Cabby said again, grinning.

"But it makes perfect sense," Francis said, who was now draining a good deal of whisky out of the bottle.

"But we haven't heard anything about you," Cass said, turning towards the Cabby. "All of us have put our characters on stage here, and you've offered nothing to us about yourself."

“Well that’s for you to guess,” the Cabby shrugged.

“A task that is simple enough,” said Bridge, sizing up the Cabby and smiling.

“You think so, do you?”

“Certainly,” Bridge replied. “The city cabman is almost always easily categorized into one of several types. You consider yourself to be a fairly intelligent person, rather clever, but you figure that life has given you some bad breaks that you have in turn been able to twist in your mind into good breaks. This allows you to believe that you are living a life that is in some vague way superior to that of others. Usually this idea comes from a notion of honesty that you have developed over the years, one that you believe to be central to human life, but one which is really developed from your own personal situation, a condition which no man is free from. You pride yourself on the skills you’ve developed while driving this cab, your, and I must say it is rather astute, ability to read characters, and your down to earth no nonsense approach to life. If anyone in this cab is the most capable of murder it is you, because you have the realistic sensibility that allows you to dismiss basing action purely on morality as something belonging, and rightly so, only to John-a-Dreams. Nevertheless, I do not believe that if anyone in this cab has murdered someone, it is you, for I can tell that you have never done such a thing. Moreover, I highly suspect that someone else in this cab has.”

“Yeah? And who’s that?” asked the Cabby.

“For obvious reasons it would be improper for me to divulge that information.”

Ralph took a long drink of the whisky. “Well let’s apply your method here Bridge. We can deduce who you mean.”

“Can you?” Bridge asked. “I should enjoy this.”

“The party just gets better and better!” Francis whispered and smiled.

“Sure,” Ralph continued. “Let’s begin with the driver. Obviously, from what you just said it isn’t him that you suspect, and so we can move on to the next person right away. That means Francis. But why would you suspect Francis of murder? After all, she’s simply a stranger, unconnected with this affair completely, who happened to jump into the cab and become a part of this monstrous game. For you, a man of reason, to suddenly suspect her of murder is as unreasonable as believing that it was the cab driver. That means we move on to Clyde. But Clyde is your partner. That alone isn’t enough, I’m sure that would be your rebuttal, to free him from suspicion. But you

can only suspect Clyde inasmuch as you would suspect yourself, seeing that you know he had nothing to do with us before we met you today, and seeing that he’s been working with you constantly for quite some time now. Besides, you’ve constantly chided Clyde on his poor observations and deductions about us, that was clear enough to see earlier today in the bar, and so, because Clyde’s not only impossible to place at the scene of the murder and incapable of having committed the murder, he can’t possibly be a suspect. Next we move onto you. Unless you’re a madman or a murderer than you don’t suspect yourself. And if you’re a murderer than there’s no reason for us to believe that you’ve reasoned out anything. You’ve simply remembered killing somebody. That leaves only Cass and myself as suspects. It’s clear from Clyde’s previous outburst that the idea of Cass being somehow responsible for the murder hasn’t escaped your mind. Plus, your sudden coincidental appearance at our cab is suspicious enough to lead me to think that you suspect one or both of us. It’s clear Cass is high on your list. I admit that I don’t know where I stand. In fact I can say very little about anything anymore because, and maybe it’s just the liquor, but all of this conversation between all of us has made little sense to me, and I feel myself fading out.”

“Ralph!”

“So Cass, you’ve been the killer all along!” Francis cried.

“We knew it was so,” Clyde offered.

“Silence!” Bridge boomed. “I have said nothing of the sort. Now, listen to me carefully. There is a killer in this cab, and there is a spy in this cab, and I do not know who either one of them are. I simply suggested I knew who the killer was to see who responded and in what way that person would respond. But it is clear to me that one person, or perhaps two, knows who the killer is, and that one of these people is spying on the other person- and all of us, to find out- what, I do not know.”

“How are you so certain of this?” asked the Cabby.

“This is unusual for me to say, and so I will accept any judgments against my belief in this matter, but even the great philosopher Descartes realized that man had to rely upon it at some point. It is perhaps the greatest accessory to reason, and yet it is connected to it such a vague way that it seems almost antithetical to it: I have a strong intuition. I have been watching our drama unfold here in this cab, and I have a strong intuition that one of us is guilty and that one of us is a spy, and

I do not know why I have this intuition, and I do not know what brought the two together here, and I do not know who is who. This is one of the very few times that I must allow for the fact that I may be gravely mistaken, although I am almost certain that I am not."

"And how do we know you aren't the spy or the killer?" asked Francis, leaning farther back over her seat.

"That's true Bridge," Ralph said. "If you're right, any one of us could be either one- including you."

"Yes, it would be clever on your part," Cass said. "After all, I've also had the same feeling that one of us is spying and one of us is guilty; and I'm sure we're not alone."

"No," said the Cabby. "Every single one of us has had that feeling. I can tell."

Long silence.

"You are right in your reasoning, all of you. I too must be a suspect now."

"And what about me, Bridge," Clyde piped in. "Am I a suspect as well?"

"You perhaps more than anyone."

"Hold on a moment detective, a moment ago you just said that you were sure that I wasn't the killer. Does that mean I'm free from that suspicion? That if I'm anything I'm the spy?"

"You're not free from it for a moment. It's as I said before. I spoke only to elicit a response."

"But what about me? Surely I could be either one, especially since my arrival to the cab was so coincidental. But supposing we picked up another person right now. Could they be a suspect?"

"Of course not, we've already determined the two are already in the cab."

"So when did I become a suspect?"

"The moment we all started having the intuition that the two were in the cab with us."

"But this is ridiculous too Bridge, isn't it?" Ralph said. "We're basing this all on intuition. How would we know where to start? How could we begin to work out who's innocent of what and why?"

"Right now the intuition is all that we have. Even supposing we do away with our intuitive notions and rely on nothing except what we know, where are we left? With Clyde's strong suspicion that Cass is the killer, which very well may be the case. But that's based on intuition as well. Could we really make a case against her that would hold in a court of law?"

"So we know nothing," said Clyde.

"Nothing," said Francis.

"Except," said the Cabby, "the killer, who knows he's the killer."

"If he's here," said Cass.

"And the spy," said Francis.

"If there is one," said Ralph.

"Which doesn't leave us with very much," Bridge concluded. "But let's address Ralph's question- how do we know where to start."

"How do we address that with nothing to work on?" Ralph asked.

"It's true," Francis said. "We don't even know anything about the victim."

"Not even the name," said the Cabby.

"Not even the sex," muttered Clyde.

"Not even how the killer came to meet the victim," Bridge declared.

"Nevertheless, you do indeed know the sex of the victim, don't you Bridge? We made that stop at the police station, and you said that you found out. That it was easy enough to reason out."

"That was forever ago Clyde! That was when we even considered that question to be an important one. Didn't you listen to Cass' speech just a moment ago? Wasn't that enough to convince you that it's completely irrelevant- that it's unimportant- that it's downright counterproductive to begin this investigation with the question of the sex of the victim, or even who the victim was. That the real question is who is guilty, and why this person is guilty? Hasn't it occurred to you that it is more important to find out who the spy in the cab is than it is to figure out how the victim spent the last twenty four hours before death? That everything we have done today up until the point of getting into this cab has been a waste of time and that we have been going in logical circles and that now is the only time we will ever have to solve this crime- and that we have no grounds upon which to solve it even though more than enough clues- when even the killer himself is present in the cab with us! That we will never solve this crime if we leave this cab, and yet we must leave this cab and so the crime must go unsolved! Have you not realized that all mysteries are now unsolved and that I shall go back to my office, pace and smoke my pipe- and have forgotten everything!"

"My God, Bridge!" Clyde said in slow wonder. "What's happened to you? You're talking like Cass now."

"Yes, he's beginning to understand," Cass said.

"I always heard he was a nutcase," the Cabby smiled, looking back over his shoulder, trying to keep track of the whisky, which was on the second pint by now.

"Something's not right," Ralph said.

“Yes,” said Francis. “It’s obvious. He’s playing a part.”

“That is true. Again, I have been trying to elicit a response from each of you. It has helped me immensely- and yet I can still say nothing.”

“So all of that just now-,” Clyde began.

Bridge patted Clyde’s shoulder. “It was nothing, my friend. A shenanigan designed to elicit a response. That is all. Everything we have done today has been of immense importance. The only part in which I was not being facetious is in that of the sex of the victim. Although it is very important to the case to know the victim’s sex, in fact it has been my most helpful piece of evidence so far, it is impossible for me to say right now, as no doubt the spy is in the dark as to the sex of the victim, and is hoping that I tell freely exactly that. It is a trap I am unwilling to fall for my dear Clyde.”

“Of course Bridge, of course. Your brilliance never ceases to amaze me.”

“Nor me either Clyde. But not to be rude, here is where we get out. It’s back to the office again old boy, where we can have a drink and discuss these matters that the day has provided us with.”

“Certainly.”

The cab pulled up in front of the office, and the two men got out, paid for their portion of the bill and then disappeared into the building.

“Come sit back here with us,” Cass said as soon as they were out of sight, speaking to Francis.

Francis climbed out and came around to the back. She sat as far as possible from the couple, watching them with her large brown eyes.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “It has been so much excitement. Too much for me really. I don’t know how much longer I can stay in this cab. It feels like it’s possessed. If you could just take me about a mile down this street here, there’s a little hotel I know, and it has a great restaurant attached to it that isn’t expensive at all. I need some place where I can just hole up and be alone for a while.”

“Why, don’t you have anywhere to stay?” asked Ralph.

#

The moon breaks its way through the trees, but nothing else stirs and the sudden silence feels very empty. So this is loneliness Betty. All around me the grand chestnut trees hang silently, gloomy witnesses, and the still leaves feel like this restless absence.

There were so many dreams we had together girl. There were so many nights we spent together that convinced me there was substance to these dreams, like a shared feeling at the bottom of a beautiful blue solo. Our memories girl, yours and mine. Our shared memories. The way we would talk together like we wouldn’t talk with no one else, and the way we looked at each other, and the strangeness of us, me being old and you being young and all the ways that made us seem closer together not farther apart. These things were real, weren’t they? Say they were all the fantastic imaginations of an old man, say they were only that, like feeble, like senile murmurings in the middle of a lively song, and suddenly you put out the sky. When I was up there playing Betty, I was playing those songs for you. When the audience was out there swaying Betty they were swaying for you, only they didn’t quite know it. When we kissed, when you kissed me, when I kissed you, we kissed with so much soul, so much soul I couldn’t even blow into a flute so much soul and prettiness the way we kissed, and there is no sky Betty, hell there isn’t anything if there wasn’t that.

So this is loneliness Betty. Like finding yourself outlived one morning, like maybe twenty years ago when you knew you blew it, and by blew it you meant everything, that you blew life, and that you were still trying and kept telling yourself you were noble and knowing the whole time you was just a coward, and then you try to recapture it. It’s like children Betty, like trying to keep going. Like knowing you blew it. Maybe that’s all it was, and then that’s all anything is, all we were Betty, all anything is, like knowing you blew it and trying to keep going, and trying to get back what you blew and knowing all the time, blowing energy into what you did once love, onstage, everyone watching, and only you knowing you blew it, and trying to keep going, and having children and having a Betty, and watching yourself dying in their youth, but them not knowing your secret, one so deep you’ll never let anyone know it, not even yourself, your secret, you blew it. And you know it and Betty knows it and all those children, they knows it, and there you are, blowing out your soul onstage, and nobody lets on to anyone, not even themselves, that they know it. So you got a whole room full of music and sound and color and liveliness, and everybody knowing you blew it and nobody knowing nothing. That’s all it comes down to Betty. There were so many dreams we had together girl. Do you remember that time we took a boat all the way to Paris, and they was gonna pay for me to play out there? Sure you do

girl, and I felt something in that. We were on that boat and we was dancing and drinking and carrying on, you know the way we do, and then some fancy young man in a smart suit comes up to you and wants to take you away. Do you remember that Betty? And how me and him, we got into a fight, and how he said he would throw me on over into the ocean, and I said I'd like to see him try, 'cuz not if I got him thrown over first, let me be an old man even if I am? And then that time we was just walking along after a show, and you picked me a flower, and old fool that I am I stuck it in my hat, happy as a rabbit in his hole? Then you said you didn't even want to be seen walking next to me, some crazy old man with flowers in his hat, just strutting his way along. We have so many good memories girl, so many good ones, like when I would come on by your apartment, and there I was trying to teach you to play a flute, and holding your hand and showing you the fingering, and there you were, playing those raspy notes, and sounding horrible and you just screamed and offered me some hot coffee. Well, I don't much like coffee Betty, but you never knew that because how could I resist just sitting there drinking coffee and talking with you? Sure Betty, it gets me to thinking that maybe I'm wrong, that maybe there is something, that maybe it's not all about blowing it and not being worth it anymore, and all the youth and soul is gone and that was all that mattered. Because the soul is still there baby, and the youth is still there too, and it isn't just there 'cuz of you girl. You help, but it isn't just because of you. I go around places Betty. I have thoughts and feelings and emotions, and they're not the same as when I was a younger man, but then they couldn't be. A younger man couldn't have them. And maybe there's something more tired to me baby, something more defeated. Maybe I don't have the energy and the brightness and vivacity as when I was a young man, hell maybe I don't even have dreams anymore girl, and let's say I've outlived myself. Can't I play that too? Isn't there something in that as well, maybe something even more revolutionary than the unusual experimentation that fascinated me so much when I was young? That stuff was only kind of real, and others were doing it, and we were doing it but had maybe lost sights of why, and so we couldn't really take it anywhere. But this is all I got anymore Betty, this being older and sadder and less alive, and that's pretty in its way. And its not been done; hell, Betty it valid. It's damn valid. And that's why when I play up there I move them folks, and I mean the young and the old, because what I have

in me is something everyone's got in them, only it's waiting to unfold in the young, like some terrible prophecy, and they hear me play that flute, and something in them starts to laugh and cry hard. Like the way I touched you girl. Like how I got to your soul. And you can't say there was never anything there, that I never touched you deep in your heart, like you were looking directly into this prophecy and loving me for it, and learning from me through it. I saw the way you looked at me sometimes, wishing I was younger sometimes, but that would be impossible; you wouldn't have loved me like you loved me if I was younger, and that's why I say the way I play is valid. That what I've got to say in my music is more valid now than ever. That as a failure I'm more successful than ever. Is that fair to say? Can an art of failure be an unparalleled success?

So this is loneliness Betty. Sitting here, looking out over the lake with the silver reflections from the moon running smooth over the surface. Looking at all the small stars hidden and vague behind the heavy leaves of the chestnut trees. Remembering youth and validating the present. Making excuses for yourself. The absence of you. Betty. And this horrible silence, initiated with violence, and then the slow drowned out roll of the jazz pushing in from the background, back at the club where they're swinging and drinking and getting high. Or your body baby, lying there, all elegant and wonderful, sleeping beauty. No Night can fade your beauty. All of it, and everything, right now, where everything's just peaceful and sad, and the moment before which was all anxiety and anguish and hurt; confusion of the worst sort, and not knowing what to do, and acting out of my mind and knowing I'm acting out of my mind, and not even minding it. All back to now where it gets quiet and peaceful and sad, even sentimental with the drowned out jazz, just humming in the background. And then the next moment, finishing it all. Washing everything away, the bodies and a lake, and how much it's gonna hurt, and walking around in fear for the rest of my limited time, looking at folks and wondering what they know and wondering about that peculiar light in their eyes, and always wondering... Never being able to act straight with anyone again. Exile, baby. Exile around your own kind, exile in your own land, exile among those not your kind, exile in foreign lands. This constant terrified sleepiness, like just wanting to drop off, and feeling like you're going to any moment, and then not doing it because you're afraid, and going about like that everyday. And validating yourself, what you do, why the

hell you're still alive, saying silly things to yourself, like fooling yourself into thinking your failure is a success, and other logical lies like that.

There were so many dreams we had together girl. Even today when we were driving through the rurals of Illinois, and the wind was blowing through the car, and we was talking and smiling, I know there were moments when we were as close as two people are gonna get. Just sitting there in that car, and neither of us needing to say anything to the other, just flying across the golden roads all thoughtless for love. And that was just today baby, that was just today, and now here we are at tonight, and I gotta wonder baby, what happened? And didn't I know it to begin with, waking up this morning, waking up without dreams, waking up drunk, waking up alone. Didn't I know? And then I go back and tell myself that I'm just being a foolish old man, that if I get to thinking about it, thinking about our memories, thinking about how I got nothing to give you but my love, and there wouldn't be any other reason for a young girl like you to be messing around with an old fool like me, that I should realize that we got something pure, that we got something real, like in the movies, like everyone wants to have and like everyone wants to think they have and like nobody does have, but we have it. But I don't know girl, that's obvious. I don't know what you were thinking, and I never will. I never would have anyway, 'cuz you'd a never told me, and that's probably right, because I wouldn't understand. We were worlds away baby, we were conversing but it was like we were characters in two separate stories, conversing in their own way back and forth, but really we were worlds away, worlds that didn't even run by the same damn logic. And I think everybody's gotta be like that, because I always get to feeling lonely and down, even when I'm with you sometimes I just drift off and get to feeling lonely and down, and then even when I'm with the guys, well then a lot of the times I get to feeling lonely and down and blue, and then all I can think to do is play the flute, and believe it or not baby, a lot of the time that'll be just enough to help bridge up the gap a little bit. And it doesn't even matter, 'cuz I don't need to validate what I do anymore baby; I don't care anymore if I'm revolutionary, because I guess in my way I will be if I just play. I got nothing to play for. I got no hopes of victory, fame or fortune. Not even a tiny little glimmer, 'cuz my day is done. I got nothing to play for except sometimes when I'm playing and I'm playing good and it gets downright personal like I might

just any minute break down and cry, I bridge that gap a little bit. And I like it when I do that, 'cuz I feel I'm getting close to people, I'm getting to know them, like I don't feel blue anymore.

And so this is loneliness Betty. When you don't know what you're doing or why you're doing it, and you're running around half the time just talking to people and trying to feel like you're getting somewhere with yourself and with others and you know at the bottom of it all you haven't gotten any damn place at all. When you're just plain living your life the way you feel you got to live it; when you're paying your bills, when you're eating your breakfast, when you're just walking on down the street, when you're watching TV. It's everything baby, when you're washing the dishes, when you're out with your friends, when you're out in a car with your best girl, and the wind and the breeze make you feel just perfect, when you feel that intimate connection between the two of you, like there ain't anything else to even consider in the world, when you're making love, especially baby when you're making love. And it only stops when you're performing. When you're playing those notes, be it alone at home or in front of a crazy party; and then it's over, and then you're in the party and you're there with everyone else drinking and dancing and getting high while somebody else plays, but it don't matter none anymore that you're alone, 'cuz you can't feel it, 'cuz you played it out, and there you are just talking and laughing and socializing so glowingly it's almost like you jumped up in church and started speaking in tongues. And then there you are at life's best, and then you go home with your gal and you make love to her all night, and all that loneliness isn't there 'cuz you blowed it out early that evening, and you can keep on going with her like a man possessed. And that's just what I'll do tonight, only you won't be there tonight Betty to give it that special ending, but maybe I'll just go through Chicago and find myself a nice young girl on the street and I can take her back to your apartment and turn off the light, and it might as well be you if she's young. After all, don't nothing really exist anyway.

There were so many dreams we had together girl. And I'm gonna rediscover them tonight. I'm gonna run through them, our dreams, or memories, one by one, playing that flute like there ain't nothing else. I'm gonna close my eyes and play and play and play. Then the set will be done, and I'll be on fire, and then I'm gonna start

drinking, and I'll smoke some reefer and I'll talk and laugh and socialize. I'm gonna kiss the pretty young girls, I'm gonna play cards and drink whisky with the guys, and I'm gonna get myself so damn blind it'll be lucky if I can ever see again. Then I'm gonna get in my car and go for a nice long drive out into the rurals, maybe drive all the way home. I'm gonna pick up all my most important things, and drink all the way back into the city, swerving around those damn city streets like a man gone mad. And that won't be the end of it. Then I'm gonna drive through the dark and shady streets of Chicago and find a nice young girl, she's gotta be young Betty, and pick her on up. I'm not gonna go cheap either, I'll get one of the best- a real professional baby. Then I'm gonna take back to your apartment and I'll holler your name all night long. After all, I been getting to thinking lately. Maybe I should move on into the city.

So this is loneliness Betty. Exile.

#

No, she hadn't anywhere to go. She'd even wanted to stay with Ralph and Cass, because she liked Cass very much and Ralph amused her, but she sat in the cab and looked at their reflections in the window thinking, I can never stay with them. Not even another hour would have been bearable, and past everything, outside the window of the cab where dark buildings ran by in black and gray shapes, the reflection of the two lovers faded in and out, while they spoke to each other comically in what seemed to Francis a foreign language. Ralph had been leaning forward, facing Cass, his face real proud, and his eyes were wide. He was grinning the entire time. Every time he spoke, and Francis couldn't understand a word of it, it sounded to her like Russian or German or French, or maybe even all of them, his voice and tone and posture seemed suddenly to agree, and although the words were strange, Francis felt as if she understood the whole conversation between these two images in glass.

Cass was more casual. She sat back, her face relaxed now that Bridge and Clyde were gone, and obviously enjoying the soft effects of the liquor. Francis thought she looked like a French film noir movie star, and she wished she could curl up underneath her and lay there trembling and giggling slyly. When Cass spoke her voice came out slow and demure, and what she said, although Francis could only understand what she said by how she said it, was witty and charming, perfect

feminine responses to Ralph's good humored, cleverly foolish and brazen masculinity. Watching the two made Francis think of Rebecca, and that made her sad, but since Francis had never been with a man, and Rebecca had been extremely feminine all the time, and moreover always sedate and melancholy, watching these two lovers was comparable to watching a whole dramatic world of emotions and sensations unfold that, while making Francis curious, also repulsed her. The fact that she could sit and watch them unabashedly in the glass window added to her impression of being an audience to some surreal drama, and the two bizarre lovers were no more real than images seen on the movie screen. This transmigration of the real into the unreal gave Francis the sudden desire to step across the borders of the real with them, and she felt as long as she was in the enchanted cab, she had some place in the strange and unreal world of these two lovers. But she sat in the cab and looked at their reflections in the window thinking, I can never stay.

Which left her where she'd already been: with nowhere to go. The futility of the day was asserting itself on her heavily as she sat and thought back on these things in the hotel bar; the way she'd tried to cling to the magic of the enchanted cab; the way she'd jumped into a cab full of people simply to be daring and fun; the way she'd changed her hairstyle so she'd no longer recognize herself; the way she'd taken trains around the city just for something to do- or so she imagined- she really had no idea why she'd spent the entire morning riding the train through the city and back again. And then of course the bar, a drink, memories, where she naturally found herself again, regret for the past.

Not that she didn't like this place, she hadn't lied when she expressed her enthusiasm to Cass, she just felt kind of lonely and sad, and she realized that she'd been feeling this way all day long; and while she admitted that this didn't surprise her, it sort of startled her in a frightening manner, and right there in the middle of the bar a warm plump tear rolled down her cheek and lingered at the corner of her mouth. She wiped it away and looked up and smiled. The atmosphere was sterile, and that's why Francis liked it. The walls were pink and white, decorated here and there with quaint provincial paintings of gardens and houses and people, and the bar, situated toward the back of this large one room establishment had well polished silver rails running above and below

it. There was even a carpet, and it was pink. Francis wasn't seated at the bar, she rarely felt comfortable doing that, and if she did, it was only in dives like the place she'd been to that morning. She was sitting at a table, in a comfortable leather chair, looking blankly out the window, and thinking of how the bar reminded her of airport bars.

There weren't very many other people around, but just her luck those that were there were lovers. Francis shrugged and thought it served her right, it made sense. This was the perfect type of bar for young lovers, who couldn't afford to go anywhere very fancy, but wanted a semi-elegant atmosphere. There was music playing, and it was Dixieland, and Francis could get along with that. They'd played that song again, the one she'd heard earlier in the morning, the same one that she heard for the first time, or maybe just noticed for the first time, the night she met Rebecca. It hadn't evoked those stupid and romantic memories this time, like it had that morning, it just seemed awkward. She enjoyed the song, she liked listening to it, but it wasn't as sacred to hear it again like that. She felt like it was stalking her, and that just made her feel terrified. Terrified and alone. And then she started to think about how everything was like this- this moment- where she was sitting by herself in this made up bar, made up for couples, drinking a martini and trying not to look at anyone too directly. This moment where she was trying to recapture lost sensations and impressions, and where she was trying to run from them as well. This moment that was caught up more with the past than with itself, that dragged itself back into pining for an enchanted cab and an enchanting girl. This moment, awkward, exposed and nothing that it aspired to be, ashamed of itself, like Noah waking up hung over and naked. And then there were all these people. The gentle couples in the bar who sat cooing at each other, their indifference to her making her feel twice as awkward; the waitress who continued to come back, and whose calm and friendly smile hid every uncomfortable thought behind an aggravating politeness. Which got Francis to thinking about how she hated politeness, how she hated polite people, how it was, of all the sins, one of the most smug, insincere and aggravating. She thought about her loneliness, and it seemed to her immense- how many times had she thought she'd finally found a friend, and all it had really been was someone's ridiculous politeness- everything uncertain. What about Rebecca? Was their relationship based on nothing but politeness?

Certainly Cass was very polite, but that was the extent of her feeling toward Francis. Politeness. And France had been dreaming all these great dreams of forming a wonderful friendship with her.

Well they were just that and she knew it, dreams. Nothing more than her interest in the hairdresser had been. But she liked the Inspector, Bridge. He hadn't been polite at all. He'd been downright rude! And the game that he made them play in the cab! Certainly his intellect was unmatched, and she thought again of that hawk nose, and those beady eyes, and she shivered. What does he know? What can those eyes see- and that mind of his reason out?

But all of these thoughts vanished as soon as they formed themselves, and she found herself left with again, as always, nothing to do. And the only thing she could think to do was to sit in this bar and continue to drink, savoring the passing sensations, until finally the liquor inspired her into some other action. Some other action that would probably involve drinking more, maybe going to a dive bar, or maybe going dancing, or maybe, she thought, throwing herself from a bridge. It was a bad night for her to drink a lot, but she would go ahead and do it anyway.

Just as she was having these thoughts, and her loneliness was cocooning around her, sharp and painful, but becoming, in its constancy, somewhat numbing and pleasant, outside of the bar window she saw a troop of people in colorful costumes pass by, followed by bombastic music, drums, trumpets and flutes. A parade! The effect on Francis was mortifying, looking on the slow crowds of people that began to pass in the triumphant procession, families, lovers, friends, students, children with their pets, the drunks and barflies. The effect was mortifying because it seemed to her a final and dramatic testament of her separation from all other people, and this feeling of exile, from those she felt were like her, for example Cass, and from those she felt were unlike her, for example the hairdresser, made this cocoon of loneliness she'd spent the whole of the day spinning around herself suck suddenly inwards, and gave her the impression of suffocation. She stood up, flustered, watching blearily the parade go by, and not knowing what to do, not knowing what she could do, feeling generally helpless, she sat back down again. She wanted to rush out into the parade, to follow after all the people and the music screaming good

natured antics, like the drunks, whatever came to her mind, but the whole thing was absurd, everyone looked charming in their role, she would just look foolish. What's more all her speech was trapped in her throat, and in her wild bewilderment, she would've been unable to say, or even think of, anything at all. And then there was the final consideration, and that was confronting the image of being trapped out there, with no one she could speak to among all those people, terrified and alone, unable to recapture her peaceful solitude and unable to connect with another person, which, after all, struck her as a kind of solitude anyway.

But she wanted to see it more than ever, so she stood up again, and she saw herself in the glass, her tall and slender shape, warm brown skin, large brown eyes; but her face and her posture looked to her unrecognizable. She stood tall, erect, like a mannequin trapped majestic, draped in soft and dark blue, like musical tones of color. And beyond that she was grotesque: bizarre ornaments, oddly dressed performers, colorfully clad kids passed beyond the glass that held captive her image. And she watched this mesh of images and color with a horrible fascination, and she started to shake, she didn't know if she was laughing or crying. The desire had seized her completely now to be a part of that wild frenzy, and it was some bacchanalian delirium, and she felt in her blood all the pounding and adrenaline that she imagined preceded one of these festivals. She turned to go. The mesh of images was still twisting wildly in her head. She felt faint. Someone took hold of her arm and she sat down.

A moment later she saw she was facing a very good looking gentleman: tall, well-built, extremely well dressed in a black suit that maybe bore an Italian name. He was looking at her ironically, like someone might look at a child. She smiled at him nervous and pulled her arm away. He didn't say anything; he just continued to smile, his charm expressing itself completely through his face. She looked at him, and she didn't say anything either; her eyes got very wide, and in spite of herself, she smiled too. She felt like she was thanking him for helping her sit down. She wanted him to know that she didn't know what had come over her- that she didn't know what she was doing. The waitress came with two martinis. Francis looked up at her and smiled; she didn't have to feel embarrassed anymore. The gentleman was watching Francis closely the entire time, only now he'd relaxed himself somewhat in his seat,

and his smile was more regular and casual. Francis wanted to say something to him, but she just lifted the glass to her lips slowly and looked at him sly, like she was giving a toast. He understood and lifted his glass as well. Once that was done Francis thought that he surely would say something, she'd had enough experience with men making advances on her; but he didn't say a word, he even stopped looking at her. Instead he sat quietly back, sipping his martini and gazing absentmindedly into the air. It seemed so absurd to Francis that she just sat there looking down into her drink, taking occasional sips, and glancing occasionally up at her partner. Still he said nothing. Francis would have said something herself, only she felt captivated by this unusual man, and she wondered how long this unusual man would keep it up. Under normal circumstances she would've even felt uncomfortable, nervous or awkward, but there was something about the gentleman's demeanor, the way that he coolly blended into the setting, the way he tapped his fingers and nodded his head so subtly to the music, the way the light reflected off of him, the way that he sat posed as if in perpetual contemplation, something so statuesque about him, that made her feel very comfortable sitting there watching him, smiling up at him through occasional sly glances.

At last he finished his drink. He put the glass down on the table, and bringing his gaze downward with the glass, alighted his eyes on Francis. He smiled like he was pleasantly surprised by her presence. Francis smiled back, and she realized that her eyes were locked in his, almost as if she were in some kind of hypnotic trance. She watched him as he reached into his coat and pulled out his wallet. He produced from it a thin black card, with silver writing and flourishes. Francis took it in a daze, and breaking her gaze from his, she looked down at the card. It was a formal invitation to a party. The party was being held by Mr. Louis Devine. It was for that very evening, right in the heart of the city. Francis was excited. She looked up at Mr. Louis Devine and he smiled at her before getting up to leave. Once he was standing he very gracefully took her hand and kissed it. Then he directed it delicately back onto the table. Francis watched him leave with a frozen smile. She stood and turned around to watch him as he passed from the restaurant, passed in front of the window. A moment later he was gone, and Francis realized that the parade was gone too.

#

The moment we stepped through the door and were back inside the office Bridge wasted no time in assuming his most natural stance: he lit his pipe and began to pace, puffing thoughtfully and looking into the air with an almost vacant expression. After a few minutes had passed in this fashion, while I sat flipping through a magazine, he turned to me and asked, "So what do you make of this whole affair now, old man?"

I looked up from the magazine and shrugged. "I can make nothing of it Bridge. As far as I can see when we left the cab we'd lost everything we thought we'd found, and we were without any direction at all."

"Yes, that was the impression I was clever enough to portray," Bridge said. "I had hoped that you would respond in that way. For if I fooled you, who have studied all this time under my keen supervision, than I have fooled everyone."

"Then you mean you know something after all?"

"Know something!" Bridge laughed. "My dear Clyde. I am almost certain of knowing everything. I am pretty certain of who the killer was, and I am pretty certain of who the spy was, and I am pretty certain of the importance of both of their roles."

"You must tell me," I said.

"I will admit to you," Bridge said smiling, sitting down and pouring himself a large glass of whisky, "something which you already know, and which I should not have to tell you. In fact, once I do admit it to you, it will surprise you that you hadn't picked up on it earlier. But in the heat of the moment, few people are astute enough to pick up on the most basic and obvious of truths."

"And what is this strange confession?"

"I admit to you, Clyde, that I was the spy. And you yourself as well in a manner of speaking, since you were acting as my assistant. I put my knowledge of a spy down to intuition, a faculty of thought which is, while important, careless at best. But I needed neither intuit nor reason the presence of a spy, since I myself was the spy in the cab, and knew it all along."

"Then what was the purpose of bringing it up at all?"

"My methods are complicated and unorthodox Clyde, but rest assured, they strictly follow the fundamental tenants of rigorous logic, and by implanting that suggestion of an anonymous spy, I turned the game into a much more complicated one. More complicated especially for the killer-since naturally a panic of paranoia would invade

our killer's consciousness with the knowledge that someone, the killer knows not who, is spying for a reason our killer knows not what. And moreover, the killer most likely fears that the spy knows who the killer is, while the killer does not know who the spy is. It was a complicated psychological game I was playing in that cab Clyde, and the presence of the liquor was doubly clever, for that dulled their wits, while I, under the influence of alcohol only become more logical and astute."

"That is very remarkable."

"Yes it is Clyde. And I am a remarkable man. But listen to me closely. Through all that we have accomplished today, we have still not accomplished enough. I am almost certain of my conclusions, but I must find out how Ralph and Cass spend the rest of their day."

"And how do we intend to do that? We've already lost them. The cab has pulled off, and we've no idea where they're going!"

"My dear Clyde, you really do underestimate me! After all these years together, have I ever once been known to be so careless in my execution?"

"No, I suppose not Bridge- I just can't fathom how-"

"No matter, I will tell you."

"Tell me first Bridge, for this interests me the most, who is the killer, how do you know this, and what is the sex of the corpse?"

"Ah, my dear Clyde! You amaze me that after all we have witnessed, you are not certain yourself. But I will put it to you." Here Bridge stood and began to pace anew, puffing luxurious blue rings of smoke into the air. "I must give the Washingtonian Irregular due compliment on his abilities as a sleuth. Given nothing other than a few facts, I believe he pieced together the very germ of the mystery. He may have strayed on a few details here and there, but these things even I am not certain of, these are issues which we will have to confront tonight-"

"Tonight?"

"Let me finish Clyde."

"Certainly."

"The Washingtonian based his entire argument on the fact that the corpse was a woman. I tell you now that in this, and in this alone, he was wrong; and yet the stem of his argument was precise. The only fallacy in the Washingtonian's argument was that Ralph should be obsessed with a female. No. He was more willing to accept that Cass became obsessed with the female than that Ralph could be obsessed with another man. Let us look at the evidence. We have just observed

Ralph. He is not an old man, but he is certainly no longer young- he is getting up on his years. He is a very weak and timid man- in a way he is effeminate. Cass is, as the Washingtonian himself suggested, most definitely the power figure in the relationship. And yet there is no reason for us to believe that Cass is the type of woman to find herself attracted to the ideal of another woman when she herself is young, younger than Ralph certainly, self willed and self assured. These are all qualities Ralph lacks. A very happy addition to our company, one whom I almost wanted to reject was that young lesbian Francis. Now I observed very closely the interaction between Francis and Cass, because much of the psychology of the Washingtonian's argument depended on this. But, while I saw that Cass was at times flirtatious with this obviously interested girl, her indifference, and her true devotion to Ralph was clearly manifest. Therefore, looking at the two personalities, the one more likely to be guilty of idealizing a member of the same sex was Ralph. Moreover I caught a brief glance at the police station, and I am certain that it was a man I saw lying there- and a man that fits perfectly for my theory. This man- and here is where the confusion of the sex lies, was very young and very handsome. He had boyish features- features that could very well be considered feminine. His hair was short, but not too short. His face was smooth and clean. His lips were bright and red, and his cheeks were full of vivacity. He wasn't strong or exceptionally well built, but he was slender and girlish, and all of this- this antithesis to the awkward, old and, not to do the man injustice, but somewhat chubby Ralph, became for Ralph the ideal boy. He envied him so much that he in a sense fell in love with him. He would watch him, just as the Washingtonian suggested, day after day, burning with love and envy, and yet he could do nothing about it, for essentially Ralph is not a homosexual. But in these spaces, and here is another of the fallacies in the argument of the Washingtonian that my theory answers, he would forget about Cass. Now I am prepared, as the Washingtonian was, to accept that he would literally forget about her, because this youth inspired in him fantasies of a different, or more youthful and lovely version of himself. Sometimes perhaps he even imagined himself something of a girl. And then who was Cass? Of what importance was she? Did she have any aspect in his life at all? It is an unusual pathology, but it is not unheard of, my dear Clyde. And if this object of adoration had been female, what would have stopped Ralph from acting upon his desires?

Shyness, perhaps the Washingtonian would suggest. But it couldn't be shyness, because we know from Cass herself that Ralph had approached her on the street from out of the blue. If he had the ability to do it once, this desire of his would certainly be strong enough for him to do it again. And if we admit that he had forgotten Cass, that in any case, she hadn't any more importance, than his fidelity to her could not be the reason for his not approaching this lovely young creature. That leaves the only possible explanation as mine. He could not approach this boy because he was not a homosexual, and as in love as he might have been, he couldn't bring himself to that level.

"So there we have the beginning of our drama. The rest unfolds exactly as the Washingtonian suggests. Cass begins to resent this young man, she has noticed him because Ralph has forgotten her, and so she goes around to find him. Think of the way she spoke of her dead friend. With such fondness and with such bitterness. They would sometimes sit together for hours without speaking, etcetera. What do we make of that Clyde, eh? And so she in a sense falls in love with this man too, and yet she despises him. But she thinks that if she loses herself in him, like Ralph does, she can be happy. She tries to keep it up for a while, and at first, it works. But her hatred and her love for this young man are in conflict, and one night, out of her mind with grief and confusion, she comes by his house and kills him. Then she returns to Ralph, who, at first doesn't remember her, but after perhaps a few love letters, pretty memories, whatever you may, he comes around to it, and she calls us first thing in the morning."

I sat contemplating Bridge's argument the entire time he spoke, and I must admit that it intrigued me. Halfway through it I poured myself a drink and tried to seize, as Bridge could, truth in liquor. Slowly I felt it descending upon me, like grace on a prophet. Everything seemed warm and strange and wonderful, and I felt very inspired. As I spoke, I spoke like a man possessed, feeling myself through the words before I even knew what I would say, trying to drag myself along Bridge's method.

"That is a very intriguing theory Bridge, and for the most part I think it is right. But perhaps we have been too narrow in our search for the killer?"

"How do you mean?" Bridge said turning to face me.

"We know nothing about the deceased. We know nothing about his particulars. We know nothing of whom he knew, whom he was connected to, and to what extent he was connected

to Ralph and Cass. I am suggesting something very unusual, and you must take it as you hear it. I am only beginning to understand your methods, so perhaps you will be able to see through this theory immediately. But perhaps the Washingtonian was the killer.”

“Go on,” Bridge said, frozen in place, puffing vigorously upon his pipe.

“Well I was thinking about what you said- that the Washingtonian was very astute given the few facts that he had. It seems to me that we have arrived where we are because of extensive investigation. But he had nothing. Now here is what I am suggesting. The Washingtonian, and so naturally the rest of The Irregulars were in some way connected with this couple. Although they would be a frightful group to someone like Ralph, I am sure that they would be very agreeable to someone like Cass, who seems to like to explore all avenues of life. Moreover, the fact that they are such Irregulars, as you yourself call them, would be of some interest to Ralph, as he is by profession a psychologist. Now all of this is very vague, and I can connect no logic to it. But let me here, just once employ a strange intuition. The Washingtonian’s astuteness is the very root of this intuition. The fact that Ralph and Cass can stroll about like two happy birds the day after a brutal murder is another foundation for the intuition. The fact that Ralph and Cass are clearly not killers, and could not be killers is another. I am not saying that Cass did not kill her- maybe she did and maybe she didn’t. It is possible that she hired the Washingtonian to do the act for her. But I do not believe that is the case, because I have seen in the demeanor of the Washingtonian that he is a man guided more by passion and pathos than by money or business. I am not certain he would kill for business, as one of the other Irregulars might do. I believe, and again, this is all just a gut feeling, but one that I feel should at least be explored, that the Washingtonian is in love with Cass. He knew the deceased was a man, but he threw in a female to throw us off the track, and to still, in a sense, tell the truth. Often a killer has a heavy need for confession, especially if he kills for love. Supposing all of this is true, and again, he was the only one who understood what Cass meant when she said that Ralph had forgotten her, suppose he had watched the relationship of the two with a sad envy. Then the day came that Ralph became infatuated with this young boy. This was a good day for the Washingtonian, because he hoped Ralph would discover himself a homosexual. In the meantime Cass was forgotten, and the Washingtonian could watch her more closely than

ever. But Ralph never approached the young man, and instead of paying attention to the Washingtonian, Cass began to pay attention to this young man. Now it had been a very long time that Ralph had forgotten Cass, and the only thing that seemed to stand between the Washingtonian and Cass was this young man. Our Irregular never figured that Cass survived only through the young man. He figured that once this young man was dead, and now that Ralph seemed to have forgotten her, she would have nowhere to turn, and he could make his appearance. So he went last night to the house of this young Adonis, and brutally murdered him. He hoped to make his appearance to Cass in the morning. Instead we made our appearance to him. I’m certain it must have been very startling and upsetting, but from there all he could do was confess without confessing in the agonies of his despair.”

Bridge fell into his seat, and took a long drink. He did not speak and he did not look at me, but sat gazing into the air and puffing on his pipe. His face looked as if it were locked in the most concentrated thought.

“Well,” I said. “What do you make of it?”

“I am certain,” he said after some time, “that you are wrong.”

I grimaced at him.

“Not so hasty Clyde. Obviously my genius is rubbing off on you. I am only certain you are wrong in particulars, and I think you have opened a whole new dimension to this case that I have very stupidly overlooked. One that changes the very nature of it, and may answer questions that even my theory, tight as it was, had overlooked. Questions which I hoped would be illuminated tonight, nay, which I thought could only be illuminated later tonight, but are illuminated now instead.”

“I don’t know what you mean Bridge.”

“No? But you yourself have said it. I have not questioned myself enough about what part The Irregulars must play in this. It seems that they are never uninvolved with some scandal or other in this city, and what they told us, save for the Washingtonian’s theory, which was too detailed not to be suspicious, as you have just pointed out, was so vague and unfinished that it seems ridiculous we accepted it from them. And then they have tricked us into focusing all of our energies onto Ralph and Cass. This in itself was extremely logical, since Ralph and Cass were logical subjects. But they made us make the illogical assumption that it had to be one or the other. I do believe that they have a definite connection with the murder, just observing them

today, outside of the deceased simply being Cass' friend, but the question as to what that connection is becomes broader now. But more than this- and here is in a sense the crux of our problem now, now that we are taking The Irregulars into perspective- how did Cass know that her friend had been murdered before the body was discovered?"

"These are very good and difficult questions Bridge," I said, taking another long drink. "What do you propose we do about them?"

"Is it not obvious?"

"Obvious, how so?"

"We have to go and find The Irregulars, and then tonight everything will unfold before our eyes as I unwrap the final drama."

"What's so special about tonight Bridge? Why do you keep referring to it? I still don't even understand how we are to find Ralph and Cass now that we've let them go. Sure, it's always easy enough to find The Irregulars, but we can't press them for knowledge about Ralph and Cass, not right away anyway, or they'll know we're onto them."

"Naturally. My dear Clyde, we are going to a party tonight."

"To a party?"

"Yes Clyde. That is, after all, where I am certain Ralph and Cass will be."

"And how do you know this Bridge?"

"Do you remember that gentleman that passed us as we were spying on the two lovers? The one that had been sitting with them?"

"Of course."

"Yes, did you notice that he handed Cass a card of some kind?"

"No, I didn't notice."

"My dear Clyde! No matter. In any case he did exactly that. Now when we got into the cab I made sure to get in right next to Cass, who, not expecting our most sudden arrival, had not put the card away; in her drunkenness she had been carrying it while flipping it through her fingers. Right before she got it into her purse I caught a keen look at it. It was a party invitation- I saw that immediately without even reading it. All that I actually needed to read was the address." Upon which he threw a notepad at me that had an address scrawled down on it. "And that I did quite successfully. The two of us must dress very nicely and attend this function. We will get The Irregulars to go with us."

"This will be bedlam!"

"That is what I'm hoping."

"But how do you know Ralph and Cass will be there?"

"My dear Clyde! We have already got them irresponsibly drunk. They will indeed be there."

"And what do we do in the meantime?"

"We must catch The Irregulars and get them into our confidence. Grab your coat. How do you feel about an afternoon spent drinking whisky and playing cards?"

#

The sun captured Cass in the corner of the cab, and Ralph lay back and smiled at her. Through the outskirts of the city, past small suburban houses and large lush fields of green grass and heavy green trees, the cab sailed smooth across blankets of bright blue sunshine. The two lovers were exhausted with liquor and with the lazy, happy sensation of being alone together, indolent and even somewhat bored. They'd been petting and kissing tenderly for some time, but now love's delirious exhaustion had overwhelmed them, and they both lay in opposite corners of the backseat, smiling fondly at each other. Small patches of light and shadow were dancing now over Cass' face, and they moved with such smooth rhythm, they seemed to suggest a perpetual motion towards an ecstasy of image.

"This is all that I ever wanted of us," Cass said soft and kind of sad, like she was speaking from out of a dream she'd suddenly become aware of; and the still calm smile on her face reflected her contentment, reflecting back Ralph's own.

"It seems like," Ralph said lazily, "we've been through so much-," he searched for the word, "unrest. I don't know why that is because I can't remember anything specific."

"We hadn't seen each other for a very long time."

"Yes," said Ralph, "it feels like it'd been a very long time."

A blue veil of light passed through the windows of the cab, shivering gently against the glass as it lingered.

"And why was that?" Ralph asked.

"You wrote to me," Cass smiled.

"Yes. I remember the letters now. They were touching. I think that I was very confused. I don't understand them anymore. Or maybe I don't understand us now. It feels like the afterlife."

Cass smiled.

"Am I making any sense?"

Cass turned up her head, so that her neck was exposed, and tiny ladders of shadows ran down her throat. She was looking up past the trees where the clouds looked through the sky down inwards, looking back at her.

"Am I making any sense?"

"It's because we're finally happy. We're finally peaceful together," she said at last. "It had been a long time Ralph."

"Yes, I know."

"It wasn't easy."

"No. It was never easy. Not even our best times."

"They seem so dark now."

"Like even bright summer afternoons we spent together walking around among bright colors."

"They seemed to be shaded with blue filters."

Cass looked back at Ralph. "What are we going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know really. Can we preserve this moment?"

"No, it's impossible. And even if we could we'd grow tired of it soon."

"Yes that's true."

"We have to make new ones." He paused. "Let's go away somewhere."

"Do you mean it Ralph?"

"Yes, absolutely. Forget about your friend, forget about our past, I'll do the same: leave my practice, leave my work, leave my patients."

"It's immoral."

"Yes. Deliciously so."

"Aren't you going to feel bad later on?"

"No. I plan to never regret anything ever again. Do you know Cass that I've spent my entire life feeling a vague sense of regret? Something that I can't even place. Regret for things I've no idea of what are."

"Regret for the past."

"Yes."

"But did you love your past?"

"No."

"It seems strange."

"Yes, it does. And I can't allow it to control me the way that I have. Every day goes by Cass, and I feel that it's grown heavier, as if there's something that I need to do, that I haven't done; that I'm always regretting, and I can't place it."

"Yeah?"

"But I know now Cass. And I think I've known a long time, and I can't be sure how I never managed to sort it out right. It's you Cass. It's you. I'm not certain there's ever been anything else."

"Been anything else?"

"At all."

"What do you mean?"

Large green trees, out past beyond Cass' head which lay trembling against the window, did a gentle dance in the tall grass. Ralph watched the

sun filter the patterns of their shadows over the rhythmic fields.

"Do you think anything exists?"

"I'm confused, Ralph."

"Well I don't. And I can't explain what that means, except that everything seems somehow-" and he searched for the right expression, "filtered through."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And then there's you. And through all of these images that filter themselves strangely through- I don't know what, there's something uniquely essential about you, like everything else could vanish, and even you could vanish, and still you'd be there- if only as a presence."

"Yeah? Ralph, I love hearing you talk this way."

"These are things I'm only just realizing."

"It's how I always felt about you."

"I think it's how I always felt about you too, but I've never had your insight. It's only now."

"Please don't speak to me about that."

"About what?"

"This thing you call my insight."

"But why not? It's precious- it's a gift. I've seen so many remarkable things in you. It's as if you already have knowledge of everything- just intuitively."

"Ralph you're being stupid. Everything I believe is wrong. I no longer believe myself- or at least these stupid paranoid intuitions you call my insight. I only believe in these, as you call them, moments of filtered images. And what else should I believe in? We've finally learned to trust each other Ralph, and not just ourselves. You never believed in my intuitions, and you were right not to. They only caused problems. But I never believed in you either, because I only believed in them. Ralph, I've cast them off."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm no longer going to hold myself to them. Why should I? I believe in you, not intuition. I want to believe in you, and I do. And you believe in me- without my intuitions. Anyway," and Cass laughed wearily, "you heard how Inspector Bridge said intuition is the weakest form of knowledge or whatever."

"Yes. Let's not talk about him."

"Shall we have no past?"

"None."

"Then there's only us now."

"And beyond."

"Yes."

"We'll go somewhere."

"Where will we go?" Cass' eyes, green and wide captured the light of the sun, and seemed to shine sad and wonderful.

"I don't know. Anywhere. Away from here. Far away."

"Someplace where we can start over."

"Or at least wipe clean the slate."

"Leave the country."

"Do we have the money for that?"

"We'll manage."

"Yeah?"

"Sure, we'll starve. It will be romantic."

"We can walk arm in arm through European cities, finding work, food and lodging wherever we can," Ralph said slyly, smiling at Cass.

"At night, in the snow, we'll have to huddle together to keep warm and gaze up at the stars."

"We'll spend all day in cafes sharing one cup of coffee because we'll have nowhere else to go."

"It's very romantic isn't it?"

"Sure it is, and it's silly too. We'll go away someplace, I'll open a new practice. And we'll get on just fine."

"But where will we go?"

"Someplace exotic!"

"Yes, definitely someplace exotic. I want to live on an island somewhere- no more cities like these East Coast cities. I hate them. I'm tired of them."

"New York, Washington, Boston..."

"They could all burn as far as I'm concerned."

"Cass, there's nothing more exciting than this."

Cass looked up and smiled. "No more murders and detectives and running around cities."

"We can start everything over again. We'll go somewhere and we'll be anonymous."

"Everything's been so dark and confusing up until now."

"It's strange that all along it's been this simple."

"Has it all been a matter of choosing?"

"Yes, I suppose that's it. I don't know. I don't understand my past. I don't even want to anymore. It drives my head in circles."

"I understand mine too well."

"The past seems fragmented."

"Or rather like a long monotonous line."

"It's best forgotten."

#

By the time I woke up the album had stopped playing. Small bars of morning sunlight were working their way through the blinds, and my desk lay cluttered with unfinished work. I felt like I'd only just dozed off a minute or two, but all

signs seemed to suggest the entire night had passed. I leaned forward and looked around at the study: the lamp was still on and the stereo was still on, blinking lights, a subtle whish of sound issued from the speakers. I scolded myself. It was a comfortable feeling. The room was warm, and the morning sunlight gave it an attractive golden glow. I thought back to the previous night, a wasted night really, but in its way touching. Freehand Fred. He'd been here, right here in this room, dancing with Betty. And all those other people, and the jazz and the slow rhythmic sway. I felt like I'd been to the jamboree myself.

I was still wearing my suit. I stood up, removed the coat, brushed it and hung it over the chair. Then I walked over to the stereo and turned it off. When I walked back to my desk I looked down at my calendar and noticed that I had some sort of social function to attend for the evening. Maybe there were some letters lying there too, but I'm not sure. Sometimes I'll leave old junk mail lying around, it's a bad habit of mine, and so I throw them out, usually without even glancing at them. I've gotten myself in trouble that way a couple times, but it's another bad habit of mine, and who can break old habits?

I thought I'd get some more sleep, it was still ridiculously early, and so I retired to my bedroom. I got undressed and crawled into bed. It was very comfortable. I lay there under the blankets just enjoying the feeling of warm blankets over my body and staring up at the ceiling until my eyes got heavy. Then I fell asleep.

I must've been real tired because I slept for a long time. It was almost dark again by the time I got up, and I couldn't believe that I'd slept so long. I pulled back the covers, slid out of bed and went to take a shower. I didn't feel like going to whatever function it was that I was supposed to attend, I didn't even remember being invited, and I wasn't sure who the host was: Louis Devine. I racked my head about it the whole time I was in the shower and the whole time I was getting dressed, but I couldn't place the name. Again, another fault of mine, my poor memory. It happens often that I'll forget this or that patient, that I'll miss this or that appointment, that I'll be late to a function, miss it altogether, etcetera. Being scatterbrained is an unfortunate curse, and the fact that it hasn't ruined my practice completely is a miracle I don't know how to account for.

I wanted to wear the suit I'd been wearing the night before, because it's the nicest one I have, but I'd wrinkled it beyond all hope sleeping in it, so it was no longer an option. There was no reason for me having worn it- I only wanted to listen to my old album with it on, and now that that novelty had passed it just seemed ridiculous. I probably never would've taken that chance if I'd remembered this function, and so I scolded myself again. It was a very self-deprecating evening.

I don't understand why I carry on with the monotony of this lifestyle. Isn't it clear that I'm unhappy with it? Everyday I get up and do the same old thing, and I do it badly. If I were good at what I did, if I had skill or talent for it, anything, maybe that'd be enough to justify it; I could pretend I was making some sort of martyr out of myself. But as it is I'm just deceiving my patients and myself. I could be doing a hundred other things with my life. I must have no imagination because I can't imagine what. I'm unspeakably lonely, I have trouble meeting other people. I have trouble socializing with other people. When I go to social events I don't even know who it is that's invited me, or why it is I feel compelled to go. My relationships with women have always been poor. Sometimes I like to walk around and watch people. Mostly I think that's what I like to do, and this is a very lonely activity too, but it's when I feel most at home. It seems that out there, in those vast crowds of people, in their interaction with each other the germ of knowledge- a vague term I know, must be hidden. And what's even more stupid is this useless pursuit of knowledge of mine. I don't know what I'm looking for, I don't know where to begin looking for it, but I've got this intuition that it's out there, and that it's important. As if beyond all the images that confront us during our day to day there's some sort of song that reaches back into infinity, beyond our perception- or at least our immediate perception- or perhaps only accessible to our cognition.

These thoughts are silly I know, and I can't possibly conceive of why they concern me. I guess I just needed to take a walk. I found some appropriate evening clothes and left my house, taking note of the address. I sort of wandered in the general direction I had to go. It was too far to walk, but I'd given myself enough time, and I wanted to take a walk and observe people. Everything still seemed to have a strange glow to it, as if I hadn't quite let go of Fred's jamboree, and it was still skewing my perceptions. The air

was pleasant and cool; I'd expected it to be colder. Little street lamps cast pleasant moon-like shadows over the sidewalks, and beneath the twilight sky, the colors seemed to blend together appropriately with the temperature. I watched a few of the girls that walked around, many were very pretty, but I didn't get the feeling that I was looking into something, so I kept on going. I saw a group of children playing in the street, and almost felt there was something, but they started to leer at me, and so I kept up my pace. I guess I often make people uncomfortable when I go out and watch them.

I remember there was this girl once I used to watch, and I still see her from time to time. She has wonderful skin, a copper-ebony color, and she often goes around with another girl. The first time I saw them I was surprised, because they were obviously lovers, and you don't see that kind of thing too often, at least not if you travel in the same circles I do. But they were out in the park, it was summertime, the middle of the day, and they were engaged in heavy intimacies. All in all I guess it was nothing serious, after all they were both dressed, but I couldn't help but stop and watch them from a safe distance. Naturally I wasn't the only one doing it, there were others; some people were downright impolite about it. Anyway, besides just being something of an oddity, and besides being somewhat erotic, I thought, in seeing them, that I was looking into something that contained that small germ of truth I'm always looking for. I didn't know exactly what it was about them, but something in the way that the two of them embraced, the way their expressions seemed frozen and moving, like in a very good painting, the way that the interaction between them seemed to suggest something more than just them themselves, I felt like I was gazing into the center of infinity. It was an experience so captivating that whenever I went out I made sure to look for the two of them again. It was a little while before I saw her again, and the second time I saw her I was doubly surprised because she was with someone else: a very young man. I followed them at a safe distance, watching as they walked down the street, engaging in small coquetries, like lovers do. When at last they turned and kissed I realized that I was watching exactly the same two people as before, only the other girl had cut her hair short, and her face looked a little more lifeless. It was astonishing. More than ever, especially in the fact that I could only recognize them in this embrace, I felt like I was gazing into some kind of wonderful infinity again, and ever

since that day onward I've kept constant vigil when out on the street for these two peculiar young lovers. I don't see them very often. I think that they have mood swings that waver between manic extroversion and intense introversion. Usually they must be pretty introverted. I haven't seen anyone else yet who's inspired in me the same sort of feeling. There was one time I remember I was watching them, and when at last my discretion made me turn away, I saw a pale young lady with black hair standing by herself underneath a street sign, kind of transfixed. I thought maybe in her I was feeling the same thing, but since I'd just been observing my two primary muses, I put it off to imagination. Besides, I've never seen that lady again since.

But I was looking out for this couple as I walked my way toward this social function. I didn't expect to see them, I almost never see them at night, but sometimes I see the copper-ebony girl by herself, walking around at night as if she has nowhere to go. I don't know what she does with her time, or her life, but I've always been intrigued by her. I'd like more than anything to find out. She's got a peculiar way of walking too, like she isn't necessarily there- like she's constantly daydreaming, and that may very well be the case. She, even by herself, seems to me to partake of some mysterious force that, were I to learn the secret of, all knowledge could be mine.

I continued to walk. I walked for a very long time, and I was enjoying it a lot. The night was beginning to set in and I tried to trace the sky as it faded in color. It seems impossible. One moment the sky's bright and the next time we're conscious of it, it's grown considerably darker. Even without letting our guard down. But it's impossible for me to keep up my guard anyway, because I'm always in search of this girl, and I think, essentially, the only thing that's made me continue my walks is the hope of finding her. I no longer really find anything in trying to decipher the falling of the sky. I find nothing pretty anymore in nature. Cities only repulse me. Large plains of land, or grassland, wetland, rivers, lakes and ponds are no longer anything to me. I can't understand my connection with images. Is there anything more than them- and are they even really there at all? I've often thought back on my past, on my young days when I was always rebelling against cities, and in that, embracing them at the same time. I don't know what to make of those days anymore, and everything, every image of my past, every memory seems tainted, as if shown through a blue filter. My memory's inconclusive;

it has no continuity, like our dreams. It seems fragmented. Sometimes I'm convinced that I'm missing whole gaps of it, but the facts seem to assert themselves as real as anything else. I don't know how else to say it except that there seems to be a lack of substance to many of them, as if it weren't really me who'd undergone all these strange experiences, more like something I'd read in a book, or watched in a movie or something. They have that characteristic of only seeming to contain two-dimensions. Other memories are real clear, like they're still happening this very moment.

It's silly to bother myself about problems that are so metaphysical, but I've got nothing else to concern myself with. I can push these concerns from my mind when I'm pursuing that unusual girl and the other girl she keeps company with, but I don't know if I'm really pushing away anything. I became entranced with her because I thought the two of them carried in their embrace some glint of knowledge, and I still believe this. But I don't believe that I watch them for that anymore. I watch them now because it's pleasant. Maybe I've just become accustomed to finding them pleasant. I don't find them erotic, or unusual or amusing anymore.

The streets reasserted themselves. The glow of Old Fred's jamboree dissolved. It was something I guess I was grateful for, because the lingering effect made everything kind of ominous and disturbing. But it was upsetting too. I had a weird feeling of elation under its influence, and now that it was completely gone, the mundane streets just looked back at me with the same mendacity of any given street. Something had been taken from me.

#

Francis, dressed in a gorgeous black dress she'd purchased just that day was received at the door by Mr. Devine himself. He took both her hands and smiled. "I'm very glad you could make it. Let me take your coat."

"This is a wonderful place you have here," she told him. And it was. The foyer, which she'd just stepped into, was long and wide, a decadent tunnel decorated with classical paintings, silver candelabra and bas-reliefs. It led into a wide hall, which opened into a beautifully adorned living room. To the right of the living room marble stairs ran upwards, describing a subtle arc, and vanished mysteriously into the ceiling. The living room was exceedingly large. Beautiful rugs were strewn across the floor in aesthetically pleasing patterns, and all along the walls wonderful paintings sat in

large golden frames. To the back of the room there were double doors that were covered with white silk drapes, and an identical door was situated to the left of the room as well. From the very high ceiling there hung chandeliers that were so prettily embroidered Francis thought she'd never seen anything quite like them before in her life, and as she walked into this magnificent room, she took a moment to look around, pacing slow and believing herself to be dreaming.

Louis followed her from behind. He was dressed exceptionally well, wearing a classical black tuxedo, with long tails like in Victorian movies; even the collar of his white shirt was ruffled, and the sleeves extended from the jacket in delicate frills. There were already many people present. The attire was very diverse, even among the men, ranging in suits of all colors and styles. There were men dressed in conservative business suits to men dressed in bright blue zoot suits, sporting wild looks and unusual hairstyles. The dresses worn by the women were just as varied. Some of them were wearing, like Francis, fairly conservative long black evening gowns, while others wore everything from sequins to silk to colorful and outrageous outfits that nonetheless, complemented them very well. Beautiful girls in short dresses with long stockinged legs, reminiscent of cigarette girls in casinos, were walking around with trays of drinks and hord'oeuvres. All these beautiful men and women delighted Francis. She watched the girls with erotic delight, and she looked at the guys with grand respect. She'd never seen anything like this before in her life.

Louis caught her eye and took her hand. He stopped one of the girls carrying a tray, offered Francis a glass of champagne, and took one for himself. "Let me show you around some and then I'll leave you free to mingle and make yourself comfortable."

Francis felt like she was under a spell whenever Louis spoke to her, and she was easily led up the staircase into another wide foyer, very much like the last, or maybe even prettier. The walls were sky blue and one long rug decorated in blue, black and white lay on the floor. On the three sides of the foyer there were doors that looked a lot like the doors downstairs, each covered with a delicate white drape.

"To the right," Louis was saying, "is the Master Bedroom. That's where my wife and I sleep."

"Your wife?"

"Ah yes. I didn't mention to you that I was married? Well, that's no matter. My wife is an

extraordinarily charming lady, and you will have to meet her before the evening is through."

"I don't suppose I should be surprised," Francis said. "A man so wealthy as yourself must, of course, be happily married."

"Of course," Louis said, and he opened the door to the Master Bedroom.

The room was indescribably large, far too large just to be a bedroom, but that's exactly what it was. In size alone it was much bigger than many one bedroom apartments, and this was something completely new to Francis. A soft blue carpet covered the floor, and a large bay window, covered by blue drapes, looked out onto a dazzling view of the city and the river. The bed was huge, covered in dark blue satin sheets, and it faced a television that looked more to Francis like a movie screen. Exotic objects of all sorts decorated the room, tiny statues of marble, paintings, bas-reliefs, etcetera. Little oak tables were strategically placed, and on them were expensive little ornaments of sculpture from all over the world.

"Do you like it?" Louis asked as he showed her out.

"Do I like it? But Mr. Devine--"

"Please, call me Louis."

"Louis then. If you don't mind my asking, how did you come into such an amazing fortune?" "I will tell you someday Francis."

They passed through the foyer again to another of the doors.

"There isn't too much here," Louis said. "This door just leads to the guest bedrooms, and they are all pretty similar, give or take a few details, but I will show you one of them if you're interested."

"Of course."

He opened the door, which led into a large hallway. A beautiful maroon rug ran down the length of it, and candelabra and paintings adorned the walls. There were doors running down both sides of the hall. Francis followed wondrously after Louis, who opened one of the first doors and showed Francis in. The room was very pretty, but less remarkable than the Master Bedroom. It contained a large bed with some of the prettiest bedding Francis had ever seen, decorated with patterns of flowers. Three wide windows looked out onto the city, and a television, smaller than the other, but still larger than most sat opposite the bed. There were a few paintings, but decorations were sparser than in the Master Bedroom, or any other room Francis had seen in the mansion. Louis led her back into the foyer.

"The last door," he said smiling, "is simply a bathroom. It's the general use bathroom for the

top floor, and it almost never gets used. There are bathrooms in each individual room, and so- there is rarely any need for it, but sometimes, during one of these functions, all the general bathrooms downstairs will be occupied, and someone will come up here to use this one.” Having said this, he threw open the door.

The bathroom was large and very glamorous. It was extraordinarily clean, as if it had never once been used. The floors were made of white marble and there were mirrors everywhere. Two silver posts on either side of the room set a wonderful glow from the lamps inside them. A small light was over the sink, there was a loveseat in the corner, and the tub was wide and shiny black. A small window was in the side of the room, covered with a mahogany drape. The bathroom fascinated Francis. It was almost as wonderful as the bedrooms, so comfortable, luxurious and deliciously private.

Louis led her back downstairs where already more people had gathered. “This is,” he said, turning to Francis, “not even the crux of the party. This is simply the reception area. If you will follow me,” and he led her across the room, opposite the staircase to the door that was on the other side. He threw it open, and it opened into a glorious marble ballroom filled with ecstasies of extravagantly dressed couples dancing wonderfully to a breathtaking live big band. There were so many people Francis could hardly fathom how someone might know so many different individuals to invite to a party.

“Across the hall there is another door,” Louis was explaining, “which leads to a sculpture garden. When the guests are tired of dancing and need some cool air, often they’ll go out there for repose. But you’ve only just arrived. Tell me, do you dance?”

“No. I tried once and I made a fool of myself.”

“No matter,” Louis said, finishing his drink, “follow my lead.” And suddenly he had her by the hand and was gracefully leading her through the steps. Francis felt dizzy, being swept along in this unbelievable dream, and for a moment she thought of Rebecca, and wished that Rebecca were here with her, dancing, showing her how to dance the steps.

About this same time, directly across the hall and through the sculpture garden, creeping their way in through the open gate, Inspector Bridge, his sometimes assistant Clyde, and the four Irregulars watched the party with muted awe. They were all nicely dressed, and they were all very drunk, even Bridge, who, nevertheless would have argued that instead of being drunken, he was

more aware than usual. They crept through the garden, hiding themselves in the shadows and behind the sculptures as they made their way closer and closer to the open door.

A couple minutes and they’d managed to get through unseen, standing awestruck in the glorious ballroom of Louis Devine’s mansion. Inspector Bridge thought that there was no time to waste. He wanted to find Ralph and Cass immediately, and his plan was to watch and instigate the two lovers while everyone became increasingly more intoxicated. With this much in mind, he began to make his way through the crowds, glancing keenly this way and that.

This left the other five members to occupy themselves as they would. Clyde went off immediately, amazed by all the original artwork that adorned the walls, and discussing silently with himself what damages might have befallen the paintings over the years, and how, if it were necessary or even possible, he would go about restoring to them their original classic beauty. That left only The Irregulars, who, by this point were exceedingly drunk, to fend for themselves in this world which was utterly foreign to anything they’d ever seen before. The Man from Chicago had been influenced by Bridge’s confidence, and had adopted a similar sort of confidence himself, so much so that he believed it necessary to first observe the scene, and determine where Ralph and Cass were, and then from there decide what to do next. The Bostonian, beguiled by all this wonderful fanciness, and used to parties that basically consisted of a group of crass guys sitting around a cheap bottle of liquor, began to indulge himself on the champagne and hors-d’oeuvres, thinking that he had at last found his place in life. The New Yorker, always cynical, looked down on the crowd of merrymakers as despicable. He hated the rich, he hated the way they lived and he hated their pretensions: all this ridiculous art on the wall, live jazz bands playing swing music, as if the music had been created exclusively for the disgustingly wealthy, he hated it all. Taking a glass of champagne just the same, feeling it was his duty to take all he could from these repulsive people, he decided he would get as drunk as possible and start a fight with the first smug rich motherfucker who gave him an askance glance. The Washingtonian, characteristically shy, looked at all these people and wished that he could join them in dancing, and decided that probably he could if he drank enough. He started having fantasies of meeting some beautiful woman, dancing with her all night and then taking her somewhere private where they could make

passionate love. The fantasy ended twice as deliciously, with him finishing with her, standing up and perhaps throwing her a few dollars for her trouble. Once this fantasy had seated itself fully in his mind, he began to press through the crowd looking this way and that for a woman he thought would make a suitable victim.

Francis, who had been dancing with Louis, first noticed Inspector Bridge out of the corner of her eye. It didn't register to her at first, she just brushed it off, but on a second glance she knew that she could be in no way mistaken. Inspector Bridge's presence neither alarmed nor surprised her. Maybe it startled her for a moment, but that was all. It mostly got her curious what he was doing here, and she wondered how he came to travel in these circles. It was, she supposed, no surprise perhaps, seeing that he had said himself that he was the best Private Investigator on the East Coast, and if that were so, most likely Louis had hired him at some point or other, and now knew him as a respected friend and/or acquaintance. It's true that Louis and Bridge were acquainted, but that's another story, and Louis certainly wouldn't have invited Bridge to this festivity.

But Francis had a strong desire to speak to Bridge, and she excused herself. She thanked Louis very much, but said she was worn out from dancing and could she have a moment to relax and to mingle. Louis was more than happy to oblige her, and within moments he had another beautiful young woman in his clutches. Francis pushed her way through the crowd and followed Bridge back into the living room.

"Excuse me, Inspector Bridge?"

Bridge turned around and looked at Francis strangely. He showed no sign of any emotion, but he said, "I am greatly astonished to see you here, I am very taken aback. I didn't know you were the type to travel in such circles, and it just goes to show that my powers of observation are not always up to par. But I suppose, upon reflection, that it shouldn't surprise me. People of alternative lifestyles often seek each other out, whether they be of the same alternative lifestyle or not. But tell me, for this is of great interest to me, how did you come to know Mr. Louis Devine?"

"I don't travel in any such circles Inspector. I simply met Mr. Devine today after I left the cab. I no longer have anywhere to go, and so I was sitting by myself in the hotel restaurant where I'm staying, when he came up and helped me."

"Helped you?"

"Yes, I was falling down."

"I see. And why was that?"

"Please don't interrogate me Inspector Bridge, I've had a very trying day."

"Let me ask you one very brief question. Why is it that you have nowhere to stay?"

"Because I can no longer stand my apartment."

"And why is that?"

"Because it reminds me of myself."

"Ah. I see."

"But I wanted to ask you how you know Mr. Devine."

Bridge smiled. "Mr. Devine and I go back a long way. I worked for him once, and he hasn't been able to forget me since. Tell me, have you seen Ralph and Cass here tonight?"

"You mean the couple that was in the cab with us earlier today?"

"Naturally."

"They're supposed to be here too? Well that's very fantastic. Everybody's here but the cab driver!"

"Yes, well I'm fairly certain we won't be seeing him here tonight, but Ralph and Cass were invited to this function in very much the same way that you were. I have a suspicion that many of the young ladies here were; it seems to be a habit of Mr. Devine's to stalk upon beautiful young women."

"But isn't he married?"

"Yes, Francis, he is."

"That's rather despicable of him. I can't understand why his wife would put up with it."

"His wife has put up with much more. But that is all by the by. It's clear from your response that you've seen neither Ralph nor Cass here tonight. Well enough. I plan to be here for quite a while. If you should happen upon either of them, would you be so good as to inform me?"

"Certainly."

And with that Bridge carried on his way, looking through the crowd this way and that, scanning for the two lovers. Francis felt slighted by her conversation with Bridge. She'd hoped to talk to him, ask him a few questions maybe, and feel a little less uncomfortable among all these people that she didn't know, and instead he'd just put questions directly to her as if he were interrogating her. She forgave him, after all, he was a Private Investigator, and that's what they do, but she still couldn't help feeling slighted.

Just as she started to go about her way, the Washingtonian approached her. He smiled at her nervously and asked her if she cared for a dance.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I really don't know how to."

The Washingtonian's eyes lit up. "It's simple. I will show you." And Francis agreed to it, because she didn't know what else to do with herself.

At about the same time Ralph, who'd been drinking all day and had arrived with Cass, stumbled his way out of one of the guest bedrooms where in his drunken confusion he'd managed to collapse onto the bed and sleep off a good hour. It was amazing that he came to again so quickly, seeing how much he'd drank, and even more amazing that when he awoke, he didn't feel like he'd been drinking at all. He just felt a faint glow over everything around him, a glow that was fading, and after a few minutes, practically gone altogether. He stepped into the general bathroom, washed his face and hands and looked into the mirror. He wasn't sure what had come over him, he wasn't certain exactly where he was, he didn't know exactly what to expect when he made it downstairs, all he knew was that he could hear a tremendous party going on, and that he was supposed to be there attending it, and that there were people expecting him. The bathroom seemed like such a safehaven. He was terrified to leave it. But there were things that could be done. He straightened his suit, he brushed his hair, slapped his face and so on, trying to prepare himself for the uncomfortable journey downstairs. A few moments later he was ready.

As he walked down the stairs into the living room he was instantly delighted, which isn't to say that his nervousness vanished, he just felt excited at the prospect of enjoying the rest of this party, which, as anyone could see, was one of the most glorious parties ever thrown. He shuffled into the crowd, grabbed a glass of champagne, and began to drink anew, suddenly drunk with happiness and excitement. He looked around at all the cleverly dressed people, and thought himself perhaps something of a bore. He was wearing just a normal black suit. That was all that he'd had available, because his favorite suit was wrinkled and dirty. But he went slack-jawed into the ballroom and the band began to play a song that suddenly broke out in his heart a thousand memories:

There was an old man named Freehand Fred
He'd drink whisky all night 'till he seemed most dead,
Used to dream of Sweden and he used to dream of France
And he used to dream a gal called Betty Aintgotsense

Now I'm told old Betty was as foolish as he,
They'd drink whisky all night at the jamboree,
Start to cursin' and a swearin' till the break of dawn
And by the time they got to kissin' ol' Betty was gone

But Betty Aintgotsense ain't around no more
She got killed one mornin' round three or four
Fred come found her cheatin' down at Chestnut Lake
And when he shot her from the trees he felt his poor heart break.

Well, there was an old man named Freehand Fred,
He'd drink whisky all night 'til he seemed most dead,
Used to dream of Sweden and he used to dream of France,
He used to dream himself a gal called Betty Aintgotsense

All at once the jamboree of the previous evening became real again. Objects started to lose their consistency, the glow returned fierce and new. The dancers in the ballroom suddenly seemed much less elegant, much more real, more cartoonish, the big band was no longer so big, but a tight group of struggling musicians trying to earn their bread for the evening and have a good time doing it. Old Fred was there and Betty was there too. The whole thing startled Ralph so much that he walked dazed into the crowd and asked a young lady to dance. Taking her by the hand he felt a liveliness that he hadn't felt for ages, as if all of his worries of the passings of everyday, and the monotonies of his life, and his desperate search for knowledge were all useless, as if he himself were partaking of that knowledge here, swinging his partner to the rhythm of the music, to the rhythm of the setting to the rhythm of the colors and the lights and it was all suddenly there again: the logic of images! And all at once, as if to complete everything in a dramatic and wonderful irony, he saw the delightful cobberebony girl out of the corner of his eye. At first he didn't believe it. He thought he was imagining absolutely everything, but a second glance made him certain. And she was dancing, very badly but with unmatched enthusiasm. Her unhappy partner, some guy Ralph had never seen before, was trying to show her the steps, and this girl, who looked as if she were already pretty well intoxicated, didn't have the patience to keep up with his lessons.

And then all of a sudden there was a scream followed by a loud crash. In the middle of the dance floor a large circle had formed around two people. One of these people was the New Yorker, and his face had a mean looking snarl on it. The other person, a handsome and well-dressed young Englishman lay sprawled on the floor, a broken champagne glass and a broken vase lying next to him. The New Yorker was advancing steadily. "You fuckin' guy," he said. "The hell do you think this is? You think you're better than me? I'll show you who's better than who."

The band stopped playing and a hush deepened the room, the silence felt unnatural for

such a large crowd. Through the crowd there could be seen the Bostonian and the Man from Chicago rushing to the aid of their friend. The Washingtonian stayed in place, staring at the scene, and looking from time to time guiltily around. The terrified Englishman was scrambling to his feet while all this was going on, trying to talk sense into his opponent, and finding it impossible to speak in anything but short incoherent mumbles. It was uncertain what the New Yorker planned to do, but it was fairly certain that he would make it unpleasant.

And just when the tension was so tight it would've broken with a whisper, pushing through the crowd, holding directly ahead of him a small pistol, Louis Devine approached the circle dark and angry. "Who the hell dares to cause a disturbance in my house," he said more coolly than angrily. "I suggest sir," addressing the New Yorker, and the other Irregulars that had just joined him, "that you and your hoodlum friends leave the premises immediately. If I ever see you near these premises again, rest assured," and he paused, "I will shoot you dead."

The three Irregulars, muttering curses, turned and pushed their way through the crowd, not leaving too quickly, but striding with regal pride, as if it had been they who'd had the last word.

As all this was going on, Inspector Bridge watched fascinated. He'd known it was a bad idea to bring The Irregulars, but he'd done so for exactly that reason. Now it was too late to do anything with them. But that wasn't important anymore. Inspector Bridge, very drunk, watching all of this, thinking back on the day, and thinking on it in terms of all the fleeting images, and finally watching as The Irregulars left the building, then Francis break free from the grasp of the Washingtonian and fly towards the living room, and then watching Ralph, who'd been watching Francis, let go of his partner, and in almost the exact same arc, pursue Francis, suddenly had something occur to him like the purest intuition, and so he went to find Clyde.

"Are you enjoying yourself Clyde?" Bridge asked.

"Yes Bridge, I am. These paintings are very interesting. I'm sorry it ended so badly with The Irregulars. Now we may never know who the killer is."

"Well," Bridge said. "Maybe it's best that we make a more subtle departure ourselves. Some mysteries aren't meant to be solved."

"Why, Bridge, I've never heard you speak like this before."

"It's only because I'm extremely drunk, and I will doubt myself in the morning. Be that as it may, I propose we go home and occupy ourselves with some other mystery."

"As you wish."

Meanwhile Francis, who'd rushed suddenly out of the ballroom, feeling overwhelmed by hearing her and Rebecca's song for the third time that day, stopped only to take another glass of champagne from one of the girls, and then continued walking, going nowhere in particular, more pacing through the crowd than anything else. Ralph, who wanted to talk to this strange girl, followed her, and reaching the living room looked at her spellbound as she went back and forth. He wondered if she'd been upset by the scene in the ballroom and figured this was the perfect opportunity to address her. As she turned another time on her heel, her head down and her black hair obscuring her features, Ralph put a hand on her shoulder. She turned around with a jump

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"You," Francis whispered, "there is someone looking for you."

"For me? Listen- I've seen you before."

"Yes of course," Francis said, looking at him wide-eyed.

"What made you run from the room just now?"

"What made me run? But there's someone looking for you."

"Who's looking for me? What are you talking about?"

"The Inspector," Francis said, a little louder now, but still almost in a whisper. "Inspector Bridge."

"That name sounds familiar."

"Of course."

"Listen, I must talk to you."

At this point, the Washingtonian, who'd stood for a moment dumbfounded by the sudden flight of his partner, turned on his heel and pursued her into the living room. He saw her talking to Ralph, and approached them.

"Why did you run?" he demanded, addressing Francis as if there were no one else present.

"Why did I run?"

"Listen, I must talk to you," Ralph insisted. "It's very important. It's the only important thing left."

The Washingtonian looked over at Ralph, acknowledging his presence for the first time, and grimaced. "Listen friend," he said in an unfriendly tone, "I was just engaged with this young lady. Now, if you don't mind."

"I don't understand what either of you are talking about!" Francis said. "Will you just leave me alone? I've had a very trying day."

"But why did you run?" The Washingtonian pressed. "You don't understand. I'm very much taken with you. All of my life I've been in pursuit of an ideal- the ideal of perfection, of beauty and of truth- and now at last I have seen it in you. Don't ask me how. I don't know myself. All I know is that I've spent my life wandering around in this unhappy Hell of a world that I've created around myself, and now- at long last, now that I have found something beautiful and true, I cannot, at any cost let it go. You mustn't think me crazy, or raving or anything of the sort. I'm a very sensitive man. I'm a very unhappy man. Please allow me to understand what it is to embrace life."

"But those are my concerns with her as well," Ralph objected.

"You see- then it's not my fancy, it's true," the Washingtonian said. "But tell me- are you in love with her?"

"In love with her? It would be impossible."

"Impossible, but why?"

"Because I don't like men!" Francis shouted, backing away. "I don't like men at all. I hate them, and nothing convinces me more of that than the two of you."

"But certainly," Ralph said, "you understand the need to pursue beauty!"

"And what about Cass?"

"Please, you're confusing me," Ralph said. "Let me talk to you."

"But you already have," Francis said. "I have to find Cass. I'm sorry. I want nothing to do with either of you. Please leave me alone."

And a moment later she'd broken free from Ralph and was rushing back into the ballroom. The band had started playing again, but they were playing something else now, and everything seemed hurried and rhythmless to Francis as she crossed the ballroom and made her way out into the sculpture garden. On her way out she ran headlong into Louis, who grabbed her.

"What's wrong Francis? Aren't you having a good time?"

"Yes. No. Something is wrong. Everything is wrong. I can't make sense out of anything." She looked up at Louis and he was looking very pale and angry. His eyes were dark and his face was trembling. "But there's something the matter with you too," she said. "What's wrong Louis?"

"My pistol," he muttered. "I only laid it down for a second, and now it's gone."

"Hasn't this party turned out miserably!"

"No, not at all," Louis said, smiling again. "These things always happen. There has never been one yet where there hasn't been a fight, and usually someone gets very badly hurt, or even killed. This one has been unusually tame. You must understand Francis, that a man like myself thrives on these sort of insane gatherings. They are for me a true Bacchanalian revelry. Nevertheless, I must let myself get somewhat upset when things go wrong, or even these would lose their interest for me. In truth," and here he paused, "I am not concerned at all about my missing pistol, or about the fact that a fight broke out, or whatever else might occur during the evening's proceedings. Even if I myself were to be murdered, even that, would be nothing more than an interesting event that occurred in the process of the night. But all that you shouldn't concern yourself with. Perhaps you would like to retire with me to the Master Bedroom for a brief while."

"But you're married!" Francis said, "and besides, and how many times do I have to repeat this tonight: I don't like men."

"Marriage is unimportant," Louis said, "but it's interesting to hear that you're a lesbian. Perhaps I could find another woman for you, and the three of us could find some way of enjoying ourselves."

"Please," Francis said, "let me go Mr. Devine. I am looking for a friend of mine."

"A friend of yours? You know someone else here then?"

"Yes. You invited her today. She was with her lover. Her name is Cass."

"Ah, Cass. Yes I do remember her. Where is she anyway? I saw her earlier this evening, I am sure enough of that."

"Then she's definitely here?"

"Unless she's already left. But it's so early, and besides, her friend Ralph is still here so I imagine she must be too. If I'm not mistaken that's him now, coming across the ballroom directly for us."

At these words Francis forced herself free from Louis' strong grip and, running out into the sculpture garden, doubled back and managed to slip by Ralph and the Washingtonian unseen. As she passed back into the ballroom she saw, disappearing quickly behind a crowd of dancers, Cass. She turned in the direction she saw her and began to walk quickly.

Cass was headed for the living room. Francis followed her. She caught sight of her making her way through the crowd towards the stairs. Just as

she was about to push forward, Inspector Bridge stepped in her path.

“Francis! It’s good to see you again. Clyde and I were just on our way out.”

“Yes, very well. Goodbye.”

“I only wanted to say that it was a pleasure to get to know you Francis. That I’m glad we met today. It seems strange the things that fate places in our path, and I’m certain that I’m a better person now than I was this morning, simply because of meeting with you.”

“But Inspector—” and here, Francis, no longer strong enough to brush anyone off, and her nerves completely broken, fell onto the Inspector’s shoulder and began to cry profusely.

“You have been waiting all day for that Francis,” Bridge said, “and indeed I hijacked you just now for exactly that purpose, for I suspect that it’s a comfort you may not have again for quite some time. But let that be. I am very drunk. My assistant Clyde has let me in his confidence that he as well suffers from this same malady, and happily, I suspect that you do too. We shall remember this night Francis, and we shall cherish it as well.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Francis said, composing herself and looking at Inspector Bridge and Clyde.

“I am above all,” Bridge assured Francis, before taking Clyde by the arm and exiting the scene with him, “a man of reason and observation.”

Once the Inspector was gone, Francis forced her way through the crowd and onto the stairs. She was still shaking with tears, but she had them more under control now. Everything was swarming around in her head, like before when she’d been at the hotel restaurant, and all the people took on the same grotesque aspect that the parade had taken on. Another familiar sensation ran through her chest, and it was almost enough to make her stagger, but she turned on her heel and started carefully up the stairs. She was no longer running, but everything seemed very fast and frantic anyway, and all she could think about was the mesh of colors parading around in this already too colorful house. She paused as she entered the foyer. Everything was dark here, and a silence was already present, the sounds of the party, the slow roll of the jazz pushing in, more muted now, vanishing. Even more slowly now Francis made her way through the hallway. She softly called Cass’ name, but loud enough so that someone close-by might hear her. There was no response. She called it a second time, this time a little louder. Again there was no response. She walked over to the hallway door and opened it. There was no one in the hallway, all the doors to the guest

rooms were closed. She called Cass’ name again, down the hallway, this time fairly loud. Still there was no response. She turned around without bothering to close the door. She walked over to the bathroom door and knocked on it. “Cass, are you in there?” She raised her voice. “It’s Francis. I need to talk to you. It’s important.” Silence. “I met you today in the cab, my name is Francis. I need to talk to you Cass.”

Francis waited a few moments, but there was still no answer. She opened the door and walked into the room. Cass was there. She lay slumped over the tub, one arm resting over the side of it, weakly holding her up, the rest of her lying limp against the tub and the floor. Blood was running all over the marble. A small pistol was sitting beside her. The room was very dark, and the light grotesque, only the one small lamp above the sink was on, and Cass’ face was hidden, her head hanging down over her chest. Francis cried out and stepped back, and suddenly, the control she had over her tears expired, and she was shaking uncontrollably again, crying profusely. She dropped onto her knees and crawled up next to the wounded girl; her new dress soaked in the blood. She lifted Cass’ head, and the eyes were weak. She was still alive, barely; it looked as if she were trying to mouth Francis’ name. Francis put her finger over Cass’ lips. “I know,” she whispered, leaning down to her ear.

At that moment Ralph stepped into the bathroom, still in pursuit of Francis.

“My God!” he said. “We have to call an ambulance immediately. What the hell happened here! Who the hell is she?”

But Francis was unable to look, averting her face, her head paused in air, maybe saying a prayer.