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Escape form the Bible bet: a collection of short stories

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Escape from the Bible belt:
A collection of short stories

by

Evan James Davis

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

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A BLIND ROMANCE

I don't know why it bothered me so much. I guess it's the way I've been feeling this last week from helping with the inventory. And then I was working in the Ladies' Department and remembering Susan. They needed somebody to help with the Lingerie and they couldn't think of anything better than me, a stockman. Maybe I'm all they had, but anyway there I was, thumbing through all those panties and stockings, everything pink and white and pastel green, and holding that nylon slip where I could see my hand through the fabric. Something felt strange about that. Lou was nervous, of course, like she always is. Were my hands clean? Did I know how to put four marks and then cross them with a fifth? I guess stockmen aren't supposed to know things like that. And I was holding that slip, looking at my hand--it seemed I could see every nerve through the fabric--when Jeannette walked up. She was very pleasant but I wondered what she was thinking. And then:

"Ernie, I've got something for you to help me with," she said, her voice professional and cool, and I followed her into the back hallway and to her office.

"You didn't show up last night," she said after we were seated. "I didn't know if it was something I said or something I did . . ."
"It wasn't anything, Jeannette," I said. I could feel the hard edge in her voice and it scared me. "I apologize for not showing up. I should have called . . . ."

It's funny. I felt that same way the first time I met her, just the other day. I was with Lou in her office when Jeannette walked in. She didn't even see Lou. Her look to me was like Rod's looking at a young woman and saying, "Well, hello there!" I had heard that the new Assistant Manager was a real shark, but she didn't seem that way to me at all. And she had a fine sense of humor. Everything I said was right and everything she said was right, not like with some people who are never on your own wavelength. And you couldn't believe she had a six-year-old son by a prior marriage, she looked so young. And her healthy figure didn't look bad at any distance. And her healthy brown hair and full cheeks, bright skin and nice classy clothes. The only thing I wondered about was why she wore that old-fashioned fur collar; it looked funny or over-stylish. Anyway, it's like Lou said, she's pushing thirty but she looks like a college girl.

Later that day, after we had talked awhile in the office, I discovered Jeannette watching me as I was helping Lou with the bras and girdles--that was the day we had started the inventory. When our eyes met, she walked up and we began talking. She was the boss so I guess we could talk
without anybody objecting. We got onto the topic of parapsychology, transmigration of souls, the coincidence of certain friends we have, a dream she had had, and then she unbuttoned the sleeve of my shirt and looked at the wrinkles between my forearm and palm, saying that the number of wrinkles there was how many previous lives I had lived. "I'm sorry," she said, after counting my previous lives, "I don't usually undress men," and she buttoned my sleeve again for me.

I felt a little nervous because I could not work and talk at the same time, and Lou was in a hurry. Also I didn't like Jeannette doing things like that. After all, she was the boss.

Then the next morning Jeannette asked me if I could help her move into her new house; she was having trouble finding anyone to hire. I had a free hour after lunch so I said yes. I felt I would just do her a favor. She would pay me, of course, whatever my time was worth at the store. I didn't like the cheap sound of that but I didn't say anything.

She gave me the directions and said she would meet me when I got there. As I checked out of the main office a little before noon, the secretary said, "Did Jeannette get you to help her?"

"That's right."

"She was looking for you," she said, smiling a little
too sweetly. "I think she really needs a man's help."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh nothing," she said, looking back to her typewriter but still grinning.

That secretary is always making jokes like that, but now I felt a little funny about going to Jeannette's house. I felt like everybody had their eyes on me.

It wasn't snowing outside but I still had a hard time finding Jeannette's place. She had chosen the most out-of-the-way place to live, given me the most hard-to-follow directions, and I wasted almost a half hour getting there. The road she lived on was one of those twisty country roads with dangerous curves, along the side of a mountain where people had built their own homes on both sides of the road, each home with several acres. Jeannette's house was a beautiful modern one, obviously custom built, with a wide garage and a short front yard. The door was open, and when I stuck my head in, Jeannette called to me from the kitchen and told me to close the door behind me. Inside, the house was as modern as on the outside: gabled ceiling, a handy kitchen, brick fireplace, and wall-sized windows looking out over the backyard to a formation of rocks on the mountainside. It was really a classy place.

"This is the first house I've ever owned that's really me," she said when she saw the way I was looking around. I
wondered what it was like to even own a house. Already it was pretty well fixed up inside. She had her own paintings on the walls and some nice original landscapes like they sell in the art stores. Several hundred classical records sat on a low shelf, and dozens of books were on another shelf higher up, all read. Her furniture was shiny modern. There was a sculpture in one corner, a mobile hanging from the ceiling. She showed me the last sculpture she had finished. It looked to me like Ringo Starr. She said it was a bust of Leonardo Di Vinci she had fashioned from a picture in the Encyclopedia. It expressed her intuition, she said, about Leonardo.

"That's really a good likeness," I said.

"Would you like to look around?"

"Sure," I said, being polite.

It was a small house so there wasn't much to see. I saw the bathroom, which was a very nice one except for the stockings hanging over the shower curtain and the bobby pins on the toilet basin, and her son's small bedroom, and then her own bedroom which had almost nothing in it but a large box-springs and mattress on the floor.

"Isn't this a nice room?" she said to me. Apparently reading the look in my eyes, she continued, "I mean because it's so big and spacious. I don't have my bedroom furniture moved yet, so it's not very well fixed up."
Just as I expected her to go and bounce on the mattress to show me how soft it was, she walked into the hall looking a bit wary. Then she put on a fluffy hat that made her look like her hair had gone to seed and said she had to leave to pick up her son. My big job was to take her lawn furniture and some metal sculptures from the garage to the back yard. She wanted to pay me. I told her I wouldn't take any money and she protested. Finally she said the least she could do was cook me dinner. Would tonight be okay? "Anytime," I said. It was agreed and then she left. For a few minutes I looked again in amazement at the living room, and hurried to the garage so I could get through before she got back with her son, wrapped my arms around a welded tin figure of a woman, being careful to grab her by the crotch and breasts so I wouldn't lose grip, and took her freezing in the chill air from the garage to the safety of the back yard.

But when seven o'clock came around I was having trouble with my car and I just didn't feel like facing it, all of Jeannette's open assurance and classiness, and all the complicated possibilities of the situation, and the lack of a certain innocence that attracts me in women. I had the excuse of the car so I stayed home.

Now, facing Jeannette in her office, I could hear Susan in the threatening pain in Jeannette's voice. I explained about the car and said, to make her voice less
painful, that I would come demanding my home cooked meal as soon as I could get that lousy mechanic to fix my car.

"Well, if it's just that, I guess we can plan on some other time, maybe this next Friday if you're not busy," she said, her voice more relaxed, almost cheerful, now. "Of course, it doesn't really matter to me; I just want to return what you've done to help me."

"And I'm really looking forward to it," I said.

I lied, of course. And yet I was thinking how nice it would be to have a decent meal instead of one I cooked myself and ate alone. What bothered me now was the tone of the situation. I was apologizing for something that wasn't really important. What had I done to give her any pain? It had been a casual invitation to dinner, not a special date. And here I was, feeling responsible, guilty because I hadn't reacted the right way, whatever way that was. I still had no indication how far her professional attitude around the store would extend to me: would she show favoritism and make everyone resent me, or would she be upset and pass me in the corridor and give out those icy looks and painful vibrations because I had somehow not acted a way I didn't know how to act?

But, after all, it was only an invitation to dinner. Yet the memory of Susan clung to my mind. I hadn't seen Susan for years, and here she was dancing through my
consciousness. Jeannette did look a lot like Susan; I could see that similarity. But Susan was more of a natural girl, more sunny once you got past that reserve of hers.

I don't even know how I met Susan, though I remember the whole thing very clearly. It was a Cassavetes film we were watching. Rod had told me it was good. He told me about the natural photography and the wide-angle lenses and how the effect was very artistic. I didn't really care about the art; I was lonely and wanted something to do, and I figured at least the second feature would be good if Cassavetes wasn't. As I was sitting in the theater during the film I noticed three girls sitting to my right in the row behind me. I looked around several times at nothing in particular, and in the garish light from the screen I noticed that the girls were rather pretty. At the intermission I just turned in my seat and spoke to them, to all of them. I don't know why I did it, except that maybe I was interested in understanding the film. The girls looked at me like mashed potatoes looking up from the plate, except that the middle girl began to act hostile. It's not that she said anything; she just looked it. I could tell she thought I was trying to pick them up. I didn't want to leave that impression so I went ahead and talked about the effects of the natural lighting in the photography, just what Rod had told me about it, and suddenly the one in the middle—Susan I found out later—became very friendly while the
others still looked at me like mashed potatoes. Over the back of my seat I talked to her about the film, and about some symbol she had found in it that sounded pretty interesting. As we talked, I began to be drawn to her healthy, blooming face.

We talked again after the second feature and I ended up driving her home. It seemed we didn't have very much to talk about during those first weeks we knew each other, yet somehow the conversation flowed and it got off to a good start. I liked her manner. She wasn't at all intellectual like she had seemed to be at the theater. I remember on our first date her talking to the waiter in a restaurant, an elderly man who had a Spanish accent, about nothing in particular while I sat there not knowing what to say; it was just small talk, but what charmed me was the way she could talk like that and be so sweet.

Eventually we became lovers and she was sweet about that too. I was a little shy of making an advance but it wasn't any real problem. She liked to joke around. We'd be sitting in her apartment, me with my feet on a footstool, and she'd put her feet on my legs. I'd grab her by the legs and pull her off the couch and we'd get into a tussle there on the floor. Eventually I'd have her pinned, my arms tight around her body, her blouse hunched up from her waist so that her bare skin was hot against my arm, our faces
together and breathing hard, and--it just happened after one of those times.

It seemed like such a natural way to become lovers. Boom, suddenly it happened. That's why it was so incomprehensible the way it ended. I had such a faith that nothing would ever go wrong. Not that it would go on forever, none of that. I hadn't even thought about it turning into something like marriage. It didn't seem like being with her was part of a situation to be worried about and planned for and committed to, just something good. Yet it turned out to be that way, only worse.

It got bad, so bad that the thought of it makes me shudder. That's how it was and that's what I was afraid of, especially with Jeannette. She had that healthy look that says, I'm going to ask a lot from you. When I told Rod about Jeannette, he said you lucky bastard, and he couldn't see any problem. He can shut his mind to things like that. But I can't. And that week before I had dinner with her, I would pass Jeannette in the corridor, she would wink at me or say something funny, remind me of how good dinner would be on Friday, and I'd think about what that wink meant. If Susan had winked like that, I'd know for sure.

It was a good dinner, though. We had a roast with potatoes and carrots to go with it, and a good sweet wine. I stuffed myself. She joked about it and was very flattered.
We finished the wine in the living room. Her son, out of coincidence, she said, had been invited to spend the night with a neighbor and we were left conveniently alone. We sat in candle light, the whole room twinkling like the sun on a lake, with different kinds of candles, plain tapered ones, short fat ones, and funny drippy ones that are sold in specialty shops, because candle light was "more natural," she said, than the horrible artificial stuff. To listen to her, you'd think she was the original "natural" woman. I sat with my head under a shelf of her books. The divan was split and joined in a corner, and she sat on one cushion, I sat on the other, our knees almost touching. I took a big swallow of my wine.

"You know," she said, "I was really attracted to you the first time we met."

"Were you?"

"You know why?"

I couldn't guess.

"Because," she said, "I saw in you something I had dreamed about."

Something she had dreamed about; what did that mean?

"Oh, you know," she said.

It was a good one on me. I guess she meant her intuition, or she was just making conversation, because how can you dream about somebody you've never met? I hadn't
any intuition about meeting her, but of course it wouldn't be right to say that. She was expecting me to "you know."

"I guess I see what you mean," I lied. "I have dreams about people and sometimes I don't recognize who they are."

"That's it," she said. "I don't remember you exactly, but I'm sure you were a part of a certain dream."

"Does that really mean something?"

"Of course it does! Don't you know about dreams?"

I didn't really want to know what she had to say about them, but what could I do? She told me you can see the future in your dreams. Boy, if my dreams are the future, I sure wouldn't have much to look forward to. We had talked about parapsychology before so I steered her into a related topic. I knew all about parapsychology, of course, because Rod had read a lot of books on the subject and had kept me filled in pretty good. Jeannette was into auras. I acted interested and she said she wanted to feel mine.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

"Hold out your hands."

I put out my hands, fingers apart as she instructed, and she put her open hands just over mine, moved them back and forth to feel my aura. I noticed my knee was between hers now that we were closer. She wanted me to do it to her, and I did as she told me to do, feeling her aura which seemed pretty hot. "Now don't you know a lot about me?" she said.
Then she looked at me with that look, her eyes very round and clear, eyes that are waiting. Somehow we were closer together. Her breasts brushed my arm and I noticed that my knee had inched up very far between her legs, her skirt pushed up with it. She had that look of expectancy in her eyes, and what could I do? I reached back for my wine and took a big swallow. I emptied the glass. Then I leaned back and played with the ring on my little finger and started telling her how I got it. It was a pretty nice ring.

I felt bad about it all because she was good looking, but I didn't know what else to do. I could imagine what Rod would do: he would have taken her right then and there, on the rug or the couch; no, it wouldn't even have gone this long because he would have been making it with her days ago. He knew what he was doing. He knew what he wanted and how to handle it. I just kept strangling my little finger with my ring.

When I looked up, I saw that she was standing away from me, looking out the window at the mountain lit up by the night lights. Her back reflected the candles on the table between us and her face was in the shadows. She whispered something I guess I wasn't supposed to hear, softly to herself, and it had something to do with being embarrassed but I couldn't tell for sure except from the tone in her
voice. I didn't want to think about it or let her know I overheard anything.

I went on about my ring and eventually she sat back down and we had some awkward conversation, acting as if nothing had happened. I emptied the wine bottle into my glass and felt miserable. The sound of her whispered words lingered in every word she spoke. She had that blank look that Susan had had that last day.

That blank look took me way back. That was the day when Susan's attitude suddenly changed toward me. Maybe it had been building up to that and I hadn't noticed it until that day. It was a Saturday and we went to the lake. I had been drinking the night before with Rod and felt hungover. We lay on the beach in the sun, against the twinkle of the water, and I didn't notice anything peculiar. Both of us were quiet and I had a relaxing day, glad that I didn't have to do anything while I had the hangover. Driving home, my mind was clearer and I saw that she was studying the windshield as if there was something of particular interest in it. After I watched her a minute, I realized that she was just looking at nothing and that the windshield happened to be close to where she leaned forward. She looked very withdrawn. I took her hand, and that was all it was: I took it. She didn't resist or offer it, and it was limp. I asked if something was wrong. Nothing was wrong, of course, according to her.
I stopped at my place and she said she was tired and wanted me to drive her home. I coaxed her inside, offering her dinner. I warmed some string beans and cooked some flavored rice, and when we had eaten I finally asked her to give it to me straight. She said she was just having a mood. I didn't know she had moods, I said.

"There are all kinds of things we don't know about other people," she told me.

"I guess that's right," I said. "I guess there's lots of things I don't know about you and you don't know about me."

"I know a lot about you," she said.

"You should."

"I know, for instance, you're not the person I thought you were."

There it was: I was not the person she thought I was. I was a stranger who had been making love to her for the last six months. It really took me by surprise and I didn't know what to say. We mumbled some more on the subject, she escaped me when I tried to embrace her, and finally I took her home.

When we got to her place, we stood in the courtyard of the apartment building because she wouldn't let me come upstairs to her door.

"Don't try to come up, Ernie. I need to be alone. You
can understand that I need to be alone, can’t you?"

"I can't understand what you mean."

"I need to be by myself so I can relax and think, and
I can’t do that when you’re there."

"You were relaxed today at the lake, weren't you?"

"No, I wasn’t," she said.

"I thought that’s why you were so quiet."

"We didn't have anything to talk about."

"I thought there just wasn't any need to talk."

"There wasn't, but that's not it," she said.

Her voice had a terrible timbre in it that scared me. She wouldn't face me. I had the feeling, looking over her shoulder at the side of her face, that she was suffering because she knew that I expected her to say something, and that she was suffering because she didn’t have anything she could say. It was an intense feeling. I couldn’t say anything. She told me we should not see each other again for awhile. Finally, she went upstairs and at the door turned and waved and then closed the door on me. I didn’t know until then that I felt so strongly about her.

That’s what made it so hard: I needed her. I couldn’t just forget about her and yet I couldn’t call her again or bring myself to go over and see her. I didn’t have the guts. Rod told me, don’t act stupid, but what I did was figure out where she would be passing at a certain time, and accidentally
run into her, just to see her and hope her attitude toward me would change. She was polite the first times we met that way, and then it became clear to her what I was doing and she became resentful, and the strong vibes started to reek whenever I passed her.

Those vibes really scare me. I appreciate a certain politeness where people are just nice even though they don't want to be. I guess Jeannette had it over Susan in that respect because when we were talking about my ring she calmed down and became friendly again. I took a swallow of wine and listened to her say that she thought I was a very gentle person and that she liked that in a man. Did I know that's what a woman likes in a man? How could I answer that? The question was loaded like a pistol.

"I guess women like a man to think of their interests as well as his own," I said.

I took a gulp of wine. It was a large glass.

She guessed that the prettiest women had the problem of not finding a gentle man because they are too sexually attractive and get only the ones who are after their body. She didn't figure she had that problem. That too was poisonous bait.

"You should," I said. "You're very attractive."

I didn't want to say that but it was all I could do without changing the subject, and that would have been too
obvious. I emptied my glass and we were out of wine.

"I should have had more wine," she said, seeing the empty bottle. "Maybe I should phone and see if they'll bring some out."

"That's silly. I can just go for some."

"I'll go. You don't know where the store is."

"There's a 7-11 by the main road," I told her. I knew it was the closest store.

I told her I would be right back, and I made for the door. She told me the kind of wine to get and tried to give me money. Christ! I fought off the money at the car and got inside. I didn't even notice the cold.

"Drive carefully," she said. "Ooh, it's starting to snow."

It was good to see the freedom of the road, the searching headlights, to feel the mild warmth of the heater as it took away the chill.

The wine made me dopey but my thoughts were racing. Susan was in them and I was back there when it all happened. I had felt pain because I couldn't see her except by running into her on a sidewalk somewhere. Rod had told me to have it out with her and get her out of my system, and finally I went to her apartment, not to have it out exactly, but to just face it, to get through whatever was dominating me.

Her roommate answered the door and I could see in her
face that she thought my being there was strange. Why should it, though? Hadn't Susan and I been regular friends? She went and knocked on Susan's bedroom door, and Susan came out in her bathrobe. She must have been reading in bed because it was still early. She came to me with a polite, friendly expression.

"Hello, Ernie," she said, but her voice was strained.

Her roommate was still in the room, and cleared some plates and glasses, and a wine bottle, off the dining table before leaving the room. When we were left alone I looked at the closed door of her bedroom. I knew it well.

"I'm so glad," Susan said, "to see you come without calling first. What a surprise."

She didn't mean a word of it. I stood there with my mouth open.

"You take such an interest in me," she went on, "and with my affairs. I should be flattered. Is there something you don't know about me? Have you come to fill in the blanks?"

"I'm glad to see you're flattered," I said. She knew what I meant.

"I really am," she continued. "It's nice to know I have a secret admirer lurking around every corner. And such a masculine one, too."

"You should know my masculinity," I said.
"Oh yes, so self-confident and aggressive. I wonder why you worry so much about insignificant me."

I had wanted to say "You know what I came for," or something like that, and get down to the way I felt, but her snipping at me made me angry. Rod had said, don't get angry, dominate her. It sounds easier than it really is. I acted foolish.

"You are pretty insignificant," I said, "the way you treat people."

"I know I am. How right you are to say it. It makes me wonder why you follow me around so much."

"You don't have to act like a bitch every time I see you."

"Not a bitch in heat, anyway. Not for you. You should act like a man sometime instead of the fool you are, a stupid blustering fool. I don't know what I ever saw in you."

That's more than I care to remember. It was bad, very bad. She was right about not knowing people: I hadn't known a thing about her. It was all so bitter that I couldn't keep from shaking. Everything I said was stupid, and that made it worse. Half way down the steps outside her door, I almost fell. The night seemed exceedingly dark as if it were in the country. I almost drove past my own place without seeing it.

Thinking about that now made me almost miss a curve. The
snow was really coming down, covering the road in a white deception. I forgot what wine Jeannette had told me to buy.

The 7-11 was lit up like a circus. I went inside and found a brand of wine that Rod and I drink a lot. The lights inside were bright and the cashier was picking his nose. Wine from a broken bottle was spilled on the floor. I paid the cashier and left.

I had my hand clasped around the neck of the bottle and went to the car outside. The snow was really coming down. Already the interior had chilled and I started the engine to get it warm, looking at the big falling flakes of snow. The road back to Jeannette's was dangerous, I figured. I would tell her that. Then I relaxed a little.

I turned onto the main road and, when I got to Rod's, drank the wine and had a good drunk.
Between strings of crab pots, Mr. Gilford would climb up to the topside above the cabin and, while he steered the boat to search for the next string, would try to impress Jerry with the importance of the work they were doing. Jerry wasn't doing so well.

"This job's like any other," Mr. Gilford would tell him, "except for the groundswells."

He had his body tensed and his hand holding the pipe brace of the wind break. In the big swell, the topside deck would roll like a patch on a wide cylinder, then would stop and roll the other way. The seas were tremendous.

"And what I tell you to do is for your own good," he would tell Jerry, "as well as to get these pots done. You won't become a man until you learn how to work."

"But I can't figure it out," said Jerry.

"You could if you tried a little harder."

They found the first buoy of the next string, and Mr. Gilford steered up to it, then climbed down to the deck to grab it and pull the crab pot. It was Jerry's job to steer and he wearily turned the boat to face the groundswells. The giant swells were coming in from a storm that was passing out at sea, and when they entered the shallower water of the bay they hunched up into high corrugations. Up close, the
swells looked like walls of galvanized steel. As the boat wallowed in the trough, Jerry saw ahead the next wall, higher by several feet than his head. Then before the swell reached the boat the water that roiled ahead of it lifted the boat in a jerk and then the swell, not so steep as it looked, came under the hull and the bow lurched, then the boat climbed heavily up.

When they topped the crest, Jerry looked out over the ridges of water ahead, and down the trough, for the next buoy in the string. He hoped he wouldn't find it, but there it was to his left, the buoy slapping the water as the swell pushed it ahead, and he tried to visualize where it would be hidden again in the water. Then he looked longingly at the thin strip of fog that lay on the horizon at sea. The sooner it came in to shore, the sooner they would go home.

It was frustrating work in that big sea. What made it hard for Jerry, more than anything else, was the underwater current. He would do just as his father told him: steer up to the buoy with the starboard toward the swell, turn the bow toward the swell after the buoy had been hooked, then, while his father pulled the rope, turn the starboard away from the swell so the sea came at them from the other side; and, though the swell would push the boat over where the buoy had floated, when the slack was pulled out of the rope it would rip through the water away from them as if a shark were hooked
on it. Half an hour later when the tide had changed, another rope would cut toward the hull as if the shark were swimming the other direction.

"Turn it around!" Mr. Gilford would yell. "Can't you see the tide's changed?"

He would turn it but, with the surging swell against the hull, the boat would push sideways or backwards and he couldn't make a clean turn; the rope would then get near the prop, and if it got too close, the rope on deck would be quickly thrown as far as Mr. Gilford could throw it, to keep it clear of the prop. Then they would have to pull the rope again.

"I don't get it," Mr. Gilford would say, standing on the topside with Jerry. "What's the matter with you?"

"I can't brace myself and steer at the same time, and I can't figure out what the rope's gonna do."

"Christ!" Mr. Gilford would say.

Each time, after the slack was out of the rope, the pot itself would be at another angle from the boat. The rope might be bowed in front of them, but the pot would actually be sitting in the mud to the rear. When the slack was out, the rope would suddenly rub the hull and Jerry would have to turn the boat again. If it wasn't turned just right, the tensed rope would go straight to the prop. Each pull took as many as five turns, and Jerry was never sure which turns to make. He tried to figure it out as his father did, but it
was too hard and he gave it up. Instead, he guessed about it and blamed the tides.

It was necessary to steer with both hands, and when he was turning the wheel he had no hand to brace himself with. He tried straddling the board they used for a seat, but that put him too close to the wheel and he had to stand behind the seat and bang his knees against it when the deck rolled, then bang his elbows for balance against the wind break, then do some squatting to throw his weight against the motion of the deck, and the constant exercise made him weak from fatigue. He wished he could just lie down and forget the whole thing. It wasn't a job he was up against, he figured, but an exceedingly complex torture.

He maneuvered the boat to another buoy and this time he was lucky: he got close enough so his father could hook it without leaning over the gunnel to reach it. Jerry straddled the seat for a minute so he could lean against the wind break and take a rest. He leaned his chin on his arm and wondered how many more pots there could possibly be: forty, fifty, a hundred? It seemed like they would never finish working them, and that the fog bank would never come in. He saw his father start to pull the rope, and suddenly the slack rope ripped through the water away from the boat and ahead of them. He pushed the throttle and, moving just his one hand, was able to turn the wheel toward the rope. Suddenly the slack went out of the rope and it was under the hull near the
churning prop. He jumped away from the seat to grab the wheel with both hands, and his movement temporarily disoriented him. When he looked down again, his father was throwing the buoy rope clear from the boat.

“What the hell are you doing up there?” shouted Mr. Gilford. He climbed to the topside where Jerry backed into the corner by the mast.

“I don’t know what happened,” whined Jerry. “I thought the swell would push the boat away.”

“You can’t turn that way.” Mr. Gilford was incredulous. “That just runs the prop over the rope.”

He repeated a long, complex series of directions about where to turn in what situation.

“It’s not my fault,” said Jerry. “I can’t figure anything out and I can’t . . .”

“This is serious business!”

“I don’t even want to be out here and I . . .”

“You can’t cry about it,” shouted Mr. Gilford. “Just do what I tell you to do, and get off your lazy ass!”

They pulled the rope again, and when Mr. Gilford fastened the lid of the crab pot that he now balanced on the gunnel, and took the buoy in his hand, ready to throw it, Jerry turned the wheel hard toward the next buoy and pushed the throttle. The boat was now sliding down into the trough. “Kick her,” Mr. Gilford yelled. Jerry pushed the throttle harder. The boat turned and yawed on the descent to the trough, the hull
heaved sideways and sliced to the left as the boat raced downward, Jerry took up the slack in the wheel and pulled with both hands against the weight of the water on the rudder, but the boat wouldn't turn. The next swell caught the hull, pushing it more to the left, and Jerry pulled the wheel harder. The topside rolled. Jerry stumbled. He braced himself with one of his hands and heard his father yell again.

"More, more," Mr. Gilford yelled, waving his arm to the right.

Jerry pulled harder at the wheel but the swell was too heavy to turn against. The pot Mr. Gilford had balanced on the gunnel was in the water, and the buoy rope trailed behind it from the deck.

"Kill it!" Mr. Gilford yelled.

Jerry idled the engine and put the boat out of gear. They crested the swell and the boat finally turned. Mr. Gilford coiled the rope on the deck in a few rapid strokes and threw it as far as he could manage from the rolling deck, and then threw the buoy after it. Then he ran and stood at the stern and looked down at the prop. Jerry watched to see what his father would do. Mr. Gilford looked down, then suddenly stood and waved his arms about his head as if beating off a swarm of flies. He looked up and yelled, "Okay, the rope's clear."

Jerry steered to the next buoy; his father laced the
rope over the davit and around the winch, squatted to keep his weight low and braced his knee against the gunnel, then pulled the pot and worked it. It was the last one of the string, and when the pot and the buoy were thrown in the clear, Mr. Gilford climbed up to the topside.

"We almost had a rope in the prop again," he said, "and I don't think you have any idea what it's like getting a rope out of the prop in this sea."

Even standing next to Jerry, he had to shout because of the wind. To Jerry, he looked like a savage, face coated with a mist of salt, cracked and sunburned, hair wind blown and wild. Jerry's soft face was pink from the cold.

"You've got to go easy on the wheel," said Mr. Gilford. "Why do I have to keep telling you that? Give it pressure, is all, then gas. The sea will turn it."

"It doesn't work that way," said Jerry.

"It works, I know it works," insisted Mr. Gilford, getting angrier. "Don't you think I do it that way myself? Don't you think I know what I'm talking about?"

He wasn't putting it to him softly because it was a man-to-man job and Jerry wasn't pulling his share.

"Don't look at the steering wheel," Mr. Gilford was saying, "just feel it. I know this is your first year, but you should have it by now. I can't steer this boat for you."

"It's awful hard," whined Jerry.
"It's no harder than in any other sea," insisted Mr. Gilford. "And you work too slow. See that fog out there?"

He pointed out to the fog bank. It had lain about ten miles at sea since the sun first rose that morning, long and narrow like a strip of white tape. It would move in with the afternoon wind and then they would have to quit for the day. Jerry looked at it longingly.

"We got to get all these pots worked before that comes in," Mr. Gilford emphasized. "They're almost buried now. We've got to work faster."

The pots would get buried because the surge of the groundswells moved the mud with it over everything on the bottom, and the pots had to be worked every other day when the groundswells came. Already two ropes had broken when they tried to pull the pots clear of the mud, and if they left any unworked, tomorrow they might all break.

"Just go easy on the wheel," Mr. Gilford shouted. He shouted against a fifteen knot wind.

"I am going easy with it," said Jerry.

"Don't get smart about it."

"Nothing makes any goddamn sense."

"Just shut up and do your work."

"Okay," said Jerry, "okay."

The day went badly, and in the afternoon the wind and the groundswells got worse. The tide changed three times, and
when it changed the slack in the buoy ropes bowed in a different direction and the boat had to be held at different angles to the swells while the pots were pulled. Jerry was never sure what the tide was doing.

He was too tired to try. Whenever he got the chance, he sat down or leaned against the wind break, and the work went slowly. At last, he saw the fog bank growing higher on the horizon and he felt a relief. At the end of a string of buoys, Mr. Gilford threw a buoy clear, went and nailed the lid shut on the crab receiver and stepped, bracing himself and moving cautiously, into the cabin. Then Jerry felt the wheel moving in his hands; the engine gunned and the boat began lunging into the swells. They were heading for home, and it was too late now to finish the pots.

As the boat gained speed, rising with the swells then falling, Jerry knelt on the topside, gripped the mast and inched backwards to the starboard opening of the wind break. When the boat heeled to the other side, he stepped quickly down to the gunnel and then the deck; when the boat heeled back to the starboard and the deck dropped, Jerry put one foot inside the cabin. He unlatched the door and waited, and when the deck leveled he put his other foot inside and sat beside his father, letting the door slam beside him. He latched the door shut. His father turned on the automatic pilot and they wedged themselves against the corners of the cabin. The boat
was now slamming into the swells and pounding when it crested.

"We left twenty pots out there," Mr. Gilford said wearily. "Twenty pots to work tomorrow or lose them. I sure hate to come out on a Sunday."

"I couldn't help it," said Jerry.

"You sure got some lessons to learn before you become a man. If you put as much effort into your work as you do into Judy..."

"I got up this morning, didn't I?"

"It's not when you did it, it's what you did."

"Her old man was angry and he exaggerated."

"He told me on the phone," Mr. Gilford said with a tone of finality, "what he saw when he found you two in the car."

"I wouldn't try anything in front of her own house."

"You shouldn't ever try anything like that. Maybe you think you've got to learn it before you go to that expensive college, to become a 'college man,' I guess." He said "college" with a sneer.

"I didn't do anything with her."

"We'll talk about it later."

They were both miserable with fatigue, and Mr. Gilford leaned his head against the corner of the cabin, the hard lines of his face softening as he closed his eyes. As the boat crested a swell Jerry was able to look out over all the other crests and see the moorage ahead. He was thinking about the
time it would take them to get home. He saw the moored boats in the lee of the breakwater, which at that distance were just specks on a shiny patch of water. He could see the seas hammering at the breakwater and shooting bursts of spray nearly as high as the lighthouse behind it.

He then looked at the fog bank that moved to the shore like a faithful promise. It moved swiftly with the stiff onshore wind and approached the Point, the bank almost as high as the mountain that backed the moorage. As it connected with the Point, the bank pouched upwards until it was higher than the mountain, went up and over the mountain, and then the pouch seemed to fall around it like a sudden snowfall. The sides of the pouch descended into the moorage, at first a mist floating down like a light snow, and then the mist thickened as the body of the fog glided into the cove from around the mountain, first across the breakwater and then gently over the shiny patch of water until the moorage was entombed in a soft white, sharply outlined cloud.

They were about an hour from the moorage when he could no longer see it over the groundswells. As the bank shaped itself to the land it became furrowed, looking brown and moist in the clefts. It seemed warm and comforting. He had waited all day for that fog and was curious about it. He had never experienced the fog before. The fog moved quickly and rose ahead of the boat out of the swells like a giant mushroom.
The fog approached; as the boat entered it, suddenly the surface and contours of the bank weren't distinguishable but became buffed and flat looking, and beads of moisture formed across the windshield. It became darker around them.

"It's a hell of a way to go home," said Mr. Gilford, looking out the windshield. "All we can do is relax and forget it's there."

He sounded weary, and he turned on the fathometer and closed his eyes again.

The moisture on the windshield was now running in streams off the glass. Jerry leaned forward and looked out through the glass but he couldn't see the bow. Never before had he seen anything like this. He looked at his father, whose head, eyes closed, was rocking with the toss of the boat. Then Jerry opened the door and leaned out. Ahead six feet, the point of the bow had a gray, soft outline. Behind him, the thirty feet of deck to the transom went from gray to white, and he could not see the cockpit at the stern where it was hidden in the fog.

This fog was not as comforting as it had looked. There was no longer a wind, but the sea was more frightening then ever. The swells seemed bigger because they could not be anticipated by sight. When the boat slid down into the trough the fog thinned slightly and Jerry could catch a glimpse of each swell as it passed through the narrow zone of visibility.
The swells appeared suddenly and seemed closer than they actually were, their dimensions foreshortened by the mist and the tops hidden so that he could not see their size. Then one would move against the hull and the boat would lurch upward into blindness.

He sat back inside. Now there was nothing he could do but keep himself wedged in his seat and wonder. The top line of the fathometer showed the even undulation of the swells where the boat had traveled over them, and the bottom line showed the thirty fathom outline of a reef. The line suddenly rose until it marked fifteen fathoms, then fell again leaving a sharp peak on the paper. The line began to rise again and Jerry turned his head away. He had never worried about the reefs before, but now that he could not see ahead, he was frightened by what could be invisibly there. He imagined the straight line of open water he had seen between the boat and the moorage, and he tried to reassure himself. Then he wondered what time it was; he couldn't tell how long it had been since they had entered the fog.

His father snorted occasionally, falling into a light sleep and starting to snore, then jerked out of it by the pitching of the boat and falling back into a light doze. Jerry was wide awake and tense. Though he hated to admit it, some things about his father he found amazing. He could imagine his father sleeping through anything that didn't require work.
Some time later—he couldn't tell how much time had passed—he noticed that the swells rolled more smoothly under the boat. Mr. Gilford stopped snorting and opened his eyes. "Wha?" he said. He looked at the fathometer and studied the marker line, then looked out the windshield. He had been catching little dreams and the dreams had refreshed him. He gave the engine some more throttle.

"We can go a little faster now," he said sounding sleepy. "Have you heard the foghorn?"

"I heard it a little while ago."

The foghorn blared and they could hear it clearly through the fog although, over the noise of the engine, it was impossible to tell how far it was. The foghorn blew three times every ten minutes.

"Well, as long as we're headed for it," Mr. Gilford said. He checked the compass, leaned back and closed his eyes.

The boat rolled progressively more smoothly in the sea. Leaning over the gunnel, Jerry saw that the water around the hull had become smoother than before. There was none of the boiling in the trough that there had been in the bigger swells. He sat inside again and soon could see the tops of the waves as they became smaller. Very quickly the water became noticeably calm. Mr. Gilford sat up suddenly and slowed the engine to a hum. The boat was rocking almost playfully. The swells were long in between but not very high.
"We must be near the breakwater," Mr. Gilford said.
"Have you spotted any buoys?"

"I can't see anything," said Jerry. He was excited at the thought of a buoy. "I didn't know we were around any. What if we hit one?"

"Ahhh! There's one around here, is all. You could never hit it because there's too much water."

He told Jerry to look, and Jerry opened the door and stood on the deck. He looked around and realized that they could be anywhere, that in the fog there could be danger very close without their knowing it. He had no idea if they were inside the breakwater or not. Ahead was a small island inside the moorage and then a pier, but he couldn't imagine where they might be. The boat was cutting smoothly through the water, rocking gently, and suddenly there were no more swells. He felt water running down his nose and he scooped it from his eyes and face, then looked hard around him. He saw nothing but the confusion in his mind. When he tried to look through the fog he saw imaginary things, a sudden shadow or the impression of an object that wasn't there; and then he tried to look at the fog itself, but he couldn't do it because it was everywhere and not a thing that he was used to looking at.

He tried listening. He thought he heard a tiny sound like splashing, which he could barely distinguish from the roar of the breakwater, but he couldn't tell from what
direction came the roar or the splashing sound. It sounded like water splashing against a rock, and he felt urgently that he should know what the sound was. He tried to figure in what direction the sound came from. Around him it was quite calm and the boat was running smoothly through the water. He kneeled on the deck to listen at a different angle and the sound became louder, then he looked farther down into the water and found that the sound came from the bow as it cut through the water. As he knelt, the foghorn sounded. It made a tremendous blare and left his ears ringing. He had never heard it as loud as it was now, not from any distance, and it seemed as if they must be right next to it. When would they come upon the island and the moorage? Jerry now wandered to the stern but didn't see anything.

Suddenly he heard a soft voice, his father's voice—he couldn't tell whose voice it was—whispering in his ear. He turned but nobody was there. The voice spoke again and it frightened him. He looked toward the cabin that appeared like an abstract sketch on white paper.

"Look for the red can," the voice said.

A figure moved on the topside, its head lost in the whorl of mist. Jerry went to the cabin, cleared the water from his eyes, and looked up at his father who was turning the topside wheel, calm and competent. Jerry was trembling.

"This is some fog, ain't it?" Mr. Gilford said. His
voice was light-hearted. "How does it make you feel?"

"I don't feel anything," Jerry lied.

"That's the way. That's how a man feels when he's doing something that has to be done right. That way you don't bungle it."

"What do you mean?"

"Your mind just sort of opens up and you don't force anything into it. That's something they don't teach in college."

"I guess not," said Jerry.

"I've never seen a college man that could do anything right. I think they lose their ability, if they ever had it, by sitting behind a desk all day."

"Poor fellas," said Jerry.

"Yea," said his father. "Now go look for the can."

From where he stood, Jerry looked for the red can that marked the island. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed an object at water level, and he turned to look at it but there was nothing there when he looked. It had been part of a buoy, he thought, the smooth near edge of it, the rest invisible as if dematerialized into another dimension. But now that he thought about it he didn't know if he had actually seen it, because why then couldn't he see if looking directly at it? Then he felt something behind him, over the port bow, but there was nothing either to look at or to glimpse from the corner of the eye, just the sense of something dark on the
other side of a fragile skin. And now that he thought about it and turned toward it, he could not feel it anymore or even see a darkness there. As he looked away he felt it again, this time farther over as if the boat were passing it, and whatever it was it felt big and dangerous. He felt it had to be something and it seemed like it was getting closer. He sat on the gunnel to steady himself; he felt something big was there but he couldn't admit it; he was afraid to even think about it.

"We're almost there," said Mr. Gilford, sounding like the host at a party.

Jerry looked over the side. It was flat calm except for the surge sliding the boat to each side. The water was murky from the muddy bottom stirred up by the surge, and it somehow seemed very shallow.

His father told him to look over the bow, and Jerry looked ahead. A different quality came to the fog ahead and then around them. Instead of the even frosted glaze, there were filmy strands that moved in convolutions like the spider webs that blow across the ocean. The fog was darker close to the water and lighter up above. Jerry rubbed the moisture from his eyes and he had the feeling that he was at the top edge of an invisible cliff.

Suddenly there was a large form directly in front of him. He slipped and fell on the wet deck. But he had clearly seen it, dark and gray and mysterious, the edges fuzzy, and he had
recognized it. Then he was back on his feet and the form was
gone; the boat was in reverse. He had seen the boat that
moored next to their own and his father was maneuvering
around it.

His father told him to look into the water, and he
looked down and saw the skiff bouncing against the hull. A
sea gull in the skiff looked up and flew away. Jerry secured
the mooring line and felt weak. He sat on the gunnel and
tried to relax. With the loose end of his shirt he wiped the
moisture off his face, and he felt exhausted, his legs
trembling. He sat and felt how steady the deck was. It
seemed high and solid beneath his feet, but his body was
swaying as if he were still on the sea, moving beyond his
control, and his stomach was nauseous. His father was humming
a tune as he eased the receiver of crabs over the stern to
float for the night. He listened to his father and he felt
embarrassed. He tried to stop his legs from trembling.

Then he felt his father's hand rustling his hair. Mr.
Gilford had loaded the skiff and stood beside Jerry ready to
go home. The skiff was tapping the side of the boat.

"Are you tired?" said his father.

"A little."

"That's what I like about this fishing: it's hard but
there's excitement now and then that picks you right up again."

"Yea, and maybe we'll be lucky again tomorrow," said
Jerry.

"That's the spirit. That's what those college men don't have. They sit all day with their fat jobs and get bored. A lot of them would envy this. There's that bank president...."

"They don't have to be the way they are," said Jerry. He knew the futility of what his father wanted for him, and it made him mad.

"Okay, sure, I guess you'll go to that college and get your fat job—that's up to you and I won't say you can't do it—but I don't see it. I could never work for the other guy, myself, and fishing is independent and clean."

"I hate to say it, but I feel pretty filthy right now," said Jerry.

"Yea, I guess we've had a long day," said his father, shaking Jerry's head. "Why don't we go in now and clean up?"

"I'm for it."

They climbed down into the skiff. The sea gull had left its present in a white mess on the seat. "Put a sack over it," Mr. Gilford said. Rowing to the pier, Jerry was so tired he had trouble pulling the oars. "I'll help you," said Mr. Gilford. He put his hands over Jerry's and pushed from the back seat while Jerry pulled. In the fog, it seemed like they were in their own soundproof room.

"Whatever I do for you," Mr. Gilford said, rowing with Jerry, "is to make a man of you, like this we're doing, rowing
together. Working together is the hardest to learn."

"College is hard work too," said Jerry.

"Sure it is, if you don't loaf at it. But I wouldn't have gone myself even if I had had the chance. I see all those fat cats and their cushy jobs and I pity them."

"I'll bet they like it or they wouldn't stay at it," said Jerry.

"Sure they do, they make a lot of money. But they only live for their pleasures. That makes 'em weak. That's why I don't like you messing around with Judy. It develops a weakness."

"I wasn't doing anything." Jerry was already thinking of how nice it would be in college, getting up at ten o'clock for late classes, drinking at night.

"You mess around like that and it'll ruin you. You gotta learn fortitude. And that's what I'm trying to teach you. Don't think about the girls. Just find one some day and marry her. Get your college done and find a job you want to do. Think of college as a job and get it done and get out."

"I'll do just that," said Jerry.

"That's right."

"And I'll forget about Judy." He was thinking of when he would see her again and they would carry on where they had left off.

"You do that and you'll be okay."

He agreed with his father again and then, as they
neared the base of the pier where they tied the skiff, he looked ahead in his mind past college; all he saw was a fog, not frightening because it was in the safe distance, and the distance was a comforting thought. When he left home he would sleep until ten o'clock and that was a comforting thought.
It was after dark during the early summer in southern Germany, at the Mark Cafe in the old town of Kitzingen am Main. Ross's three roommates sat at a table holding their glasses up to him as he walked in the doorway.

"Ross pal, how was the leave?" said Jerry. "Have a beer with us."

"Yea," said Randy, "and what you been running around all night for?"

"What do you mean, running around?" said Ross.

"Look at the glum on his face," said Randy. "I think he's been chasing one of those bar hogs and she got some of his money."

Ross sat down at the table and his face was flushed. The color came easily to his face, one of those that doesn't express emotion very well, just a sheepishness and frequent embarrassment. His face was oval, handsome, with a small mouth and fine features, and Ross was medium built. With his close-cropped hair he had the small town image of a nice boy.

"Have a beer, Ross. We're celebrating the old man's restrictions on passes," the third roommate said. He was usually the silent one.

"Right," said Jerry. "We followed you over the fence,
though you didn't see us."

"We hid," said Randy.

"Boy, you sure walk fast."

"Just give me the beer," said Ross. "A few of these will make me feel better."

They had several beers at the general room's expense, each one buying rounds in turn, and Ross began to answer questions about his leave.

"So you met a girl," said Jerry. "Where exactly did you meet her?"

"By the roadside."

"No," said Jerry, "not where, but where," pointing to different places on his body. They all roared.

"No, it never got that far," Ross admitted sheepishly.

"Is that why you came to town in such a hurry?" said Jerry.

"What's she like?"

"It's a long story," said Ross. He was reluctant to talk.

"He's protecting her honor," said Jerry discreetly into Randy's ear so the others could hear it.

"She was something special," Ross said.

"Tell us about her."

"Her name was Marianne. She was twenty and she was beautiful."
He had first spotted her at a distance as he looked through the Zurich traffic from across the highway. She stood with shining yellow hair by the northbound lane with her thumb out, and he wanted to get to her before a car stopped so he could catch a ride with her. She looked almost like a child standing across the road, small breasted and slender as she was and swinging her arm in a carefree gesture with the passing of each car. Her arm would get tired that way; she must not have to wait long for a ride. He ran across the road and ambled up to her with his backpack in hand. She looked at him with a straight face, and when he got close he saw she wasn't as youthful as she had looked; it was her movements that made her look that way, not her face. Her face was rather dry and serious looking, though attractive enough.

In a few minutes a car stopped in front of her, and since he was standing close he said, "May I?" and got into the car with her. Then as they rode, he talked to her in English and asked where she was from, but she didn't say anything. He thought she didn't know the language. She would look at him in a wary way as he talked but make no remark. He liked having someone to entertain who couldn't understand him, because it made it so much easier to express himself. He talked about whatever came to his mind,
something he couldn't do when people were listening, something that would have embarrassed him, and pretty soon he was saying every silly thing that crossed his mind. She smiled at him once and later began to wear the smile. When she smiled she was much lovelier. Her face had had a sour look, but with the smile it sweetened and was nice to look at. He was thinking of the black family that had moved to his neighborhood in Salt Lake City, and he asked his deaf audience if she thought blacks should be allowed to sleep with white girls.

"Only if they are men," she said.

He heard her say it as naturally as his little sister would call him stupid, and the thought of what she answered wasn't as bad as his memory of all the things he had said for the last hour. She saw the horror on his face and began to laugh.

"I bet I know more about you than most people do," she said, laughing in spite of herself until tears came to her eyes.

Then she was ashamed because he wasn't laughing also. She slid close to him on the seat and began to baby him. He was her poor little Danish boy and she was sorry she had played such a bad trick on him. When she began brushing her hair against his face he felt much better. She was the first desirable woman he had been close to in two years.

"You are not mad at me?" she said.
"Of course I am," he told her, "but it's all right. It was just such a shock. I don't usually say things like that to people."

"But you should. There's nothing wrong with it."

"I couldn't ever do that," he said.

"Well, I feel responsible for you now. We will have to travel together so I can take care of you."

They talked for a long time and then he began to feel a tingle in his backbone from being close to her. It was just plain wonderful to be with a woman, after so long in the Army with no women he could talk to or feel attached to. He tried hard not to look too closely at her body but his eyes kept drifting over her when she was watching. She saw him doing it and that made him blush. She smiled when he blushed but moved away from him. That made him self-conscious and it became difficult to talk.

"You are not talking," she lamented.

"I'm probably just tired," he said.

"You don't know for sure if you are tired?"

"Okay, I'm tired," he said, and laughed with her.

The car was taking them to Stuttgart, and the weather was hot.

* 

"She sounds pretty good," said Jerry, giving Randy the knowing eye.
"I think I met her once in Amsterdam," said Randy.
"No, I met her in Nürnberg by the old wall," said Jerry, "and she was really good."
Ross put his hands over his ears.
"No, go ahead. Don't feel embarrassed, Ross. You say you slept with her in Stuttgart?"
"We were in the campground together," said Ross, "but we didn't have the same sleeping bag."
"I hope this isn't going to be a sad story," said Jerry.

* *

They reached Stuttgart and stayed in a campground by the highway, but when they settled down for the night he didn't have the nerve to make an advance toward her. He wanted to, immediately, out of instinct perhaps, or out of craving, but when they unrolled their bags they did it at a discreet distance from each other. He lay knowing she was there near him, and thinking about her until he finally had to sleep. In the morning she was up before him because she had slept more soundly. Together, they put on their packs and went to the road to sit in the morning sunshine and wait for a ride. They were friendly and talked, but he was still a little afraid to sit close to her, or talk openly, because the self-consciousness would make him do or say something ridiculous if he didn't watch it, and he was
afraid of himself more than of her.

When they had a ride for Wurzburg, he began to relax because the big car they were riding in made her feel uneasy too, and her uneasiness put them both on the same plane. They began to talk more seriously, aware always of the driver who watched them in the rear-view mirror; and their common language, which the driver didn't understand, made the conversation they shared more personal.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" he said impetuously, afraid of having said it after it was too late. "What I mean is, I like the way you look."

"I can be beautiful if you want me to be," she said. "You look very nice too, and you can be that whether you want to or not."

He had been too outspoken and the stimulation from being that confused him for a moment. She saw the confusion in his eyes and took his arm to comfort him. She lay against him. He was self-conscious and appreciated her silence. When she leaned up, looked at him, he smiled and blustered. She smiled back and seemed to know his feelings and respect them.

"That driver really bothers me," he said at last. "I wish he wouldn't watch us."

"Does it embarrass you?" she said.

"It makes me nervous."
"I do not like it either, but we should not let it bother us."

"I can't help it," he said.

He looked up again and saw the driver's eyes glance away furtively as if afraid to betray a secret. Then the driver barked some words at them.

"What did he say?"

"He does not want us to act like lovers in his back seat," she said.

"I don't like him at all."

"Ask him to let us out."

"I don't know what to say."

"Motion to him."

He leaned forward but didn't know what to do. He talked to the driver and the driver didn't understand, of course, then Marianne said something in German. The driver let them out. As they big sedan drove away they stood at a dusty roadside on the edge of a small town, and looked around them in the hot afternoon sun. The town was up the road from them and dry hills were around them. "Look at the castle," she said, pointing out an old circular fortress that looked like a flat rock at the top of the small hill. A dirt road went directly up to it.

"Let us go see it," she said to him.

"Marianne," he said, "we should probably keep traveling."
"No," she said, "it is too pretty to miss."

She took his hand and led him up the shallow embankment and across the field between them and the dirt road, and then they climbed up the dusty road, stopping occasionally in the heat to catch their breath, but climbing steadily up with their backpacks. At the top the road entered a wide gateway in the high walls. They walked into the walls and he stopped her after a few feet. It was a small round fortress and a farmer had made his home in a building inside the wall. Around the courtyard were strewn hay and sacks of feed, with chickens on the hay and some hogs grunting around where water lay in pools on the warped cobblestones. A few ducks flew away from them when they entered.

"We'll disturb this place," he said to her.

"No, we will not."

"I'm afraid to disturb it."

"There is nothing to be afraid of. We can look around."

A fat woman looked out the door of the building and said something. Marianne answered in German and the woman listened but looked sour when she heard the Danish accent.

"You see," he said, "she doesn't want us here. I've seen that look before."

"In Denmark there are people like that too, but they are just afraid. You should not let their fear become your fear."
"We're disturbing their privacy."
"We will go back if you want."

They walked out of the gate and back down the road. Below was a field with several cars parked by some trees where a small river, just visible through the trees that were along it, ran toward the road. "I bet they are swimming there," she told him when she saw the water. She took his hand and led him into the field and down to the narrow valley, and when they approached the cars they saw young people, about their own age, ahead in a natural pool screened by the heavy foliage.

"They're not wearing anything!" he said to her. He had never seen people swimming naked. There were both young men and young women in the water.

"Maybe we shouldn't watch," he said before they reached the pool.

"It is all right," she said to him. "We can go in too."
"You can't be serious." The idea sounded preposterous. "Oh, but it is fun. Have you not done it before?"
"Are you kidding?" he said.

He was afraid she wasn't kidding. He had never taken off his clothes in the daylight, and he couldn't imagine doing it. She almost dragged him to the pool and he was afraid she was going to do it. What could he do to get out of this? She dropped her backpack and ran to the edge of
the water, and some of the swimmers who were splashing and playing shouted to her, and she shouted back in German.

"Come on," she said to him, dragging him closer to the edge of the pool. She was serious, so without letting her see his face he took off his shirt and shoes. She coaxed him to go in and he stood with his feet in the water wondering how not to make a fool of himself. She finally tore down his pants to the ankles and squealed hilariously when she saw how he stammered, and because his pants were in the water he had to either take them off or wear them wet, so he took them off.

Realizing he was naked, he fell face down to cover himself with the water, and when he stood waist deep in the pool he looked back and saw Marianne step naked into the water and wade over to some German girls to talk to them. The curiosity of seeing her without clothes made him stare without thinking how he looked and he suddenly realized that his mouth was open. A stout German boy waded up to him and talked in German. When he answered in English, the boy yelled "American!" and some others around him laughed, then came over to slap him on the back and push his head under. There were about twenty boys and girls, and they swam and dived, the boys pushing the girls up out of the water and pushing the other boys' heads under. The girls were fighting them and splashing water. Marianne came up to him and
splashed water in his face, and he grabbed her selfconsciously, not knowing what else to do, and hoisted her in the air like the other boys were doing to the girls, letting her fall sideways into the water. He played like the others, keeping himself covered, but he couldn't enjoy it.

For awhile he stood away from the others in the deeper water and Marianne came up to him with an expressionless look. Her breasts were just out of the water. He watched the water dripping off them and she dropped down to cover herself and kicked his shins so that he fell down in the water. He splashed around until he had his footing and grabbed for her waist. She pulled away.

"Oh no," she said. "You are too eager."

"What do you mean?"

"I see it in your eyes."

He knew what she meant and he spasmodically splashed water at her and tried to laugh. He played like that, out of embarrassment, trying to act like the others, and always keeping himself in the water. At last, he got close to Marianne and said, "I haven't told you, but I'm supposed to be at my Casern by five-thirty. I really should go."

"Is it so important?" she said.

"I'm afraid I'll get in trouble."

She agreed that she would go too, and he walked ahead
of her out of the water toward one of the blankets laid on the grass, not turning until she pulled him around. She looked at him.

"You are so shy," she said, "but you look more aggressive than you act," laughing.

He blushed deeply and found the towel to put around him. He didn't watch her while she dressed, and he dressed himself hurriedly. She held his arm as they took their backpacks from the ground, and said, "You are so shy. You are my little Danish boy and I will have to take good care of you."

"Is that a promise?"

"Yes it is. I know just how you are and I like you."

They walked back across the field toward the road, their damp skin drying quickly in the sun, and at the roadside she began to shake the stiffness out of her hair, looking like a wild animal that had just forded a stream. He watched her shaking her hair, saw how happy and free she was, and he admired her and felt the distance between them. She was watching him and laughed, "You are so funny." He blushed. "But very gentle," she said. He gave her a timid smile.

They caught a ride very soon, in a Volkswagen bus with a German couple riding in the back with them. The two Germans were very well acquainted and they had their arms around each other, while they talked with Marianne. He
listened without knowing anything they said, and when the talking was over, Marianne looked up at him and put her arm through his. He saw the other couple doing some light kissing and fondling, and he leaned down to Marianne and put his lips to hers. He followed the example of the other couple until they stopped in Würzburg.

*

"So you brought her back to Kitzingen, huh?" said Jerry, looking sideways at Randy. They wore straight faces, posing as stern ministers of morality. The quiet roommate was smiling.


"Ross just stepped out for a minute to get a quick drink," said Jerry. "He'll be with her again soon."

"It's not a very quick drink," said Randy. They all leaned forward and looked inquiringly at Ross. Jerry leaned back when Ross refused to talk.

"That's why you were in such a rush to get back to town," he observed.

"You were sure walking fast."

"Was she there when you got back?" said the quiet roommate. He was still sober; the rest were getting drunk.

"She's right where she said she would be," said Ross.
"Is it polite to ask what happened?"
"No it isn't."
"Well, that sounds like the way it should be." They all laughed except Ross.

* 

They reached Wurzburg late in the day and he told her that he had to go south to Kitzingen, that he couldn't be with her any longer unless she came with him. He told her that his day-of-grace had ended already. That was an extra day he had after the leave ended before he was AWOL. She said she would come with him.

"It is a lovely idea," she said, "a day-of-grace. It seems as if that day should be a very special one, a day when you receive something special."

"I hadn't thought of it like that," he said. "Maybe it has been that way: for a whole day I haven't felt like I was in the Army."

"Can not you be late?"
"I'm already late, and it worries me. I've never been late before."

"Does it worry you so much when you do not even want to go back?"
"Yes, and I can't explain it."

They rode together in the back of an Army truck past
the American Caserns in Würzburg and then to the Caserns around Kitzingen. American cars passed them on the road and he pointed out to her the green license plates that identified the Americans.

"Seeing those plates reminds me I'm still in the Army," he said.

"Is it so bad?"

"When you're reminded of it every day for years, it gets bad."

He had the truck stop in the town and they got out near a corner close to a bar where the taxis cruised to take the GI's back and forth. He stopped her at the corner, fearful to leave her but afraid not to hurry, and he held her close and looked in her blue eyes. Above them, the sky was crimson with the early sunset.

"Shall I meet you here?" she said.

"I don't know how long it will take."

"Shall we stay at the Hostel?"

"We should," he said, "but I don't know where it is."

"I will find it," she said.

"I'll meet you there."

"Remember, they close at nine. Do not be late."

Then he left her, looking back as he neared the bar, and he saw her watching after him. She looked young and girlish as she had when he first saw her across the road in Zurich,
and her distant look made him feel detached from her as if she were a dream.

He looked ahead and approached a soldier, already drunk, who was standing insecurely in front of the bar, feeling the curb with his foot. He looked as if he were waiting for a taxi, so Ross walked up to him and said, "Harvey Barracks?" The soldier nodded. A taxi stopped and they both got in. He sat in the back of the taxi and appreciated the speed of the car as it took them through the old town and over the bridge and through the countryside to the Casern.

At the main gate, he got out of the taxi and walked up to the gate. He saw a staff car drive up and stop at the guard house, the MP saluted, and while the MP was looking the other way Ross rushed through the gate and down the street. When he reached his Company barracks he went directly inside to the CQ room where his friend Sergeant Deets smiled up at him from behind the desk.

They shook hands and Ross stood around talking for a minute so as not to seem as nervous as he was. He had talked to Deets over the phone from Würzburg and there was a place saved for him on the register where he could sign in at five-thirty. "I told you I'd cover for you," said Deets. Ross tried not to show his anxiety about signing out again on pass, but then Deets said:

"Just sign in on the bottom line, Ross. Nobody's
signed out."

"That's funny," said Ross, looking up at his friend. He signed in.

"Nope," said Deets. "The old man got mad about something and canceled the passes."

"Damn! I wanted to sign out!"

"Ho," said Deets. "Why leave?"

He half-apologized to Deets so as not to reveal himself, then made the first excuse he could think of and went into the hall. Up the stairs, he rushed to the room at the end of the third-floor hallway and threw off all his clothes. His roommates were out getting drunk, he figured. He showered and shaved and dressed in clean civilian clothes, then rushed out.

He went outside through the door closest to the main gate where the taxis parked, and then he stopped and remembered he had no pass. He wondered if the MP would check him. It was a rare thing to happen, but it had happened to him once and if he hadn't had the pass he would have been in trouble. He thought of another way to town. The sun was half gone over the low hills, and he figured it was about eight o'clock. That gave him an hour left to walk to town and still find the Hostel--plenty of time. He went around the building toward the edge of the Casern nearest town, walked into the long evening shadows of the
buildings and the trees, around the back of the medical compound and onto a dirt road that paralleled a fenced field. Ahead he saw, by a lot with garbage cans in it, the hole in the fence and the path across the field. He hurried to the fence. The path was long and hard from use, the field was wide and empty, and he put a foot over where the fence was flattened and looked around. There were no MP's in sight, only the empty road beyond the buildings and a row of tall elms.

He hurried over the path to the dead-end street at the other side, and when he reached the street he rushed to the sidewalk and slowed to a walk, afraid to look around. A small factory stood to the right, and as he passed he heard dogs growling from inside the fenced grounds, then two German Shepherds ran for him, running hard, and crashed against the fence. They shook the fence with their paws and their howling resounded over the empty street. When he was out of their sight he could still hear the howling, and then it became quiet and he began to walk faster. He didn't see the farm houses he passed or the stone arch he walked under, and he wasn't aware of the pavement he walked over, just that he was moving as fast as he could go.

He left the road and walked over the old bridge into the town. On the wharf by the river, the railroad tracks
glistened in the last light, and the town on the hill above seemed to be dying in the shadow of the sunset. He saw no taxis and had to walk up the cobblestone grade of the town until he reached the knoll where the main road passed the Havanna Bar. He entered the bar, stepping around some GI's on the sidewalk who were holding their beer bottles, and walked through the dark doorway into the orange-lit room where more GI's sat drinking at tables with glasses and bottles in front of them. A band was playing loud music, and the waitresses talked as if in a pantomime. He saw a waitress he knew could speak English, a girl with a fixed smile and a black dress, and he asked her if she could give him directions to the Hostel. The girl looked at him and seemed not to understand. He asked her again politely, calmly, careful not to intimidate her. She answered that she didn't know there was a Hostel in the town. There had to be, he said.

"I am sorry," she told him, looking over her shoulder at a customer waiting for his beer. "I do not know where it is."

"Isn't there one in this town?"
"I am sure," she said, "but I do not know where it is."
"I thought everybody would know."
"The town people would know, yes."
She wasn't even a German, she told him, but Dutch, and
all the other girls were Dutch except for one who came from northern Germany. He hadn't realized it before, but all the girls in the GI bars were from the bigger cities. He tried to figure out why he had never known about the bar girls. They all sounded alike to him and he hadn't known they spoke in different accents. He hadn't bothered to learn the language because, after all, what was the use of it? The Army was just a mistake he had made two years ago and he had thought of everything connected with it as other mistakes he shouldn't make. If only he could speak the language now. And now there was nothing he could do but keep asking and hope that someone would help him.

He went outside to the street and thought of asking at a Gastatte. They were run by the local people, he figured, and they would know. He saw one ahead with its two eye-holes for windows and a doorway in the stone, up the main road, and he rushed there and went inside. Several stiff-faced men in work clothes played cards at a table. He asked the clerk at the counter where the Hostel was. The clerk looked at him in an amused way and said something to the men at the table who began to laugh. When he heard them laughing at him, he ran outside. In the fresh air his face burned, and he tried to figure out what they had laughed at. He couldn't see any reason for it, but he wasn't going to face more of it.
Confused, he looked around the street, and floating into his mind came the idea that it would be hard to find the Hostel, that he was going to have to assert himself somewhere, somehow, in order to find out where it was. He looked up the road at the line of dim business fronts, and he saw a restaurant beneath a small hotel with the lights still on in the dining room. He went quickly to the restaurant and then quickly into the bright room.

An old woman met him from the kitchen door and she spoke in German that sounded like the catering appeal of a waitress. He asked her politely for directions and she didn't understand. He repeated himself again and again, and finally he repeated "Hostel, Hostel," trying to imitate a German accent, until the woman looked worried and then thoughtful. She stared at him, thinking, and then she put her hand to her chin and said "Hostel." "Yah, yah," he said excitedly, and the woman answered, simply, "Schule."

The grade school. It was up the road about ten blocks from the restaurant, and he hurried up the road looking for the school building. As he entered the residential district around the school, the sidewalk became wide and the street lamps shone in a string over the stone like the series of his bright but disconnected thoughts. Then ahead, the flat roof of the school as he approached it rose above the skyline of gabled rooftops until its flatness dominated in
the darkness. He stopped in front of the building and looked at its shadowed features. It sat in the center of wide lawns and was dark except for one lit window where a light inside had been left on.

Now he had to figure out where the school fit in with the Hostel. The Hostel had to be around somewhere close. He walked along the road and looked up the narrow streets for a sign, but all he saw were the long condominium-like rows of dark houses with their yardless facings and their heavily curtained windows. The streets were vacant except for cars parked on the sidewalks, and he walked along up the street nearest the school and found nothing but nameless homes. He knew the town clock would chime when it reached nine o'clock, and the thought of time made him hurry faster down the street then over to the next street and back toward the school, but he found nothing.

He walked to the other side of the main road and along one of the down-sloped streets, looking close at the houses. In front of one he saw a small sign but he couldn't read it, and since it was the only one around he stood in front of the house for a minute, trying to figure out what he would do after he knocked and the door opened, trying to figure out if this was really the Hostel. It looked like just another house, not what he was looking for, and he was afraid to try it. Then he went to the house and knocked.
A very young girl opened the door and said something he couldn't understand. In the room behind her a man and a woman sat at a table and looked toward him. The man had a serious, almost angry, look and when they heard the question asked in English the man stood up and walked, swinging his arms in powerful strokes like a bulldog's walk, toward the door. Ross realized that this could not be the Hostel, and with the angry man coming toward him he backed quickly away and stumbled to the street. They watched him from the door as he rushed away.

Now he went back toward the road wondering what he could do next. He heard the town chimes and realized it was too late. Desperately, he went to the first door he saw and knocked. Footsteps came from inside, and when the door opened he looked into a bright hall with an elderly man leaning out from the portal. The man barked some words. He looked at the man and repeated "Hostel" in a staccato voice. The man seemed shocked, and then barked some more words and slowly closed the door, peering with contempt from the edge of the door until it was finally shut.

He stood in the dark and realized what a fool he was, and how he had acted like a fool all day. He hadn't risked taking a taxi from the main gate, he hadn't thought in advance about what to do, he hadn't realized the value of what he would miss. He walked back toward the school and saw in it the one bright window and wondered if a
The balls of his feet hurt from the cobblestones and he had a sensation like hunger. He walked toward the lights of the town, looking at the night. A car cruised by with the interior light on. A girl drove and another sat alone in the back seat. They watched him as they passed. He felt hunger but didn't know if it was really hunger or just the way he felt. The car that had passed before now drove by again, dark inside. Two figures sat together in the back. He walked toward the lights of the town.

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"You mean you didn't even find out where she's at?" said Jerry.

"Nobody could tell me," said Ross.

"God, that's too bad."

"I never realized that you couldn't talk to these people around here."

"It's surprising."

"I'll bet this old gal can tell us," said Randy. He motioned the waitress over. She was a tall, fat woman.

"Tell me, good lookin'," Randy said to her, "where's
the Youth Hostel around here?"

The woman held up four fingers and looked inquiringly.

"No, not beer, sweetheart, just the Hostel."

The woman went away nodding and brought back four pieces of pastry.

"Wow," said Jerry, laughing with the others, "the problem here is sure a lack of communication!"

They ate the pastry. The quiet roommate was smiling and nodding.

"I'll bet you really feel bad, Ross."

"Oh sure," he said, "but it's just one that got away."

His lip was trembling.

"And there are so many women around," said Randy, ironically, staring at his pastry.

"Aw come on," said Jerry, "that would make anybody want to cry."

"Not really," said Ross, wiping away a tear. They all had tears from laughing over the pastry. "It would have been nice, but that's how it goes.

They all stared into the amber of their beers, their compassion taking strong effect. They all saw how nice it would have been. They were silent for awhile. The quiet one was grinning.

"What are you grinning about, Mister Silence," said Jerry.
"The Hostel," said Mister Silence.

"And what about it."

"It's located inside the school house."

"What?" Ross stood up and spilled his beer. His pants were wet with the beer.
The old man was really caught off guard that day when Billy didn't come home at noon like he was supposed to. The old man had made it very clear to both of us, and there was no way Billy could not know how important it was for us to go and paint the boat that afternoon. At first, the old man was just angry, and then after we had waited awhile, he began to brood and talk as if Billy had stayed away to get even for something, though he had no reasons why Billy would want to. As we waited, the old man's brows grew heavier over his eyes. He took the bookwork from a drawer, slammed it onto the dining room table, and began to worry over his bills. He wasn't going to waste his time, no sir, and he was going to suffer as much as he could.

We were supposed to paint the boat that afternoon because that was an important part of us kids' education. Obedience was part of it too. We weren't going to learn just that timid stuff they teach in school, if indeed they teach anything there--they didn't, after all, teach the three R's the way they were supposed to--no, we were going to get taught right, and we started with sweeping out the machine shop each day after school, going to harder things as we got older, and always painting the boat on free Saturdays when the old man wasn't out sport fishing with it.
It didn't have to be important work, just so long as there was plenty of it, and it had to be real honest-to-God work, not something we would enjoy too much. Real work was always unpleasant, and learning to like it required a lot of skill.

As I said, the old man acted pretty strange when Billy didn't come home. "What the hell's wrong with him?" he wanted to know, and neither my mother nor I said anything. "Why, I told that boy to be back at noon," he said, "and he's not back yet." Of course, nobody knew that but him and he would have to tell us about it time and again. And it was all the school's fault. "It's one of them crazy ideas they've put in his head," he was saying. "They only teach the kids how to loaf there, not what's really important." My mother finally helped keep the peace by leaving to go shopping, and I was left alone with him.

I was just a little kid then, second or third grade, and Billy was twelve. He had gone to the waterfront for the morning with some Boy Scout friends. That was something my father had complained about too. He didn't see how running around at the docks was going to teach Billy anything; the old man finally conceded that Billy's just a kid and kids have to do things together sometimes, and he reluctantly let him go.

We waited and I could hear him brooding in the next room, if only by his silence and the heavy breathing. I
was in the kitchen by the doorway and it was dark. A hole of light came through the curtains of the window above the sink and made the walls an oppressive yellow. I had a piece of paper on the floor and was drawing a picture on it—a man without arms—in the light that came in from the dining room windows. Occasionally a chair would rub against the floor, or papers would rustle, and the air was dark with brooding. Suddenly, the light dimmed and I jumped. Without making a noise, my father had come strolling into the kitchen. I looked up and saw him at the stove pouring himself a cup of coffee. He sipped his coffee and turned to me.

"It's almost two," he said with a tone of great importance. He leveled his eyes above my head, and then talked without actually addressing me because, after all, I was his son, not a regular person.

"I just don't understand what the hell's wrong with that kid," he said. "I told him to be back at noon."

I watched him closely because he was so unpredictable, and looked for some clue about what I should say or do in the case that he expected it. He scratched his chin and looked philosophically at the wall.

"Where does he get the right to go off and play," he said to the wall, "when we've got work to do. I guess he thinks it's not important enough to waste his time on. I'm sure gonna have to straighten him out."
Then as quietly as he had come, he walked out, steam pouring from his cup.

It bothered me being surprised like that, so I quietly got up, tip-toed to the back door, and stepped out onto the back porch where it was peaceful. The sun was high and the October breeze was blowing a soft and hushing air across the ground. The porch was narrow and high above the flower beds along the house, and I slid over the side of the concrete into the shade of a large bush growing with the flowers. It was nice and cool in the shade.

I had to give up drawing because the ground was soft, so I closed my eyes and dreamed of some exotic place the way kids do. Pretty soon, as I was dreaming, I heard the footsteps in the kitchen, this time loud and coming toward the back door. I got myself ready and the door opened. My father stepped out and began looking around the back yard. His chin was up. I watched him, afraid to say anything because there was no way of telling how he would react. Then he looked right down at me in a friendly way.

"There you are," he said in a calm voice. "I can count on you, can't I. Let's go find that brother of yours, what say?"

I shrugged and he was pleased.

"Let's go find him," he said, "and if we can't we'll do the work ourselves and leave him home when we go fishing."
How's that sound?"

I didn't like fishing any more than I liked work, but I didn't say anything. I had enjoyed just doing nothing and I would rather have waited at the house. He stood up straight and beamed, then with his chin up he marched off the porch and down the driveway, me following behind, and we got into the truck and drove for the harbor.

It was a glorious day and I watched and wondered about the people we passed in the streets. All the cars and the buildings shone in the sun, and the people looked happy. When we got to the bluff above the harbor, the bay stretched below us and looked to me like a playground full of wonderful toys. Everything, the water, the sailboats, the beaches and the buildings, shone. We drove off the bluff and down the peninsula toward the Scout house where Billy had gone that morning, drove down a long road with short cement streets fanning from both sides where the ocean was visible to the right and the bay to the left. Then we entered a district where mostly the rich people live or keep their summer homes, and there we found the Scout house looking like an old church, crammed between two stucco houses and set back from the street with the trees from the neighboring gardens shading it.

We parked between a couple of low sedans and my father went to the door of the Scout house and found it locked. He
came back to the truck and motioned me out, and then we
stood together and directed our eyes across the pavement as
if Billy would suddenly come strolling around a corner.

"I don't see him, do you?" he said.

I mimed his concerned look and didn't say anything.

"I wonder where to look," he said. "You know, it might
be just as easy for him to find the truck as it would be for
us to find him."

He said it loudly as if the people staring at us from
the sidewalk were concerned.

"So we'll look at the Fun-Zone first," he said
confidently, "and then check the truck."

His reasoning made sense. Next to the low sedans, the
truck, tall and battered, one fender a different color than
the rest of it, stood out like a wart on smooth skin. Billy
couldn't miss it.

He started off with me following, across the road then
back the way we had come for a few blocks, and then around
a corner toward the bay, down one of the short sidestreets
that had a big shadow over it from a tall building along the
sidewalk. Hot as the day was, it was a pleasure walking in
the shade and looking at all the heightened color the shade
gave to the big sedans at the curb reflecting the sky and
the glitter in their paint. People rushed past us in their
beach clothes, and they smelled of coconut oil.

We stopped and stood at the end of the street where it
was bulkheaded against the water. A ferry ramp was to our left and yachts were in front of us in the bay. I was excited because I had never seen the Fun-Zone except from the bay as we passed it to go fishing, and I had that same excitement for everything I saw around it. Even ahead, where the mansions of Lido Isle stood boldly on the opposite shore, the mansions seemed bigger and more exotic than they actually were, and I even imagined that the people who lived in them were bigger and more exotic too. The water was dark from the wind chop, and bright boats bobbed their way up and down the channel. A fishing boat looked like a scab among freckles as it plowed up the channel toward the commercial docks. To the right, I saw masts of sailboats wagging in the air, dozens of them tied to floating slips connected to the sidewalk with bridges.

My father was looking ahead. I looked and saw a ferry pushing a furrow of white water toward us. The ferry approached the ramp and, with a tremendous churning from the props, water swirling around the hull, the ferry slowed and bumped hard against the ramp. Two men stepped forward and secured the ropes. Then the cars drove from the ferry onto the ramp, their engines roaring and suspensions squatting as they climbed up to the street one after another until the ferry was empty. Immediately, more cars drove down the ramp and the ferry went churning back across the
channel. My father was quiet and watched everything that happened.

Watching the ferry had put a lull in our businesslike search, and looking down at the ramp my father stepped around it as if it were a bed of flowers. Ahead was the Fun-Zone, and, looking for Billy, he walked onto the wide deck in front of the amusement booths, walking a short distance then stopping suddenly. I was absorbed with watching the people, and when he stopped I almost ran into him. While he stood there he looked all around, even at the bay as if Billy would come cruising along in a yacht, but Billy was nowhere to be found. My father walked some more, then, when we were again by the water, stopped and stood with his chin up, his body erect, turning like a comedian doing an impersonation. Finally he looked at me with a sad face. He was a thin man, but his chin doubled as he looked down at where I stood just out of his reach.

"Darn that kid," he said. "How are we supposed to find him?"

I didn't figure that, according to Billy's thinking, we were supposed to. But it was a good question. There were dozens of docks and swimming beaches on this side of the peninsula, and Billy could be around any of them, or he could be on the ocean side where the beach stretched for miles of wind breaks and sand.
"We could be, right now, out on the boat painting," my father lamented. "Now we've got to mess around. I know he wants to enjoy himself, but it just isn't a matter of choice when there's work to be done . . ."

Here he digressed into one of his long speeches about how important work was and how it was a part of our education. Frankly, though I didn't care much for his speeches—I had heard them all so many times—I was glad to hear him talk this way because he had begun to act a little different since watching the ferry and I didn't know what that change meant. He even came and stood close to me instead of letting me keep my distance. Then he put his hand on my head and began to sound friendly.

"It's such a fine day," he said looking around, "a really fine day to enjoy yourself in."

This surprised me. It was said in a tone I hadn't heard before. I saw him watching the yachts in the bay.

"It ain't right," he was saying, "Billy going off like that and enjoying himself when we have work."

He jingled some coins in his pocket and looked at the amusement booths, scratching his chin and thinking.

"And we ought to do something about it," he continued. "It's one thing to just run away, but it's another to really have a good time—which you can't do by running away. We'll have to show him."
I didn't get his reasoning; I had learned to enjoy myself more when I was ditching work, or at least when I thought I was because I didn't have the guts to actually ditch. And now here my old man was shaking my head and being my friend. It was spooky. After all, I was his son, not his friend.

"Let's you and me show him," he said.

He led the way under the awning to the booths, clopping with his shoes now that he could walk with real purpose, and he marched right up to the first booth. I followed and stood flat against the building to let the people pass and so they wouldn't notice me. I felt funny about being there because I had on my work clothes. They were much like any others I was given to wear except they were almost worn out and had blotches of paint on them; I felt unusually noticeable in them. The other people around us looked like they had just stepped out of a magazine: dark tanned, some wearing swim suits, others looking bright and cool in their sun shirts and dresses. Until my father started making a lot of noise, the loudest sounds came from the children screaming on the beach and from the hawkers in their booths. The atmosphere was lazy, but my father got right down to business and laid his quarter on the counter.

"Gimme some of them balls," he said in a cheery voice, a little too cheery, I thought.
The attendant stood big-eyed in front of him, holding some baseballs. He didn't say anything, just gave over the balls and stepped aside. With a big grin, my father threw a ball at some wooden bottles and missed. It was strange seeing him grin like that: it looked like the exaggerated imitation of an actor.

"Come here Stevie," he said. "You try."

He put a baseball in my face and I just stared at it. The whole thing was silly and I didn't know what to do. He took my arm and put the ball in my hand. It was a pretty big ball and I wasn't much taller than the counter, but since he held the ball in my hand I didn't have any choice but to try. I took it, and then without expecting it I found myself hoisted above the counter and held in the position of an airplane taking off; "Now throw it," he told me. I could barely hold the ball, much less throw it, but I threw and the ball landed somewhere on the floor of the booth. People were laughing: the attendant, my father, and some people behind me. Then I was back on my feet feeling like a fool.

"Good throw," said my father. "Here, try another."

There was no way I would try again. I backed up against the building wall with my hands behind my back and looked at my feet. He looked at me with an excitement that frightened me, then finally gave up and threw it himself.
We went from booth to booth like that, my father making his loud noises that I'd never heard him make before, urging me to have a good time with him, but I kept to myself as much as I could because now I saw that some of the people around us were watching and grinning.

People were all around us. One time, a woman came over and looked right down into my face. "What a darling little boy," she said in a sweet baby-talk way. She acted as if I was too dumb to understand regular talk, and I guess I must have looked pretty dumb the way I was staring up at her. She was so beautiful that I fell right in love. She had that rich tan, that fine straw-colored hair, those high elegant cheeks, and also she had on a flashy sun dress that made her look as if she were going to a party. I stood there staring into her blue eyes as she stroked my hair; I had never been stroked before by a woman like that. My father was throwing some darts; the rosy-faced attendant was flattened against the wall to keep clear. I looked over at my father, then back at the woman, feeling her long fingers, cool and sensual, in my hair.

My father finished his darts and moved to the next booth, then the woman went away, smiling back at me as she turned the corner of the building, and I ran up to my father as if to share what had happened with the woman. I found him busy looking over a man's shoulder.
As I looked expectantly up at my father, the man ahead of us turned from the counter and touched my father on the arm in an odd way. He told my father to go ahead of him. He was just killing time, he said, and he winked, which I knew would embarrass my father. My father stepped up to the booth, thanked the man rather coldly, and grabbed one of the hoops on the counter that the man had been throwing.

The man looked at us closely before he left. He was quite handsome, I thought. He had a mustache, had gray hair that was carefully trimmed and combed, and he wore matching tan slacks and shirt. He asked my father, did we live in Newport? We did, yes. Were we in business? The machine shop business, said my father curtly. The man obviously wasn't going to get any conversation from him, so he left us.

Before he walked away he studied us both again. I'll never forget the way his eyes looked during the short time they searched over us: two circles of clear, penetrating blue that seemed to be taking everything in. It made me wonder what he had seen. I looked at my father throwing his darts. His face was grimaced with concentration and looked like the preacher's at our church when he addressed the congregation. His hair was thick and brushed back with his hand, and he dressed like always in a green work uniform like a mailman's except not as neat. I saw how peculiarly dark and leathery the skin was on his forearms, how the rings of
white showed around the elbows where the sleeves were rolled up, and around his neck. It showed that he never dressed any other way.

The people around us were much different. I looked very closely at them. Two kids in white trousers chased each other into the sun; a tall man with a straw hat, wearing a shirt with pineapples printed on it, looked around with a camera in his hands; a young couple in tight swim suits walked toward the beach hand-in-hand, handsome like young colts. They all looked comfortable and beautiful, and they made me feel ugly and hot. My shoes suddenly felt heavy on my feet, my socks itched, and my hair—my mother cut it and she left cowlicks on both sides—buffeted ridiculously in the breeze. I felt the perspiration under my shirt, and my T-shirt clung to my back. I was glad when finally my father fished in his pocket again and found only some nickles and pennies. Out of his wallet he took a dollar, looked at it and put it back; it was the only one he had with him.

He walked up to me now and asked if I would like some refreshments. He asked what I wanted but I didn't say anything. Anything was fine as long as we would soon leave. We were standing by the food concession that faced opposite a booth at the end of the Fun-Zone, and my father went to the counter and ordered cotton candy. It was hot, even in the shade. In the concession window were large dispensers
of cold orange and raspberry soda, and I wished he had suggested that instead. When he had the candy, he stepped by me onto the beach which lay just beyond the concession, and there we ate the candy in the sun. He was still in his extravagant mood and he made a big deal out of eating the candy. I didn't want any. He coaxed me but I wouldn't have any. I could feel the sand creeping into my shoes.

"You're not having any fun," he said. "You've got to learn how to do it."

Then he showed me how it was done. He stuck his big tongue into the candy and pulled off a big piece, smacking as he ate it. He was really enjoying himself.

We had moved so our backs were against the blank wall of the concession, and before us was the beach blazing with the color of orange and yellow umbrellas, white beach towels, and the sand shimmering in the heat. It was a short beach, backed by apartments, and a lifeguard sat high in his tower looking over the swim area. In the water some swimmers held onto the buoys that separated the area from the channel, some dove under the rope, and one man lay on his stomach on the floating dock. Two dinghies cruised past under sail, and a swimmer's head was visible in the water outside the buoys. The area was fairly crowded, and the sounds to me had a soothing texture: children laughing in the water, boats' wakes gently slapping as they rocked the floating dock and
splashed against the shore, and the general humdrum of voices, all hushed by the noise of distant boats brought in by the breeze.

I watched a man and a woman with vivid tans lounging beneath an umbrella propped in the hot sand. The man sat on a chair and sipped a soda, and the woman sat cross-legged on a towel a little ahead, wearing a sailor cap and gazing dreamily at the bay. She had a white cream on the bridge of her nose.

They sat so still that for a moment I dreamed I was a part of that scene, stretched back on the luxury of a clean towel, careless, carefree, gazing dreamily at the bay without anything to listen for or worry about, relaxed, comfortable, luxurious under that white cream, tanned, beautiful—it was wonderful.

But my father didn't find anything on the beach of any value. He must have noticed me staring because he commented about the people there and the money they must have. Rich people, he said, have their own problems.

"It's not like for the average working man. These people don't appreciate the money they have since they don't have to work for it. It's what you get by working for it that really counts. Work makes you really appreciate it."

He launched into another of those speeches I had heard so many times. It was too bad he had to make that speech
just then because it had the opposite effect of what he intended. I just wished he would stop it and we would leave.

"And occasionally it's good to have fun like this," he said, showing how proud he was of himself. "But we have to remember why we came here. We've got work to do and we can't forget that."

He meant finding Billy and painting the boat, or not finding him and painting it anyway. In any case, we would check the truck and if Billy wasn't there we would waste no more time and the boat would get painted. Now we could go ahead and deal with Billy later. It was very simple.

We went back to the street again, marching in file like two soldiers. The street was there, up farther the peninsula road was there, and up ahead the truck was there sticking out like a dirty wart. Then we saw somebody in the bed of the truck and, sure enough, it was Billy.

As we approached, my father looked back at me as he would to a buddy, and I guess he figured both of us would enjoy getting even with Billy. I saw Billy climb out of the truck and drop to the sidewalk. He stood there, holding his arms stiffly like a penguin, and let the old man make the final approach.

The old man said, "Are you ready to go to work now?"

Billy said, "Yes."

"Okay," said the old man, and he looked at me. "I'm
glad I've got at least one son who isn't afraid of a little work."

I was sorry to hear him make that comparison, especially since there was no truth in it. He had made it a time or two before when Billy had gotten out-of-line, and I knew it meant that the rest of the day would be cold words to Billy and a tailored friendship toward me. It wouldn't punish just Billy, it would punish me too. The only difference between Billy and me was that he was bolder and fought the old man more. He fought for me too, as I saw it, because I was afraid, and the fear that held me back made me feel obligated to Billy for doing what I would like to have done. Being sided against him made me feel like a criminal.

Billy and I climbed into the pickup bed and my father drove to the dock. During the drive, Billy looked at me and winced to show how he felt. I didn't look at him because I was ashamed.
THE PEARL

The car left them and drove off, and the two men walked through the dazzle of lights and the tightly packed, old buildings of Market Street. Larry walked with his face up, looking wide-eyed and finding things in the dark doorways and the smudged windows that had never been there. Freddy wasn't looking. Around them, the city was a vast fair of lights and rooftops, and in the distant grandstand area the dome of the City Hall stood green above the rooftops, bathed by the night lamps in a cold light.

"Wow," Larry was saying. "I've always wanted to be in San Francisco."

Freddy thought of Larry as "the kid" because, after all, he was just a teenager—he couldn't be over seventeen—and because Freddy was so much older, seven or eight years at least. Also, you couldn't miss the kid's peachy face and that wide-eyed wonder he brought with him. Even those dirty chicanos in the car had been taken in by it. When Freddy had first met the kid at the roadside he thought he was a girl. It took a long time to figure out that he wasn't, and the chicanos had thought at first that he was a girl too. Freddy figured that's why they had gotten the ride.

"Wow," said the kid. "And you've lived here and you can show me around."
"Not until I've had something in my stomach and I've crashed for about ten hours," said Freddy.

They were walking toward Haight-Ashbury, where Freddy had lived several years before. On the sidewalk by a part of the street that had been torn up to build a subway, where the traffic was constricted to a narrow lane, they walked by the Filmore West Theater. A policeman stood by the theater doors and a group of dressed-up long-hairs were bumming quarters to buy tickets with.

"Shall we help them out?" said the kid.

"Naw," said Freddy. "They're not cool. They've got more money than we do. Look at how they dress."

"Why are they doing it?"

"Probably for kicks."

"Why don't we bum quarters and go inside too?" said the kid.

"With these backpacks? Don't worry, the theater won't go anywhere."

By this time the policeman, who had been giving hard looks to the long-hairs, said something, and the group retreated to the wall of the theater and stood there until the policeman looked away. They saw Freddy and Larry coming up with their backpacks, and one of the group came up and asked Freddy discreetly for a quarter. The policeman started eye-balling them. Freddy asked if he knew where they could
crash for the night. The long-hair couldn't tell him anything he didn't already know, so Freddy shrugged him off. The kid had listened closely. Then Freddy led the kid off the main street into the partial gloom of the hill ahead of them.

"We should have gone in with them," said the kid.
"We can do that tomorrow," said Freddy.
"Boy, the Filmore West," said the kid. "I've always heard about that place."
"First time I've seen it."
"What do you mean?"
"That's the new Filmore," said Freddy. "The old one was on Filmore Street, and it was better then because there was room to dance. Now they just crowd you in and you can only listen. Those were the good days. We used to dance at the Filmore about every weekend."
"Gee," said the kid.

They crossed Market Street by walking over a wooden bridge above the excavation in the Street, bought some milk and cheese at an Italian corner market, and walked up Haight Street to the steep part of the hill. As they walked, the kid was looking back toward the theater. They sat on a cement wall and started on the cheese and milk, sitting facing the glitter they had just left behind, with the swish of cars on the skyway above them, and looked out over what
city they could see. There were only so many lights to see without being higher up the hill, but to the kid the lights seemed to go for miles. They finished off the cheese, drank the milk, and Freddy told the kid about the gay apartment house that was across the street from them, and about a four-day party he had had of staying stoned and staying drunk in the bars along Grant Street with his friends. The kid listened to every word. Then they talked about where they were going to crash for the night. It wasn't the same city Freddy had left and he wasn't sure what to do.

"It must be great living in this place," said the kid.
"It used to be a good place," said Freddy.
"What changed about it?"
"I got tired of it, and so did everyone else, I guess. Everyone I knew, that is."
"I don't think I'll ever get tired of it."
"You haven't even seen it yet," said Freddy.

They finished the milk and then noticed someone coming up the street, the dark figure of a man with the bristly silhouette of a beard and shaggy hair. They watched him approach. The man's eyes met theirs and he stopped and asked if they were okay. He had seen their backpacks. He looked pretty old for a freak, and he had a broken nose.

"We're looking for someplace to crash," the kid said enthusiastically. "Do you know of a place?"
"We'll try the switchboard, I guess," said Freddy.

He would rather meet somebody and get an offer than phone the switchboard and go to an address without knowing what he was walking into. By talking to someone first, he could get an idea of who they are and what to expect. But he felt that if he pressed for a place to crash, the man they were talking to wouldn't offer it. He looked like he had too much to worry about himself.

"That's the thing to do," said the man. He was a regular freak by his appearance. He wore worn-out jeans and a pair of pointed shoes with a fancy inlay in the leather. "I'd give you a place but I'm staying with friends myself," he said.

"Where do you live around here?" said the kid. He hadn't learned his etiquette yet.

"We'll try the switchboard," repeated Freddy.

"Tell me now, where are you guys coming from?" said the man.

"I'm from Seattle," said the kid. "That's where I grew up."

"Is it a good place to live? For freaks? I'm looking for some place that's good."

"It's okay. There's lots of freaks."

"And where are you coming from?" he said to Freddy.

"From a lumber mill north of here, and I'm headed for
Mazatlan."

"Right on."

They talked in hip jargon for awhile, until the conversation became a little more personal, and the kid took it all at face value. But Freddy knew what was happening. They were sizing each other up.

Then Freddy said, "Right now I'm just looking around because I'm sure tired of everything. Maybe I'll marry the boss's daughter and become a materialist."

"If that means anything to you," said the man. "My name's Bill, by the way."

"What do you think, Bill?"

"I think it would mean something if you could stand to put up with the pressure."

"I think it might be easier than just drifting around."

"Yea, but just think of what it would be like stepping back into the old routine."

"Are you really going to marry a rich woman?" said the kid.

"No," Freddy explained, "that was just a figure of speech."

"Oh."

"I just don't know, Bill," Freddy went on. "I've looked at it from both sides. That's where I'm coming from. I'm going to try to settle down somewhere and make a regular
life."

"Are you going to settle down in Mazatlan?" said the kid.

"I was just saying that," said Freddy. The kid was confused.

"Look you guys," said Bill, "you can stay with me. I just didn't know who you were before."

"We appreciate it," said Freddy.

"And I want to talk some more," said Bill as he led them up the hillside. They went to a doorway in a long line of apartment entrances along the sidewalk.

They entered a flat, a large room with a kitchenette at the back. Bill was staying with friends but they were gone for a few days. He sat on a bed by the front door, backed by a partition, and from there they talked some more. Beside the bed were several shelves of books of poetry and psychology. Three of them, stacked in front of the other books, were on dream analysis and the pages were dirty. Freddy and the kid sat on a couch by the bed, and the kid was quiet and open-mouthed the whole time.

"How did you get to San Francisco?" said Freddy when there was a lull in the conversation.

"Came all the way from the hills of Oregon," said Bill.

"What kind of life was that?"

"I lived in a little town near the wheat country. The people are very old-fashioned there. My folks were religious
fanatics."

"That sounds familiar," said Freddy. "I can imagine how it was."

"I was religious too. You wouldn't believe what I was like when I got out of high school."

"Don't tell me," said Freddy. "Your religion was dope."
Bill laughed. "No, I was a devout Catholic."

"You were like your parents?"

"Weren't you?"

"No way," said Freddy, and it was his turn to laugh.

"I was just like them and I actually went to a seminary."

"A what?"

"I went to a seminary to become a priest."

The kid's mouth opened wider. Right in front of them, Bill took down his pants and put the covers over him on the bed. He had no underwear on and his belly rolled down over his crotch. He was either pretty old or in bad shape. It was hard to tell because his face was so messed up with bad skin and the broken nose.

"I'm thirty-eight, you know," said Bill, propping himself against a pillow so that he faced them. "And I went through that whole trip when I was a kid. I went to the seminary and became a priest--well, not actually a priest; I hadn't taken the final vows yet. My parents thought I was a gift from heaven. They made me their life's
ambition. I even went back to my home town and worked in the parish I'd grown up in. Sincere is what I was, really sincere, and I guess that's why I fell so far. I was working for spiritual happiness."

"I didn't know happiness had anything to do with being spiritual," said Freddy.

"Oh it does," said Bill. "It says so right in the book."

"So you lived your life happily ever after."

"I sure did."

"You're not still a priest, are you?" said the kid, confused.

They watched Bill light a joint that he took from between a couple of books.

"No," said Bill. "Believe it or not, I gave it all up."

The kid was a little embarrassed.

"There are other kinds of religion," said Freddy.

"Well, I don't know," said Bill. "I guess there are some things that are better that are like religion."

"What happened?"

"It's a long story," Bill said. "What happened was, I grew up in this town and thought it was the whole world. I didn't realize what a narrow-minded place it was. Then I got back there and started saying some things that people didn't want to hear and pretty soon I had to leave."
"What happened to being a priest?" said the kid.

"Oh, the same old shit," said Bill. He seemed to be tired. He had told the story so many times that he was prone to leave big holes in it.

"I guess what happened," he said, "was that I had gone into it under the influence of my parents, and their idea of religion was the basis for it. What I mean is, when I found out that their ideas weren't any good, it sort of left me without any reason to be religious myself."

"I don't get it," said Freddy. "I thought you said you were sincere."

"Well, it's a long story," said Bill. They were passing the joint around and Bill was feeling the influence of it.

"It was like this," he continued. "I had gone to the seminary and studied the doctrines, then when I got back to my home town it became clear that nobody was following them except me. They were hypocrites. I told you I was sincere, and what's a sincere person do but tell them what hypocrites they are? That's when the uproar began, but that's not what finished me. What they wanted me to do was be a priest, not their conscience, in other words, somebody to handle the ceremony and tell them how good they are, listen to their confession and prescribe a few "Hail Mary's" and let it go at that. A priest is supposed to think in Latin, not English. I thought in English, out loud, and everybody started telling me
I was going to have to change or I wouldn't have a job. Their religion was something they paid good money for and they wanted their money's worth. They told me how to act when I was supposed to be telling them."

"What did your parents think?"

"They were out of their heads, of course. Isn't that how all parents are when their kids act a little out-of-line?"

"You might say that," said Freddy.

The kid was looking happy. This was the real dope of dissatisfaction; it had the right ring to it.

"What I really resented was the way my parents reacted. Instead of backing me up, they lined up against me with all the other good Christians and that's when I really began to question it all. I wasn't coy about it either. When I thought something, I said it. It has something to do with the true religion that Jesus talked about. Instead of just lock-stepping with everybody else, you look to the principle behind the faith and use your own conscience. That's all I tried to do. The only thing I questioned was the way the principle was applied by those people, but when I did that everybody called me a heretic. Nobody would back me up. My parents were ashamed of me. I was really feeling low and I began to question the Bible itself."

He put out the joint and saved the roach by sticking it between two books.
"Did you answer any of your questions about the Bible?" said Freddy.

"No, I just asked them and then said the hell with it."

"How do you feel about it now?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Don't you still have any faith?"

"I guess I never did. That's why I shucked it all. Remember, I was in it out of the ambition to do the right thing by my parents. I began with the church when I was a kid, and my parents goading with dogma, and when I found out that the church wasn't doing something worthwhile I didn't have much to believe in anymore. That's why, I guess, I never had any real faith to begin with. Faith should last beyond merely Christianity. If I hadn't been so sincere I probably wouldn't have seen that far into it to question the basis for my beliefs."

"It sounds to me like just the church was at fault," said Freddy.

"I don't know," said Bill. "It seems to me that the real religion is inside yourself. It's all in what goes on in your head, and that should be respected. Nothing justifies being stomped on like they did to me."

"Do you ever see your parents?"

"They'd shit in their pants."

"I wasn't a priest, but I went through the same sort of
thing," said Freddy. "It's a wonderful world."

"It sure is."

Bill took one of the books on dream analysis and opened it. He told the kid he could sleep on the couch in the big room since the kid already had his sleeping bag out. "You can sleep in the girl's room," he told Freddy, pointing out where it was. Bill wanted to read now.

"You're into dream analysis," observed Freddy.

"This book is really good," Bill said. "I've analyzed my dreams and studied my dream states, and what's most important, and the reason why I'm into it, is I find in the morning after I first wake up that my mind is clear for about fifteen minutes. The rest of the time I'm miserable. Because that's the only time I can really think, I live for those fifteen minutes. If only it was like that all the time. That's my real religion. I realize that my life could be good if my mind was in peace all the time. Do you know what I mean? I wake up and there it is--fantastic. Now I'm trying to figure out why it's the way it is, only those few minutes and then the same old thing. I didn't even know about it until one morning I woke up and my mind was clear, just like that."

"For only fifteen minutes?" said Freddy.

"Give or take a few. And I didn't even know I was so miserable until that happened and I saw the light. I had
"That's a strange story."

"It's not the way I would have chosen to live my life."

Bill was reading his book now, so Freddy picked up his backpack and went to the bedroom at the rear of the flat. It was on one side of a narrow hall across from the bathroom. He opened the bedroom door and looked inside cautiously. He was stepping into someone else's privacy and he didn't want to disturb it. The bedroom was small and had the vague smell of women's perfume. It was very clean. At one wall was a mattress on a high wooden frame, spread with a soft fabric with flowers printed on it, neatly spread and folded, and across from the bed was a locked trunk. There were two night stands, one at the head of the bed and the other by the window. A red curtain was gathered and tied to one side of the window and the light from the street lamps shone into the room. He turned on the light and dropped the curtain. The room had the odorless smell of fastidious cleanliness, except for the sweet hint of perfume that came from the bed. There was a familiar intimacy in the room that was far off in the distance of his memory. He felt suddenly very dirty—he had been on the road for several days—and he went to the bathroom and took a shower.

When he was clean and had fresh clothes on, he came into the room again. He wondered about the girl who lived there. There were no pictures in the room and the trunk was

forgotten."
locked, but on the night stand by the door was a small box made of wood, and he opened the lid and looked inside.

Inside was a single pearl, not real of course, but it looked real against the felt lining of the box. It was just the kind of simple luxury a woman without much money would have. He picked it up and felt it cool in his fingers. This is the girl, he thought, a tiny precious object that was cool and smooth. He smelled it and the perfume on it was faint and lingering. He kept that image of the girl in his mind and thought about her.

He put the pearl carefully back in the box, a shiny object against a foil of green, closed the lid, and then he stripped and climbed between the sheets. The sheets were fine and smooth, and he smelled the perfume with pleasure. He had never been in such a comfortable bed before. The sheets were smooth and clean against his body and he was aware of them touching his skin. He breathed the perfume and closed his eyes. The bed was more relaxing than he had expected, and though he wanted to remain conscious and enjoy it awhile longer, he went right to sleep. It was a deep and dreamless sleep.

The next morning when he awoke, he immediately knew where he was. He looked over and saw the wood box on the night stand with the pearl inside. He felt none of the fear that comes with waking up in a strange place, and it felt as
if he belonged there. He was rested and had no urge to go back to sleep. Outside, the street was quiet and the morning light came through the red curtain into the room, giving the walls a warm glow.

It must be very early, he thought. What a strange but secure feeling to be awake so early and have such a rested mind. He hadn't awakened like that for many years. It reminded him of when he was a child. He would awaken with the first light, then roam the house while his mother was just getting up to fix breakfast. Then while his mother was busy in the kitchen he would watch his father grope blurry-eyed for the bathroom, and he would watch them eating breakfast together while he drank his orange juice. They would eat without pleasure, and he would study them with his clear mind. In the morning at breakfast they would not be watching and criticizing him.

He had liked the mornings then, and just where he had stopped liking them he couldn't remember. He thought of Bill's story, and then he thought of his own neighborhood in Los Angeles, in one of the old suburbs. His father owned a grocery store a few streets away from home, and down the street from where he lived was the neighborhood church sitting at the end of the block of old wooden houses with their windows in the attic and their long hooded porches. They were always painted light or dark gray, each encircled by
half-dead geraniums and by untrimmed trees. The church had a large stained glass window in its front, and the window was visible from any angle along the street so you could never forget the church was there. Next to it was a vacant lot with a palm tree and the kids, then, would play in the lot next to the church and always be afraid of putting out a church window with their balls.

He had lived his childhood by, or near, that church, and he remembered the time they hit a lady's car with a baseball, and she had stomped out of the car and over to them with her fat German legs and demanded to know who their parents were. He remembered the scene with his father that night over the incident, remembered the belt coming off his father's trousers and shaken in his face as a threat. His father had always used threats to control him.

And he remembered when he was older, sitting with the family in the church, some boys his age who had taken the baptism went up before the congregation to give testimonials. His father, sitting proudly in his suit that was too big for him, had looked crossly over at him while one of the boys spoke. Soon after, he had asked to be baptized, not because he wanted to but because it seemed the easiest way to avoid conflict with his father.

Then later, after graduating from high school, he had refused to work in his father's store. It was expected that
he become just like his father, but he wanted something else though he didn't know what. His mother would meet him at the door when he came home from a date, then hug him so she could smell his clothing and breath, but always in such a way that he would know what she was doing. When he finally came home half drunk, they accused him of following an evil path. He then told them what he thought of them and their religion, and that left him no choice but to leave home.

But other reasons had caused him to leave, to pick a fight with them in the first place. Those reasons were much deeper and somehow related to what he remembered, but he didn't know yet what they were.

He thought about those reasons, and wondered, and then he heard Bill and the kid moving in the other room. The walls of the bedroom were getting brighter from the light through the window. He didn't feel like moving but he heard the others and felt he should get up out of politeness; Bill might be wanting to go without leaving them there. He got up and noticed again how fresh he felt from the sleep. Before dressing he smoothed the sheet, then carefully laid the spread over it so that it was just as he had found it. The perfume from the sheet clung to his shoulder where he could smell it. He took a look at the pearl before dressing. He held it in his hand and it gave him a memory of something, a vague memory in the back of his mind that he couldn't focus on. Then he
placed the pearl carefully back in the box, dressed, and joined the others.

They were eating eggs and the kid had one of Bill's books open on the table. Bill looked as he had the night before: rumpled and tired.

"Did you sleep good?" said Bill.

"I sure did."

"You were lucky to have the girl's bed."

"I sure was."

"She's a lovely girl that goes with it."

"Are you going to show me around today?" asked the kid.

"I haven't decided yet what I'm going to do."

"You said you were passing through, but you might as well stay another day," said the kid.

"You're welcome to stay another night."

"I'm afraid the girl would come back early," said Freddy, "and I'd have to meet her."

"It'd break your heart," Bill agreed. "She's got a steady mate."

"It doesn't surprise me."

"Are you really going to Mazatlan?" said Bill.

"No, I was thinking of visiting my folks."

"Have you been away long?"

"I haven't seen them for five or six years, and there are some things I want to figure out about them."
"I wouldn't advise it," said Bill, "if it's anything like my situation. The last time I saw mine--oh, I guess about ten years ago--they wouldn't let me in the house. It cut me up pretty bad."

"Did you look like you do now?"

"A little healthier, maybe."

"I can imagine their reaction."

"Regular Christians, they are. How is it with your folks?"

"They're pretty hostile. I left home after school. In order for me to stay, I would have had to pull my share of the family load, and that required a big chunk of my soul."

"They charge a big price, don't they?"

"You pay most of it, too," said Freddy. "I still can't get away from them. They follow me everywhere."

"Do your parents really follow you?" said the kid.

"I don't mean it literally."

"You mean you miss them?" said the kid.

"No," said Freddy, "it's just that I came away without something I needed to make me whole, and that's something that follows you around."

"I don't feel like that," said the kid. "I don't want anything to do with my folks. They were just always on my back so I left."

"We sound like a bunch of runaways," said Bill.
"Yes," laughed Freddy. "I probably just need something in my belly. May I?"

Bill waved his fork toward the stove. Freddy cooked himself a small breakfast.

"That's not it," said Bill, thinking about what Freddy had said. "You don't really need them at all. They messed you up, but it's up to you to straighten yourself out."

"I'm not going to live with them," Freddy said. "I'm just going to go back and look for something. If I get the chance, I'll throw in a few pot-shots."

"A little vengeance, eh?" said Bill. "That's okay, though I don't have the stomach for it myself. To do that, you have to get close to them. I like my distance. I think you need a pretty free lifestyle to really get into yourself, and that requires distance."

"I'm going to go back where I started," said Freddy, "and if I can find a way, I'll settle down. Know what I mean? There's such a thing as too much freedom."

"Well, it sounds like a good plan," said Bill abruptly, finished now with his coffee. "Good luck to you. I'm going to go now because it's the end of the month. I have to get my welfare check and do some shopping."

They shook hands in case Freddy decided to leave, and Bill left. The kid asked if Freddy would show him the way to the Golden Gate Park.

"Where the freaks hang out?"
"I've always heard about it," said the kid.

"I'll be with you in a minute," said Freddy, finished with his breakfast.

When he had washed the dishes, he went back to the bedroom and stood inside awhile with the door closed. He rolled the curtain up and tied it, and made sure that everything was exactly as he had found it. The faint perfume smelled good, he thought. He took the pearl out of its box again and held it, and then he put it to his lips and felt it there, smooth and cool. The memories were very weak but they were there, memories of something that he missed, that were coming alive in that room. Yes, he thought, that's the memory I'm looking for. He had an idea about what it was now, and he would go home and find it.

He put the pearl carefully back as if it were a priceless object, and went out again to where the kid was waiting. Together they went to see the freaks.