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Letters from a lost continent: stories

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Letters from a lost continent: Stories

by

Jason Robert Wiese

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

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Signature sheets have been redacted for privacy

University
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For Dana Lee.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>500 YEARS AFTER COLUMBUS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SATYR</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAWS OF LIFE</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFRAMP</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUANA'S SONG</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE DIVE</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
500 YEARS AFTER COLUMBUS

We were sitting at a marble-topped table in the tiled elegance of the Bar Europa, sipping espresso out of short glasses and playing through the chess match in El País when the old man came in from the bright heat outside and announced in an awed and breathless voice that America had vanished from the face of the earth. There were concentric perspiration stains spreading under his arms and the lapels and cuffs of his dark grey jacket were frayed white. He smelled like piss and dust. At first I'd thought I'd misunderstood what he was saying, partially because my Spanish is shaky, but also because he had the sloppy accent of a Sevillian, and spoke like his mouth was stuffed full of ripe olives. When no one spoke or moved, he repeated in an earnest voice, “America se ha desaparecido,” spreading his hands wide before him to show that he was speaking truth. “Todo... todo. Ya no está.” The bartender, who had always reminded me of a ferret because of his pointed nose and bright black eyes, gave this man a hard look before pushing off from the back of the bar with a snort from widely flared nostrils. “Sí, hombre,” he said without smiling, “Pienso qué estás lleno de whiskey.” He swung his towel up over his shoulder and turned away toward the kitchen, shaking his head. “Pero, es la verdad,” the man pleaded to no one in particular. “El radio lo ha dicho y ahora les digo a ustedes.”

The radio said so and now I’m telling you. I looked at my wife, and then at the
man again, who seemed momentarily speechless under the terrible weight of his news. His eyes roamed the middle distance and his mouth worked silently as he sagged against the bar, letting his sleeve soak in spilled beer. "Se lo ha tragado la mar," he said, as if he couldn't believe or comprehend it himself. Someone at the next table laughed and was hissed quiet. A long moment passed before our fellow customers satisfied themselves that this man was a harmless drunk and conversation once again began to drift up to the high ceiling, whirling with shadows and cigarette smoke around yellowed slow-turning fans.

We had by this time become used to these scenes. The narrow streets of Seville seemed to abound, even then, with more than its fair share of pungent, grizzled eccentrics. They slept in doorways and on the steps of churches and convents, snoring bundles of rags, part of the scenery. We followed the lead of the locals and turned away, and I resumed my role of Karpov against Cassie's Kasparov.

"Did he say what I thought he said?" she asked, arching her brow in mock concern. I ventured that he had, sneaking a glance over my shoulder. He stood there at the bar, ignored, a pariah. I could hear him mumbling to himself in that same bewildered voice. "I thought he said it was on the radio," I said, turning a captured pawn in my fingers.

"Yeah, right. His own private station." She twirled a finger at her temple, concentrating on the board. I had to struggle not to laugh. I remember that clearly, not because she'd said anything that was especially funny or memorable, but because I think it was the last happy, simple moment that we've had for a while.
He was telling the truth, of course, as we now know. My first sense of it was when I saw a couple of middle-aged businessmen walk in with oddly stricken expressions on their faces that were not just from the awful heat outside. I remember how my mouth went suddenly dry and how I folded the paper and put it on my lap. It was the kind of feeling an animal might have, and it seemed to come from somewhere deep inside me. The conversation in the room faltered and died again as my wife and I looked at each other. Then we gathered up our things without a word, paid the barman, and left without waiting for the change.

We were crossing the worn cobblestones of the Plaza del Salvador when we saw the crowd gathered around the newspaper kiosk where we’d bought our paper only an hour before. The radio was on and no one was speaking but for a few furtive whispers as we approached and stood listening. Aside from the Semana Santa processions, that was the only time I ever saw a quiet crowd in Spain, and it filled me with dread. I remember the vendor, how he stood with his hands clasped together in front of his apron and his head bowed in an attitude of prayer as he listened. My head reeled with panic as I concentrated on the staccato voice of the radio announcer, and Cass clutched my hand in a sweaty grip, leaning heavily into me. These were those early conflicting reports. It wasn’t yet known that both continents, north and south, were now completely gone, and Radio Nacional de España was operating under the reasonable assumption that the United States and China were at war. Megatons of brilliant orange-white fireballs bloomed slowly and hugely in my imagination as I listened to the stream of confused and panicky conjecture issuing from the innocuous box nestled between pornographic magazines and football digests.
After a while I blinked and looked around at the people in the crowd, needing to see a smile or a nudge in the ribs, a knowing wink. Some sign that this was all a joke, some kind of performance, a fantastic protest against the Americanization of the world. I saw the familiar faces of waiters from the nearby bodega, standing in aprons and white shirts with the sleeves rolled up, cigarettes burning forgotten in slack fingers. There were the ubiquitous old women, short and stumpy-like in dark shapeless frocks, linked tenaciously arm in arm with daughters who were younger versions of themselves, or gazelle-like granddaughters with large eyes and dark hair gleaming like oil. Old men scratched themselves distractedly, and rubbed the backs of their necks. And gypsies with dark Arab faces, who had been shaking down oranges from the trees that line the sides of the plaza, stood openmouthed and staring as oranges dropped from their filthy canvas sacks and rolled erratically away over the cobblestones.

I heard Cass’s breath close by my ear and she turned a cheek to my bare sunburned shoulder. I stroked her hair, dry and hot from the sun. “Oh, Jake,” she said thickly. “What is this, what’s happening?” I rested my head on hers and pulled her close. “I don’t know, Babe. This is just... crazy.” A few people, one of them a teen-aged boy with dark, sleepy-lidded eyes set in an acne scarred face, stared at us dumbly, like only Spaniards can stare, almost throwing their entire bodies into it, and from somewhere behind me I could hear a voice whisper “norteamericanos.” An old woman touched Cass softly on the shoulder, offering a handkerchief, but she seemed not to hear. A pair of workmen in weathered orange coveralls entered the crowd with loudly questioning voices and were hushed by the people around them. “Pero... ¿Qué
pasó?” they asked, shrugging elaborately. I smiled grim thanks at the woman, and guided my wife out of the crowd, which parted before us whispering words of pity and kindness. One woman crossed herself and kissed her thumbnail, watching us with sad, watery eyes.

We could not, would not believe it. Of course we tried to telephone home. It was the first thing we’d thought of as we fled down streets that were suddenly sinister to us, strewn with dogshit and incomprehensible political graffiti. We tried the pay phones in front of the McDonald’s on Calle Campana, and the public phones in the Telefónica building a few streets away. Busy signals, urgent and enigmatic, were at the end of every number we tried. We stayed there for over an hour, numb and tired among the blue and green booths and wire benches, beseeching the operators to keep trying.

Strong as our disbelief was, the enormity of what had happened began to sink in the next day, and with it, the strangest feeling of unreality. We hadn’t slept all night and our bedroom had seemed unfamiliar to us somehow, as if we didn’t really belong in it and the true inhabitants would return any moment to reclaim it. In the morning and through much of the afternoon we sat on the sagging, mismatched furniture in our sitting room, the rejects from our landlord’s used furniture store down in the street, and watched our house-mate’s television, shocked and speaking in dazed rambling monotones when we spoke at all. Neither of us could bear the thought of going in to work, facing our classes. Our students, normally sullen and recalcitrant and there only at the insistence of parents with good intentions or social aspirations, would now stare at us, we knew, with the unblinking rapacity of vultures, gorging their youthful
morbidity on our national tragedy. I could hear their awed whispering already, and it filled me with rage and helplessness. I'd phoned the seedy little language school where we taught English and told Marshall, the gaunt, bug-eyed director of studies, that we wouldn't be coming in for a few days. He assured me in his rasping smoker's baritone that this was quite all right, understandable under the circumstances. There were other Americans employed at the school, Bill from Connecticut and Kate from Minnesota, and he had already assumed that none of us would be coming in to teach. After a pause he asked if there was anything he could do. I said no, thanks, and that I would call in a day or two. It was a relief to hang up on him.

For days afterward, we hid out in our flat, trying to keep ourselves sane and together. We slept a lot. One morning Cass started breaking our dishes in a rage, and when I tried to calm her by putting my arms around her, she slapped me hard across the face, struggled free and locked herself in our room. When she came out a few hours later she was better, more composed, and we haven't spoken about the incident since. The same anger boiled in me as well, twisting my insides and driving me to pace from one window to the next and up to the roof, where I would stare at the empty pages of my notebook. I looked out over the roofs and bell towers of the old city and felt like I was trapped inside something with no outside.

The days passed, bleeding one into the next like scenes in a waking dream. Mari-Carmen, our compañera de casa, brought us sandwiches of chorizo and sharp white goat's cheese, which we nibbled at distractedly as we sat huddled together on the couch, soaking up television news. There were the videotaped
images of heaving, boiling seawater where yesterday there had been an entire world of cities and mountains and rivers, our families, the bulk of our lives and memories. There was shaky aerial footage of downed airliners that had been on their way to a New York or an Atlanta that was somehow no longer there, and which, running out of fuel, had been forced to ditch in an inexplicably angry Atlantic. Tiny figures clung to the sides of flimsy yellow rafts and to each other, almost lost in the wind-whipped swells. And over and over there were the final minutes of American news broadcasts from CNN and the rest, which would wink out suddenly into crazy electronic lines and hissing static and finally into silent blackness, as if there had been no warning at all, and that whatever had happened came so quickly that there hadn't even been time for the slightest fear. "¡Qué horror!," Mari-Carmen had said, trilling her r's softly, her hand on her cheek.

Of course, now we have those famous satellite pictures from that day, the ones that filled the newspapers and magazines in various forms and combinations for weeks after their miraculous retrieval. We had all thought that now, at last, we would know the answer to history's greatest question and the meaning of our terrible loss. But they were maddeningly unsatisfactory witnesses, these floating sentinels. The best photographs came from a NASA weather satellite, and showed wispy lines of clouds stretching across the familiar face of North America, with absolutely no sign of anything out of the ordinary. But in the next frame, the clouds are still there unchanged, but the land beneath them is simply, incredibly gone, having somehow vanished in an instant, like a tablecloth whisked out from under fine china in a magician's trick.
For days Cassie and I never left each other’s sight.

What made it worse was that I had lost not one, but a string of homes. I could never claim to have had a single home town. My father’s vocation as a barge pilot, combined with his avocation as a belligerent alcoholic, kept us moving from one sleepy river town to the next, from Dubuque to New Orleans. I remember one town, LeClaire, Iowa, that had some old artillery pieces and anti-aircraft guns set in concrete on the river levee, pointing their rusty, blocked muzzles across the Mississippi at Port Byron. There was a bait shop nearby that sold candy along with minnows and nightcrawlers. We would spend our nickels on Pixie Sticks and wax bottles of colored sugarwater and go out on the levee with the other kids to defend Iowa from imaginary hordes of Illinois pirates and to heave tar-splattered rocks from the railroad bed into the muddy water. And one day the local fireman had a real cannon out on the barge platform they used for Fourth of July fireworks. They were sending booms and clouds of white smoke across the water. I asked my dad what they were doing and he told me that someone had drowned and that they were firing the cannon to bring him up from the bottom. I looked on, thrilled and terrified, intent on the swirling brown water, but nothing ever came up that I could see and I never heard anything else about it, though I suffered through some vivid nightmares in the following weeks. I was in fourth grade at the time, and mom had kept my sister and me away from the river after that.

After days and nights of solitary grief, Cass insisted that we go out and see people again. “We have to,” she said. “I feel like we’re just fading away.” So we
left through the iron gate downstairs and made our way through the streets that had so charmed us when we had first arrived in Seville. We passed the same peliquerías with their sad, white-coated old men, and the innumerable kiosks selling tickets to the corridas and football matches. It amazed us that life could go on with such apparent normalcy, yet we knew that things had changed, even here.

For one thing, there were the Moroccans. There had always been some Moroccans in Seville, mostly in the slums around the Alameda de Hercules, where they sold the hashish and heroin they'd smuggled on the ferry from Tangier and Ceuta. Now there were many more in the streets around us: dark-skinned young men with moustaches and vinyl jackets, standing around in groups waving cigarettes and leaning toward one another to speak in Arabic. There were thousands in the city now, and the papers warned that this was only the beginning of a larger exodus. With the sudden disappearance of the American continents, the seas had receded, as if to fill in a deep hole left behind. The Mediterranean was now an inland sea, and it was now possible to walk from North Africa to Gibraltar and Algeciras. The luxurious topless beaches of the Costa del Sol were now four miles inland, and many of the fishing harbors were useless. According to El País, Belgium and the Netherlands had almost doubled in land area, as had Madagascar and many of the Indonesian islands. The EC had acted immediately to freeze prices in Europe in the face of runaway inflation, but fish was still expensive, as catches were small, and had to be trucked inland after considerable difficulties.

We walked across the Puente de San Isabel to Triana, where we sat at a sidewalk café and looked for other Americans. That's where we met Felicia and
Paul from Boston, Jeff from Colorado Springs, and Richardo from São Paolo. We clustered around the table, bought each other drinks, and talked about ourselves. A couple of waiters sat with us and practiced their English. We sang songs and got very drunk together. But when the sun set and we could see the lit up cathedral across the river, we grew suddenly quiet, as if we had been caught in an act of faithlessness. It was like we had all suddenly remembered, all at once, what had happened to us. By the time Cass and I got home, we were both sober, and upstairs in our room we made love as if it would be our last time.

We ran into Kate, a friend and fellow teacher from the school, a few days ago at the Encarnación Market. Cass always goes to the same vendor's stall in the back, not because the old man has the best fruits and vegetables or the lowest prices, but because he and Cass seem to have an understanding. She continues to buy our daily supplies from him, and he in turn treats her as just another person from the neighborhood, not as a foreigner or a refugee. There is none of the pity or condescension that we've encountered elsewhere in the city from well intentioned waiters and clerks. I usually stand back and let Cass do the bargaining. Her Spanish is far better than mine, and she has a knack for it, finding minute defects in the skins of oranges, the texture and solidity of onions with a supernatural ease. She was skeptically regarding a bunch of bananas when Kate walked up. Kate's very tall, hard to miss, and her eyes are always wide behind her wire-rimmed glasses, giving her a look of perpetual amazement. "Hola, colegas," she said, hugging us both. It's strange, and I think we've all noticed it, but whenever we meet someone from back home, we all feel the urge to reach out and touch that person somehow. A hug, a hand on the
shoulder, anything to calm the abiding uneasiness we share. It's as though we need to reassure one another that, yes, we're still here, count on it.

"Doing your shopping, Kate?" Maniacally cheerful small talk is also the norm.

"Yeah. I was just on my way to the fish stalls for some calamares. They're still fairly cheap, and I'm trying to do more cooking at home instead of going out so much." She twisted up the corners of her mouth into what passed for a smile. "You know how it is."

"Have you seen Bill lately?" Cass asked.

"Bill's teaching."

"You're kidding," I said. "That's about the last thing in the world I feel like doing."

"Well, I ran into him yesterday. You know that place he hangs out? The one on Calle Betis? He, uh. Well, he said he just couldn't handle just staying at home and, you know, brooding about things, so he thought he'd throw himself into teaching."

"How is he? I mean really."

"He seems okay, considering. As okay as any of us." She shrugged. "And when I stop to think about it, teaching might not be such a bad therapy. And who knows how long our jobs there will last?"

Cass and I looked at each other. "Has Marshall said anything to you?" I asked.

"Well, no. Not since right after... everything happened. But think about it. Is there really going to be a future in teaching English?" She looked at Cass, then to me.
I looked away, blinking at the strings of garlic hanging from poles, and at the pyramids of apples and oranges. Neither of us said anything, and when I looked back at Kate, her eyes were brimming with tears. Her arms dangled at her sides. “I’m sorry,” she said, and she sounded as defeated as she looked. “I just can’t help thinking about this, what’s going to happen, and...” She looked down and shook her head, and Cass stepped forward to hug her.

“¿Algo más?,” asked the vendor behind us. His voice was quiet, embarrassed. A small line of women had formed, waiting and watching us curiously. Cass told him no and dug in her purse for some pesetas. She handed me the bag, heavy with fruit.

“I’d better go,” Kate said, drying her eyes with the back of her hand. “The fish isn’t getting any fresher.” We promised to stop by and see her later, said our good-byes, and watched her move away, towering above the diminutive old women struggling with their baskets of fruit.

Outside, an obese bearded man had just turned over a dumpster and was proceeding to empty it into the street, shattering bottles and jars according to the interior logic of his obvious madness. A group of schoolgirls passing with an escort of brown nuns had stopped to watch.

“I know exactly how he feels,” Cass said.

Two days ago, Pepe, our building’s ancient, cigar-chomping portero, along with his usual entourage of emaciated mongrel dogs, stopped me as I was coming in through the wrought-iron front gate. “Para ti,” he said gravely, carefully placing a letter in my hand as though it were a fragile and precious artifact. His dogs looked on mournfully as I held it in my fingers, turning it over
in the bright sunlight. It was postmarked May 20th in Harahan, Louisiana. One day before that place and everyone in it had ceased to exist. My mother’s address was hastily scrawled in blue ink on the back, and one corner of the stamp was folded over. USA Airmail, 50 cents. I stared for a long time at the unsettling normality of it. Pepe’s dogs sniffed greedily at the bag of bread and newspaper-wrapped fish lying forgotten at my feet, and he growled “¡coños!” at them, and clicked his tongue until they came away. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him pause by the makeshift table of flowerpots by his door and softly rap three times on the wood before going inside.

Upstairs, I sat at my rickety old desk, sick to my stomach and alone. A note from Cass said that she had gone to the university and would be back soon. Outside my window a squadron of white pigeons patrolled in circles over the rooftops, where laundry billowed like sails and thousands of fishbone TV antennas jutted up into a pale blue, cloudless sky. A letter from a lost continent. I opened it with my thumbnail, pulled out the pages and slowly read them once, twice, three times.

May 19th

Dearest Jake,

Hope you are doing fine over there in sunny Spain. I can only assume so since I haven’t heard a peep from you since late March. (hint! hint!) I’m glad you like life over there. I hope your students aren’t giving you too hard a time.

It has been a wet spring over here. It’s all I can do to keep the garden one step ahead of the weeds. Lots of peppers this year, and tomatoes. If it cools off later I’ll try to get some work done outside. At the very least I need to spray the bugs off my hibiscus around the front porch. I paid little Jackie Hebert next door
to clear the leaves from the rain gutters. I wasn’t going to get up on that ladder. Your old mom is still scared of heights. That’s why I always had you do that sort of thing.

Your sister started working at the Hibernia Bank downtown and she is thinking about going back to Loyola part-time for her accounting degree. Jeffy is just about old enough for a babysitter now and Tom has got a good job with Delta L&P so they think that now is as good a time as any. It will be hard work, I know, but I think she’ll be glad she did it. She told me to tell you to expect a letter soon.

One more thing. I heard from your father a few weeks back. He’s living over in Galveston now. Didn’t say what he was doing or if he was working. He asked about you, and I told him where you were and what you’re up to. I know how you feel about him, Jacob, but you really ought to consider writing to him some time. He is your father, and in spite of his problems, he has always tried to be a good one. Maybe with that big Atlantic between you, you could find it in your heart to drop him a line. It doesn’t need to be anything much. You can send it to me or your sister and we can forward it to him when we get his address. I think it would mean a lot to him.

That’s all I can think of for now. We miss you and can’t wait until you are back home. Tell Cassandra hello from us.

Love, Mom.

She had included a photograph of my sister and brother-in-law with their son, my nephew. Jeffrey, age 2, was written on the back in my sister’s looping, precise hand. He was wearing a little hood with mouse ears and though my sister had her smiling face down close to his, he seemed somehow frightened of the camera, gazing at it with wide-eyed alarm. I looked at their faces for a long
time, blinking hard and watching them dissolve into blurs of color. Then I
looked up at the faces of mother and my grandparents, taped crookedly on the
wall above my desk next to a "Zippy the Pinhead" cartoon sent by a college
friend. They seemed so real to me still, as if the phone would ring any minute
with my mother's breathless voice on the other side. Love Mom. I held the
letter tight in my hand. "I won't forget any of you," I said. I was shaking and my
voice didn't sound like my own. I put my head down on the dusty coolness of
the desktop and let myself cry, chills running through me like the caresses of
ghosts, and I didn't move for a long time, not even when Cass came in and
touched my shoulder. She saw the letter in my hand and said, "Oh, baby." She
put her arms around me and squeezed. She was warm and smelled like sunlight
and car exhausts.

"Where the hell are they? How can they all just be gone?" My voice kept
hitching painfully in my chest. I felt raw, used up. She had started crying too,
stroking my hair.

"I don't know, baby. I don't know."

I pulled myself together and sat up. Cass went over and sat on the bed,
looking at me through red eyes. The air in the room seemed too dense to
breathe. The letter was crushed in my hand from the pressure bearing down on
us. I tried to smooth it out on the desktop, pressing hard. Its edges kept curling
upwards, no matter what I did. I resisted the urge to tear it in half. "We
shouldn't have left them," I said. "We should have been there."

"I know. I feel the same way." She paused, swallowed. "But we've been
through this, baby." I didn't say anything. "We're here, Jake. Nothing is going
to change that."
"I don't feel like a whole person, Cass. Neither do you. Our families, our homes, everything we knew has been robbed from us. Everything. Poof! It's just fucking gone! And here we fucking are."

"Don't yell at me, Jake. It's not fair."

I threw the letter in my desk drawer and banged it shut. I took a couple of deep breaths and stared at the desktop. "Sorry," I said. "I just don't know what to do anymore."

"Just be with me. Here. Now." She held me with her eyes when I looked up. Her hair was pulled back and it looked short, the way it had been when we'd met. She had always been the practical one, the one who kept me anchored to the solid ground when I seemed in danger of drifting away. Only now the ground didn't seem so solid anymore. Beyond the horizon outside was nothing, just the ragged edges of memory. Now there would be just the two of us. I looked at her there in front of me, weighing her against all that was gone. "Come here," she said after a moment.

I did.

Many mornings, early, before the street sounds below our window start to build to their sustained crescendo, I lie in bed with my eyes closed and by power of imagination and sheer concentration transport myself to various times and places. It's a game I perfected when I was still a child. In my mind I map out the room around me, complete with its unique furnishings, its particular light fixtures and the textures of the walls. Then I move very slowly through the rest of this phantom house, or whatever building I happen to be conjuring up, maybe the tiny cinderblock house where we lived when I was nine, for example, or my
grandparents' house in Quincy, Illinois, and I concentrate on each room in turn, trying to recall each object in it, what the view from each window was like, the smells and the particular feelings that each room gave me. Sometimes the room is inhabited, usually with the person or persons with whom it is most closely associated in my memory. For example, the living room of my grandparents' house requires my grandfather sitting in his brown leather recliner listening to the Cardinals play on the radio. I can't do it any other way. It would be like trying to imagine the house in "American Gothic" without the old couple standing in the foreground. I keep it up for as long as I can, extending the reach of my senses to include other houses, yards and familiar tree-lined streets. Once I succeeded in recreating the entire Vieux Carré, New Orleans' French Quarter. I walked for hours along the ghost streets of Royal and Dumaine, smelling the spicy garbage piling up behind the restaurants, looking in shop windows and up at the spidery black cast iron of balconies I remembered in minute detail, until an argument in rapid Spanish pulled me suddenly back into the tangled streets of Seville. I know that these are nothing more than waking dreams, the ghosts of places and people that no longer exist, but in the early morning darkness it scarcely seems to matter, and there have been times when I could no longer be sure of what was real and what was simply imagined.

The first hint of an answer came to me in the Cathedral. Not being religious, I often strolled around in its cavernous medieval gloom because it was the best place to escape the afternoon heat. And because I liked the tragic stone faces of the saints, the dull gleam of the reliquaries, and the rosy twilight slanting down through stained glass windows, piercing the silence. The vastness of the
enclosed space was amazing in itself, something I always noticed and appreciated. The pillars and arches were enormous, like things from another world, and it was always a mental struggle to accept that it was all essentially a work of art, a made thing, rather than the awesome, eternal presence it seemed to be. Everything here, the chapels, the choir, the retablo, had started out as simple ideas in someone's mind. It took four centuries and thousands of workmen to give those ideas physical shape, an undeniable reality. My mind toyed with this thought for a while and I got to wondering if this or any cathedral could ever be described in words, down to every last detail. It would certainly take a while, but I decided that, yes, eventually it could. Almost anything could be expressed in language if one had the skill, the patience, and most important, the desire to do it.

After a while I found myself standing in front of the tomb of Colón, the man I'd grown up thinking of as Columbus, the Discoverer of America. His stone coffin was held aloft on the sculpted shoulders of four allegorical figures, the original kingdoms of Spain. Their eyes were blank, staring through the centuries. I went over and sat on a stone bench, looking up at it.

Some hero. Colón was little more than a businessman. He'd never understood the land he'd stumbled across, and saw it as nothing more than a prize for the Spanish Crown, its inhabitants as mere slaves. When he looked out at the fantastic new flowers, the trees, the strange wildlife, he saw only his name in the histories, the shimmering of gold. Still, his initial idea was worthy of this stone monument, and had definitely changed everything about his world. What had driven him so relentlessly? Maybe the world he'd grown up in was much too small for him. It struck me that my situation wasn't unlike that of the young
Colón before his first voyage. The world around me had regressed to the geography of pre-1492. There was nothing over the western horizon but endless miles of open sea, and it was probably possible now to sail all the way around to the Far East. He wanted to fill the empty horizon with his own glory, a new trade route for Europe. I needed to fill it now with everything that was missing, but had no idea where to begin.

Suddenly restless, I got up to leave. I had taken maybe three or four steps when my foot kicked a coin, sending it ringing across the stone floor. I paused and then followed the sound, searching with my eyes. Someone had probably dropped it there, a limosna for the Virgin. I spotted it and bent to pick it up. In the darkness it felt like a duro, a five peseta coin. I took a step towards the chapel to drop it in the offering box, but on second thought slipped it into my pocket for luck, and turning, crossed the nave, leaving the glory of Colón behind me in the gloom.

Outside in the glare I walked along the Avenida de la Constitución, past the Archivo General de las Indias, following an endless stream of taxis and orange buses toward the center of the city. The heat was oppressive. Only a brave few were out on the streets with me, this being the siesta time, and we kept to the shady side of the street. As I walked, my mind played over what I knew of the European incursion into the Americas that began in 1492. It occurred to me that what had happened in those first few hours had set the tone for the five centuries of unraveling that followed. What, I wondered, would have happened if it had been done differently? What if Colón and his men hadn't renamed the land and its people according to European propriety, but had instead listened to the names and stories that were already there?
I crossed the Plaza de San Francisco to enter Calle Sierpes, a winding street of shops that is shaded by huge white tarpaulins stretched from rooftop to rooftop like ships’ sails. It was here, near the mournful cry of the blind man selling lottery tickets in front of the Banco Central, that I looked at the coin I had been absent-mindedly fingering in my pocket. I stopped cold and drew in my breath at the sight of “United States of America” stamped around the edge. It was a buffalo nickel, the first I’d seen in years! On one face was the profile of a Plains Indian with two feathers hanging from his braids, and on the other was the buffalo, stiff legged and proud. The date was worn, but I could make it out as 1905. The blind man behind me brayed “¡Iguales para hoy!” in a desperate voice that sounded cracked and dried out by the heat, but I barely heard him. Here, at last, was a clue. I didn’t know why, or how, but in my hand, as real as the pavement upon which I stood, was a message from home.

When I got back, Cass was on the roof hanging up some towels to dry. There was no power in our flat and it was stifling. Blackouts were another thing we had to live with now. They were happening all over Europe, and nobody knew why. It was breezy on the roof, though, and we found a place near the outer corner where we could sit in the shade. The neighbors’ washing flapped and sighed around us, including the industrial strength brassieres of Doña Inéz, who lived in the flat below ours. Cass leaned back against the wall next to me, turning the nickel over in her fingers.

“And this was just lying next to your feet?” she asked. “How did it get there?”
I shrugged, shook my head. I recalled that my grandfather had given me ten buffalo nickels when I was a boy, and I wondered what had ever happened to them. And didn’t my dad have a black leather belt that was studded with them? My mind was rifling through my memories, and Cass had to nudge me and ask a second time what I was thinking about.

"Home," I said.

“What about it?” she asked. When I look at her she laid her hand on the back of my neck and said it was all right, we could talk.

“Well, I was just thinking about my granddad’s tavern in Illinois, and the old “Ski-bowl” game that was in the corner. Years later I found one just like it in a bar in New Orleans. It had the same metal pucks, sawdust, and everything. My grandfather’s only cost a dime per game and I used to play it all afternoon.”

“My friends and I used to play pinball,” Cass said dreamily. “Down at the Olympia Arcade, near the beach. We used to pretend that our grape soda was making us drunk and sing along with the jukebox as loud as we could. Stuff like ‘My Sharona’ and ‘Me and Julio Down By the Schoolyard.’ God, we were obnoxious.” From the corner of my eye I could see her smile, and I told her that I wished I’d been there to hear it. “A couple nights ago,” she said, “I dreamt that I was a little girl again, building sandcastles with my aunts. It was so real. I almost didn’t want to wake up.” Her voice trailed off and we listened to the flutter and pop of the laundry.

“I’ve been missing things, too,” I said after a while. “Dreaming about people and all the places I knew. The Mississippi, of course. My old man’s job always kept us close to the river.” I paused, gathering my thoughts. Cass grew up in Washington State, and had never seen the Mississippi, except from the air.
"You've never really talked about your dad," she said, stroking the back of my neck. I knew it was true, but for some reason her saying so surprised me.

"Didn't he drive boats when you were growing up?" she asked.

"Yeah, until he lost his license. He was a river pilot. He ran tows all up and down the Mississippi and through some of the intracoastal waterways." I closed my eyes, and after a moment, I could almost smell the river, and feel it ghostlike all around me. Cass' hand rubbing my neck felt good, and I was so sluggish from the heat that I almost felt like I could drift off. But I felt an urgency, too. Something needed to be said, or done.

"I was just thinking about the way the air smelled out on the river, the diesel fumes, the mud and the fishiness of it. Hard to describe, but I remember it so well. The creosote and oil when we passed some docks. It really stank some days, worse than shit, and other days it was all right. When we were underway, it always looked to me like the treetops and roofs of houses moved behind the levies, just gliding by, like they were in a different world altogether. All those kids waving at us, running along the shore. You could feel the hum of those big twin diesels under your feet and a long slow rock from side to side. I always liked the smell of dad's cigar, too. He used to let me ride up in the pilothouse with him and blow the warning blasts from the airhorn, two long and one short when we were pulling out into the river traffic. I thought I was the luckiest kid in the world."

"It must have been fun for you," Cass said.

"It was. And it was scary sometimes, too. It's a tricky river. Was a tricky river." Cass' hand went still, and we sat for a minute without saying anything until I went on. "Dad always said that it kept him awake and alive. He said he
respected that river more than any other force in the universe, up to and including God.” I didn’t say it, but just then I could see dad’s big hand on the throttles, the faded blue of his Navy tattoos peeking out from under rolled up sleeves. He used to spin the big chrome wheel and talk to the boat around his cigar as he guided thirty barge tows and 40,000 tons of grain or potash or scrap iron around bends, sandbars and mud flats, or between the massive scarred pillars of bridges that used to make me stand on my toes in terror.

It was the strongest image of him I’d had in a long time, and it seemed to obliterate everything that had passed between then and now. For years I’d thought that all I had left of him was the sourness of Canadian whiskey on his breath as he called me “pussy” and “mama’s boy,” thumping me hard against the kitchen wall for standing up for my mom. That was the night I broke my hand on his forehead and he answered by dislocating my shoulder for me as my mother and sister screamed at him to stop. I was maybe seventeen then, but we’d been done as a family for a long time. He’d begged me to forgive him afterwards when he’d sobered up, but I wouldn’t so much as look at him, not even when the cops took him away, and I never saw him again. Over the years since, there was just the rage and the deep ache in my hand on cold days to remind me that I once had a father. But I was remembering things about him now, down to the scars on his knuckles that he had a dozen stories for, depending on how drunk he was and who was listening. I remembered that when I was growing up, he had been a giant, the most powerful man in the world. There had been nothing he couldn’t do. What the hell had happened?

“We have to get it down, Cass” I said, opening my eyes. “Before we forget all of it.”
“Get what down, sweetie?”

“Everything,” I said.

I didn’t know yet how we would go about this, but I wanted to start right away. Sooner or later we were going to have to go back to work; we’d used up most of the money we’d set aside to travel with. We needed to get away for a while, and have some quiet and solitude to think in, which meant getting out of the city. We were unfamiliar with the countryside around Seville, though, and asked Pepe for his advice. He recommended the Sierra de Aracena, a mountain range not far to the northwest. One might encounter the odd shepherd, he said, but few people lived around there. He’d hunted there as a boy, and his father had worked in the Río Tinto mines, a few kilometers to the west. I made arrangements for getting up there and hauled my pack out of the closet. The night before we left, Cass and I spent a quiet night playing cards with Mari-Carmen, eating olives and drinking wine.

By mid morning today we reached Aracena, a tiny whitewashed Andalusian town nestled in the mountains that bear its name. There was no bus station and the bus pulled up in front of a restaurant facing the town plaza. After we retrieved our packs, the door banged shut and the bus roared away toward Portugal, leaving us standing in a cloud of diesel smoke. Two very old men with black berets watched us solemnly from their table as we hauled our packs up onto our shoulders and tightened the straps.

“Hola. Buenos dias,” Cass said. They nodded in reply, clearing their throats and muttering gruff buenos, as if they were unused to speaking. They sat
ramrod straight in their wooden chairs, dignified as kings. One rested his hands on a cane. She begged their pardon for the disruption, and they politely waved her words away into the sunlight. Of course they would be happy to be of service. Where, she asked, could one buy food and water in Aracena.

"¿Agua mineral?" asked the man with the cane, lifting his eyebrows. His accent was quite different from the sevillano accent, slower and measured, easier to understand.

"Sí, y algo de tinto también." She looked at me and I nodded. Some wine would taste good tonight.

They leaned toward one another to consult, hands tracing delicate circles in the air as they compared the merits of Aracena’s two or three shops. Their voices rose in what seemed to be an escalating argument, and at one point the man tapped his cane on his friend’s shoe, clicked his tongue and said “Qué no, Qué no, hombre,” as he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the opposite direction of the one his friend had indicated. They seemed to have forgotten all about us as their discussion became more and more animated. I hooked my thumbs around the shoulder straps, smiled at Cass and waited, sweating. I could see that they’d known each other all their long lives and were the best of friends. Cass was smiling to herself as she listened, drawing spirals in the dust with the toe of her shoe. Finally the man with the cane conceded the argument and his friend gave Cass endlessly detailed directions to the shop of his nephew’s brother-in-law, which as it turned out, was just up the street and around the corner. There, a scowling man with a greasy apron cut several long strips of ham for us from a stiff leg with a black hoof while I chose some oranges out of a cardboard box. From his wife we bought three loaves of bread, a wedge of salty
manchego cheese, two can of olives, and some chocolate. I also bought five liter bottles of mineral water and a couple of dusty bottles of red Valdepeñas wine. I was surprised that we could pay for everything with a 500 peseta coin, and they both watched us from the doorway as we stood on the sidewalk stuffing everything into our packs.

We left the southern outskirts of the town behind us, the cobblestone streets petering out into dirt lanes and then into narrow goat paths which climbed steeply up and down the hills. Ragged goats with tinkling bells around their necks were placidly chewing the bark from tree trunks, and every tree in sight was stripped up to the height of my shoulders. The sun was getting hotter, and when we came to a small grove of olive trees planted in neat rows, we stepped under their sparse canopy of silvery spearlike leaves to change into some shorts and to take a long drink from one of the water bottles. The scorched, shrub-pocked faces of the Sierra de Aracena loomed all around us, hazy with the light and heat of the afternoon. In three hours we were high in the mountains and far from the nearest village. We startled some deer at one point, but did not see another human being for the rest of the day. As the sun began to sink in the pale sky, we found a good spot, high and solitary, with a fringe of trees with flame-red leaves and a sweeping view of the valley below. We dropped our packs from aching shoulders, drank some water and rested for a while before setting up camp.

We uncorked the wine a while ago. Cass is tending the fire, and I watch her. She is kneeling next to it and laying dry sticks across the flames. Something about the way her head is bent, the look in her eyes, the way the dancing
shadows bring out the contours of her face, makes me love her so much my eyes water. My notebook is open on my knee and now and again I grab the wine by the bottleneck, feeling its cool, spicy dryness on my tongue and flowing down my throat, warming me from within. I have the buffalo nickel, too, flipping it over my knuckles like my grandfather did when I was a kid; it's harder than he made it look. I keep saying "look!" and trying to get it all the way across my knuckles for her, but so far no luck.

We're surrounded by aromatic cistus shrubs with purple blooms and the incessant buzzing of bees. The sky is rosy orange behind the dark outlines of the sierras, and the valley below us is slowly filling up with mist and shadow. Overhead I can see the first faint twinkling of a single star. It's a good kind of quiet, a blank slate for the imagination.

On the way home from the cathedral I had remembered reading that many Native Americans believed their land came into being via the spoken word. It was sung into existence by the Old Ones, who gave names and natures to everything on earth, the rivers, the animals and trees. The meaning of the land was handed down in words from generation to generation, and stories told around smoky fires invested the land with essence and magic. As I sit on a flat-topped granite boulder, one of the last surviving Americans, here on a silent mountaintop in southern Spain, I am trying to believe that words can still have that kind of power in the world. I intend to do the same thing, you see: to describe every detail of that land as I remember it. Every rock, every tree I ever saw there will be named, given new life.

I think of all the places I lived when my sister and I were growing up. I think of LeClaire, Natchez, and New Orleans, and the eternal Mississippi that
ran through them all like time itself. The smell of that lazy brown water is in my blood, as real as these mountains. That land wasn't just a physical thing to be plowed up, walled around, or even taken away. It was an idea, a way of life. Something eternal. The Native Americans all knew that, from the Maya to the Lakota Sioux. I know it. Here. In my heart and bones.

Is it possible to reconstruct a continent from memory? Even a part of it? Because that's what I know we will all have to do. Not just me, but Cassie, and Kate and Bill, and anyone else who has stories to tell. All over the world there are dispossessed Americans. It's just a matter of coming together to tell those stories, our final inheritance. We'll do it for our children and grandchildren who will never tread that soil as we did. It will be a grand exploration, and I can't wait to again see the roofs of river towns peeking over the levees under a huge blue sky, smell the cool cigarette and stale beer darkness of my grandfather's tavern. Even now, I can almost hear the primeval choruses of frogs and crickets in the dark, moss-hung woods of Mississippi. I want to bring back my mother's gardens that magically sprung up everywhere we lived, the endless varieties of tomatoes and peppers that I used to hate picking and now would give anything, anything to touch and taste. And before that, the high squeal of my sister's laughter, brown pigtails dancing, our love of going barefoot all summer long, the crawfish pinging around in coffee cans after our successful Saturday morning hunts. I want to bring back the river, too, and the son of a bitch who showed it to me mile by mile. I will write the blue stink of his cigar and the fabled scars on his knuckles as many times as it takes to get them right. For myself, it will take me the rest of my days to resurrect each and every little part of that abiding, essential river. But if we can each just get our own little parts of it down well
enough, I believe the rest will somehow be there, beyond the horizon of our memories.

I taste the wine again and hand the bottle to the woman I love, squinting at the shadows growing long around us, the twilight faces of the mountains and the still, hazy air, thick with insects and memories. I look down at the blank page on my knee, and after a moment’s pause, begin to write.
THE SATYR

No one in the leather souk knows what secrets he conceals under the woolen robe of a holy man, and though they trade hushed stories about deformities, an extra arm or leg, or the breasts and hips of an old woman, his hood has never been pulled back in their sight to reveal the bony stubs of horns sprouting high on his forehead, or the points of his ears peeking out between tufts of wispy gray hair, nor has it ever occurred to them that the rags bound tightly around his oddly proportioned feet do not hide the oozing stumps of a leper as some have supposed over smoky cups of mint tea, but rather his split hooves, scaly with age and in need of trimming, and it would have surprised them all to know that his pained, awkward gait is not merely the result of his poor health and years of hard life, but comes mostly from the inconvenience of the huge lopsided testicles dangling from his hindquarters of an ancient and decrepit ram.

He speaks but rarely, this hooded apparition with his bristling beard and mad, glittering eyes, but they have long known from his accent, his sloppy French and his atrocious Arabic, that he is not a Moroccan. A few men and boys slyly refer to him as "l'Anglais," unaware of the truth of their instincts though others are equally certain that he is a Portuguese ex-sailor ruined by drink and the wiles of countless whores.
He has been here for years, that much is known, in this forgotten corner of Fez El Bali, the Great Medina of serpentine medieval streets, mazes within mazes, a geometry that confounds even the tens of thousands who have spent their entire lives here and prevents the forlorn spirits of the dead from ever leaving this perpetual twilight beneath the woven canopies and oil lamps. Even the green waters of the Oued Fez, bubbling up with their bowel stench under the mossy stone ramparts that surround the city, are quickly confused and lost near the textiles souk, where fresh dye drips off hanging spools of wool yarn, running like butcher's blood through stone gutters to turn the river crimson as it disappears into subterranean darkness beneath the rue Nekhaline, and it sometimes happens that wayward beams of sunlight become disoriented after penetrating the holes in the sagging canopies and illuminate certain streets at all hours of the night as they seek their escape, much to the chagrin of thieves requiring the shelter of darkness for their labors.

But all this suits him well, for he came here to be lost, and now, after a hundred and twenty years of exile, he rarely leaves this part of the Medina and its reek of tanning vats, the swarming flies and impossible shit-stink of rotting hides piled in heaps beneath the peeling stucco of elegant horseshoe arches. He is a familiar sight to the young boys with skinny arms and legs stained permanently orange from the dye pits and the innumerable toothless old men with their striped robes and festering sores, yet none of them know his name, the name he was born with so many years ago in a distant sunny place, I can hardly remember it myself now with all this noise, these beetle-like multitudes, but if I could, I wouldn't call myself by that name because it isn't mine, I've lost it, God damn me, the name of a boy, perhaps, hidden away in his memory like an
curling old photograph in a locked drawer, too painful to look at, a pale boy with fair hair and frightened blue eyes that couldn't possibly dwell within this aberrant freak, this grotesque monster with its stink of a rutting goat and black halo of flies, surely not this boy, he was meant to be a hero, do you hear me, not a villain to be jeered at, some wretched old Caliban with no Miranda in sight, just these hideous Berber women with their veils and henna tattoos, old whores and underfed boys, and God nowhere to be seen, no, they don't know his name and on the rare occasions when he is spoken to at all he is called, simply, say-yeed, or monsieur.

He is accorded respect here, in part because of his enigma, but more importantly because he is recognized as a craftsman and an artist of rare talent. His nights are his own, and the source of endless speculation, but today, as on countless other days, he is at work in the back room of his shop, which is wedged in a back alley because the better locations in the souk, the ones on the rue Sidi Youssef, have been held by the same families now for ten centuries.

His reputation brings a steady trickle of customers and, as the old artificer could never reconcile his loathing of his fellow men with his need to earn a living from them, these are greeted by Kamal, his obese servant from Meknés who, though he has the slow speech and vacant stare of an idiot, nevertheless routinely out-bargains those who would seek to take advantage of the less fortunate among them. Many come simply to look, to stare in speechless wonder. There are masks fashioned from dyed and stitched goatskin, wizened faces with eyeless sockets that actually change expressions according to the wearer's mood, from lecherous grins to wounded grimaces, so heavily are they invested with the feeling of their maker, and some of these bark harsh laughter
from their pegs on the wall, while others weep real tears night and day, rotting themselves with their inconsolable sorrow.

Here too, are other small marvels, carved from perfumed sandalwood and exotic dark woods from the riverbanks of Gabon and Cameroon, curiosities stitched together from delicate reptile skins and embroidered cloth, embellished with feathers. He works with these materials behind heavy curtains, mumbling a litany of curses as he gives life to snakes with eyes of desert opal, and the tiny camels that cross the expanses of moth-eaten rugs in minute caravans, the leather bats that flutter in ghostly ellipses around shafts of billowing sunlit dust, and rows of sequined birds that exactly mimic the songs of their live brethren in cacophanic symphonies.

These wonders are not even surpassed in popularity by the enchanted chessmen of Mohamed El Hayzari which daily fight miniature battles to the death before crowds of delighted onlookers, or the green fortune-telling parrot of Ibrahim Abu Ayub, the slug-like Egyptian in the carpet souk, of whom it is often said that he profits more from its matter-of-fact renderings of destiny than from his overpriced and dubiously authentic Berber rugs.

Though he has been surrounded by the fruit of his master's genius for years, Kamal knows little about how these wonders are accomplished and is unable to answer the prying questions about them from the sons and cousins of jealous competitors, for he has never had the opportunity to observe the secrets performed behind the curtains, nor would he want to be burdened with such knowledge. He is a simple man, and at any rate, such a breach of his master's privacy would be unthinkable, especially when he recalls that his one unannounced intrusion years ago had cost him the little finger of his left hand,
though he afterwards counted himself lucky not to have lost his situation, Allah be praised, the bread and meat for his family, and thinking of these things, he can easily tolerate his master's brooding silences, his smell of an unwashed goat and the drunken rages in a strange tongue that sometimes fills the air with feathers and ripped out stuffing, for surely a foreigner and an infidel cannot be expected to behave always as a civilized man should.

The strangled breathing coming from behind the curtain is that of an animal, a suffering beast, for the man within him is little more than a memory. He is numb to the small miracles around him, sometimes crushing them underfoot without noticing as he paces his shop in the silence of the early morning. It is for others to delight in what he has made, to laugh and to tell their disbelieving friends. He is simply the architect of these miracles, alone and unknown behind the curtain, and though he can amaze everyone who enters his shop, their warmth and fellowship is forever denied to him, and it is sometimes an agony to remember what it had been like to share in the laughter of friends, allowing himself to be touched by the delicate beauty of a sonnet, to start out a normal day by shaving and knotting a tie around a starched collar. There are no mirrors here, nothing to further insist on his otherness. The constant buzzing of flies is a constant reminder of the Divine punishment that had been visited upon him. When he was young he had reveled in his curse, taking his awful delight in the shrieking of women and children, reasoning that if he could not understand his fate, at least he could wholly deserve it. Certainly, once he'd become used to them, his grotesque shape and relentless carnal appetite weren't so terrible, but the horror he hadn't expected and that grew over the years was the realization that he was alone, absolutely alone of his kind.
Here behind the curtain, the lamplight gleams off the polished hooks on his forehead, and off the spines of innumerable books that line the walls, the leaning piles of open tomes on tables next to racks of glass tubes and alembics with long, graceful necks bubbling with vaporous green elixirs, and it flickers on the high ceiling painted with hieroglyphs, cabalistic symbols and the signs of the stars, as well as upon the jeweled sheath of a curved Berber dagger hanging on the wall behind him.

His work in this room has occupied him for years, a growing obsession now that he is unable to indulge the eternal tingling of his loins, the bitter fruit of a past mistake, Marisa, how was I to know, his mindless maddening urge, devoid of any joy, that now drives him to create until even that isn't enough and there is only this left for him to do. He lingers for a moment, scratching himself, pulling silvery lice from his beard as he eyes the form lying silent and unmoving beneath its shroud, materium superabat opus, my sweet salvation, soon to wake.

He chooses a cedar box and removes with grave care an ancient scroll, long sought for and recently purchased, remembering the search that had lasted for so many hot, empty months, the rumors he had followed with the single-mindedness of a moth seeking the candle's flame, the countless lies he had endured from gypsies and scholars as he offered them more tea over the ticking of the clock. No one had personally seen the scroll he sought, but of course all knew of it, and too many had an uncle or a cousin or a grandfather that had seen it in Oman, or in Athens, no, it was definitely in the Vatican's library among treatises for summoning demons, or was it in the Alhambra of Granada, the property of a dimwitted Spaniard who used it to scratch his back at night? How
their eyes roamed the room as they told their hopeful lies, lingering on the richness of embroidered cloth and dull silver of the teapot, smelling the gold he was so desperate to pay for some forgotten bit of hocus pocus, the knowledge of magicians who had passed into dust centuries ago, now lost beneath the blowing desert sands. At last he'd given up, tempted to just bury a blade in his black heart of a goat, sick of the years, the loneliness and his own stench.

But one afternoon he had found it in a catalogue of antiquities, just a brief description that caused him to stand unsteadily with tears in his eyes. It had been in Alexandria, in a museum, never having left that land of magic and crumbling grandeur, and gold was all it took to have it placed on a freighter to Tangier and brought to him here on the mail train.

Now he carefully spreads it open, both of them cracking with age, and bending, he squints hard at the swirls and scratches of a forgotten language, mumbling to himself as he follows the yellowed point of his fingernail. He sees that there remains one last thing, a detail, really, but important nevertheless, for true magic accumulates within the most minute ingredients, the most mundane rituals. "Tonight," he says aloud. "It will be tonight."

He pulls the hood up, old habit, and steps through the curtain to the front room, where Kamal fills the doorway with his immense girth as he trades pleasantries with a seller of chickens. The chickens lie in bundles on the cobblestones, trussed up by their feet and blinking with alarm, upset perhaps at the casual way in which their fate is being discussed. "Ici, Kamal," he says, digging in the pocket of his robe, well come here you fool, finding the heavy leather pouch there and bringing it out before Kamal's questioning eyes. "Yes, say-yeed?"
"This is for you." He drops it into immense outstretched hands that dip with the sudden weight, and puzzled, Kamal loosens the drawstrings to peer inside, tilting the pouch this way and that, and his mouth falls open to the metallic clicks of the shifting gold inside, my God, what a fortune he has given me, looking up with a glossy sheen of sweat over his round dark face, his eyes comically wide as he struggles to form words.

"But why, say-yeed?"

"I shall be going away."

"Away, say-yeed?" His brows curve up with alarm.

"Yes, Kamal, away. And so it is that I require nothing more of you here," and he steps forward to where his staff leans waiting with its carved head of a ram.

Kamal backpedals in front of him, moving his bulk with surprising grace. "But say-yeed... what can this mean? What am I to do?" There is no reply. How can he do this, have I not been the best of servants? This is what an astonished Kamal thinks as his master quietly picks up a pair of shears and slips them into a pocket as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

They both step out into the street, and the old man swings the heavy doors closed and locks them with the key he wears around his neck. The doors are enchanted, the bane of every thief in this quarter of the Medina, and they bear the marks of thousands of vain attempts to pry them open. He senses the hugeness of Kamal behind him, the confusion of an oversized child, you sniveling fool, haven’t you worked it out yet that I’ve sacked you, brushing by him now, feeling the tug of time passing too quickly. "Kamal," he adds, pausing, "adieu."
He leaves his servant standing in the street behind him, staring dumbly at the heavy bag in his hand, inexplicable wealth and freedom, and he rounds the corner onto the rue Sidi Youssef. Chaos surges all around him as he limps over the cobblestones, the shouts of the nut vendors, the exasperated cries of "Balek! Balek!" as old men in turbans struggle to pull their laden donkeys through the crowds gathered to watch jugglers and fire-eaters, dentists and storytellers perched on stools, and a pair of one-armed boxers, one of them a dark Mauritanian with a glistening bald head and gold teeth, swinging wildly at each other to their lusty roars, and the beggars and booksellers on the steps of mosques, old bearded men in white skull caps delicately pulling on their embroidered slippers before stepping into the street. He passes them all with the grave care of an invalid, leaning heavily on his staff, ever mindful of the throbbing ache in the heavy pendulum of his scrotum, and of the young boys moving with him through the seething crowd with leashed monkeys riding high on their shoulders snatching at the ears of the unwary, the dervishes with tasseled red tarbooshes and cymbals coaxing coins from passersby, and on through these endless winding alleys thronged wall to wall with sweating humanity, he pauses only to let pack animals pass, lurching wide-eyed camels and melancholy donkeys half dead from exhaustion, sharp cracks of leather thongs raining down on their bleeding haunches as they struggle blindly ahead with immense sagging bundles of spices and carts of live turkeys, wretched beasts, I've as much in common with you as with your masters, bastards all, and I, too, a tiny dot floating in this sewer, alone and unnoticed in your midst, the Great Unwashed we used to call you and I was born to look down at you all from my pram as nanny wheeled me round St. James Park where the ducks are so fat
and happy and I remember the time I was holding her hand in Victoria and I said nanny why has that man got a towel round his head and she said, shhh, it's because he's a Mohammedan, what's a Mohammedan, it's someone from very far away now you mustn't stare at him it's rude and do stop fidgeting where are your manners, and where is nanny now, I wonder, probably laying in some Cornish churchyard, oh these imbeciles, they have no manners at all, this is intolerable, yes, she's dead now, and Marisa as well, I think they must all be dead, safe beneath the long green grass of England, ah it's been years since I've seen grass, smelt it, and a sudden knock sends him sprawling against the wall, pain erupting in bright flares inside him, teeth clenched against the rising dizziness as a young man helps him up and hands him his staff with a mortified "Esmah lee!" this poor old man, my God what a stink, how can he walk on these feet, and now I've touched him, "Ahna ahsif!" and he shrinks quickly away now, swallowed by the crowd before the old man can catch his breath, mutter a "shokran" in gratitude, ah god, poor boy was frightened to death of me, well he ought to be, ah this back of mine, I can hardly walk, his testicles throbbing some urgent new message of pain as he hobbles to his destination, counting his steps, the ringing of his staff on the stones, past hanging bundles of pink, glistening tripe and sticky sweets swarming with wasps, stopping at last at a dingy portico beneath a faded and peeling sign, "Hotel Splendide," and below this, writhing swirls of hand-painted Arabic script.

Little has changed since his last visit to this place, certainly not the bedding, the blue rooms of broken down beds, blankets crawling with lice and pestilential nightmares, these sour smelling women with the rotting teeth and vacant eyes of kif smokers standing in doorways and contemplating the dreams
they've lost through the cracks in the walls, yet the sleepy eyed Asiatic proprietor of years past is gone now, and there is only this tousle-haired young man with a drooping mustache leading him upstairs without speaking after the soft chinking of coins had passed between them, *business is business and my time is short*, the memories drifting to him through the gloom and the acrid scent of kif and incense, music droning and alien, he again hears the teasing little girls' voices out of the withered faces of hags, why don't you take off the robe, old man, show us what you've got, *well I did just that and they ran screaming from me but not fast enough*, down this very corridor with its blue Andaluz tiles and the dust of centuries stirred up by their passing, and he is left standing by an open door, echoing footsteps receding behind him.

A girl is sitting on a bed facing the window, combing her long black hair, and he watches, eyes gleaming in the shadow of his hood. Marisa. He leans on the door frame as the years run through him like water, taking him to another place, the room he has made himself forget, the scent of chalkdust and wax, and the weeping of a girl, her hair cascading over her arms, the edge of the table, his own sick guilt rising within him like bile, *but it was love I swear*, and she turns to look at him now, a girl of eighteen, his undoing, *no, Marisa, please*, but then she isn't Marisa anymore, but a Moroccan girl, getting older as he watches, and he stands there like a frightened child when she beckons him inside.

"Have you any money, old one?"

He hobbles nearer, stops. "Money enough." *Her hair, the smell of it.*

"Come, sit with me."

"I cannot. I have pain... here."
She nods solemnly, seeming to understand. "Perhaps help may be given," she says, thinking this poor old man will probably go right to sleep, whew, how he needs a bath.

"Yes," he says, moving a step closer, "this is the reason for my visit."

"Many men come here for such a reason." A look out the window betrays her weariness, and she scratches the flea bites on her ankle.

"Your hair," he says, thinking Marisa.

"Yes?"

"It is beautiful."

"Yes, beautiful." Strange old man. "Do you like it?"

"I want to buy it," and she laughs at the joke, but I'm quite serious my dear.

"And what price would you give me for this hair, old one?" he's just crazy, I must tell Zoraya of this, that bitch still has my shoes, and what is this?, as he pulls out the shears and drops them on the bed beside her.

"Ten thousand dirhams," he says.

Her laughter brightens the room. "Where would you find such wealth?" A harmless old fool, surely.

"Here," and he takes out three handfuls of coins from somewhere in the folds of his robe, spills them on the scorched wooden top of the low table beside the bed. "You need never work again," he says, watching her eyes flick over the coins, counting them, then widening as she counts them a second time without moving, without even breathing. Now she looks up at him, large eyes beneath her long dark lashes, trying to see him for the first time, hidden away in the shadows of his hood, this strange old man with the stink of an animal and the
money of a king. "What are you called," she asks, her eyes pulled back to the wealth glittering an arm's length away.

"I have no name."

"And why must you take this hair? Why not the hair of another?" It isn't merely the hair I need, but the color and essence of it, just make up your mind, I haven't time for this. "If I must go elsewhere, I will," he says.

She looks at him. "But you will find no hair such as this in all the world." She wraps it around her fingers, caresses her cheek with it, eyeing him coyly, and now he looks at her, sees that she is a creature of beauty and mystery and that his money is the only advantage she lacks. For an instant he wishes that he could reach out, just once, to touch her cheek tenderly, as a man would, and that she would not pull away in disgust. But it is too far for us to reach, my dear, we walk in altogether different worlds. A long moment passes as they look at one another without speaking, and he is about to ask her for her name when she gives him a broad smile, showing her bad teeth. "Very well," she says, "you may have it." And her eyes gleam fiercely as she adds, "for twenty thousand."

Later, he crosses the open square of the Place de l'Istiqlal, clutching his precious bundle to him as he walks, while smoke from cooking fires drifts up with the sound of drums and trilling pipes into the rosy light of a dying sun, and higher still, the black specks of vultures glide in their sidereal orbits, almost lost in the coming darkness of night.

He works for hours behind the enchanted doors of his sanctuary, free from the irksome weight of the woolen robe, scarcely noticing the adagios of his birds,
or the way his masks wrinkle their noses in distaste as he hobbles by them, scratching at the bristly hair on his legs, and pulling at his beard in deep thought before returning to his labors with the ivory handled awl and needles fashioned from the bones of long extinct fish.

The prayer calls come in the early morning darkness, echoing from the spires of minarets, waverering in the air like cries of joy and pain, "Allaaaaah...ak-baaaar!" *God is great*, a sentiment that inspires a wheezing chuckle deep in his chest as he attaches the last of the hair. A pair of green leather bats fly rings around his head, and he waves them away in irritation as he stands back to look at his handiwork, his magnum opus.

*Marisa.*

It is the form of a girl. She lies there as if asleep, perfect in every detail. There are no seams on the pale supple leather of her skin, and fine hairs are visible on her arms and legs. Her eyes are closed and her dark hair fans out around her head, and even he is spellbound as he looks upon her, his loins aching. *My downfall. Has it been so long?*

He feels a sudden coldness in his belly, an animal-like dread of the unknown that is as strange and poisonous to him as mercury, and he wonders, *what have I to fear?* Something has changed. The effigy, though motionless, has become a presence in the room. He circles the table in a slow, lurching orbit, watching her from every angle, now really seeing her as a whole rather than just an aggregate of parts. For years he has pursued this triumph, this cheating of his lonely fate, yet he had never once stopped to consider exactly what it was his hands were doing, or that he would someday come to this very moment in time.
He runs a trembling finger down the yellowed parchment in front of him, selects a vial of ochre powder and pours this into a small stone bowl marked with runes that seem to shimmer and change shape in the flickering lamplight. He dips a slender glass wand into another bottle and lets a single drop fall into the bowl, and there is a sudden flash of bluish light and acrid smoke drifts out like a thing alive, sending long tendrils to the stars painted on the ceiling. He sets the bowl carefully on the chest of the effigy, and stands back and waits, thinking, *please, please come to me.* Out loud, he speaks her name.

The smoke swirls down suddenly, sending parchments flying as it wraps itself around the figure on the table before entering through its nostrils and open mouth. Then there is nothing for a long moment, just the restless flutter of the bats overhead, the inquisitive chirping of his birds. He waits, mesmerized by the silence and steady tapping of his pulse, almost ready to admit defeat, to cry out in rage, when she gasps suddenly, draws a breath, her chest faintly creaking like a bellows as it begins to rise and fall, and shaking in spite of himself, he leans over her, his mouth open, seeing the first restless movement beneath her eyelids.

"Marisa, it is I," he says, startled at the sound of his own voice, and though he can't be certain, he believes he hears a distant wind, as if something is seeking him out through the infinite maze of the Medina.

Her voice beside him whispers, "who are you?" sounding very far away, frightened, the voice of an old woman. Marisa, can it be you?

"I...was your teacher," he says. Your violator. "The school in... in..." He squints, searching for the place he has buried within him. "In Sussex." He swallows hard.

"Who...?"
"You know my name. I may not speak it aloud."

"Oh. Oh, yes," comes the voice. "Yes, I remember you. It was so long ago..." Her eyes flutter, but remain closed. "I tried to forget..."

"Marisa. I am old now. I lost everything, my life, who I was, everything. I was made... into this." He feels the panic building within him, the walls of the Medina growing around him. Tears well in his eyes, roll down his cheeks into his beard. "I have been utterly alone, Marisa."

There is no reply.

"Marisa, I beg you, speak to me."

"Why have you brought me here? What do you want?"

The simplicity of her question stabs at his heart and he finds himself afraid to answer. "I have given you life again," he says at last, wiping his tears with the back of his shaking hand, "and a body that will stay eternally young, eternally beautiful."

Her brows crinkle and she turns her head slightly, as if taking notice of herself for the first time. Her hand jerks and moves very slowly over the swelling of her breasts to her neck and face. He watches as she runs her fingers over the smooth curves of her cheeks, the line of her jaw, and her lips part as she takes in a breath. He can see moisture glistening on them.

"It is your face, is it not? And it is free from all signs of age." At the sound of his voice, her eyelids flutter and open, blinking against the lantern light. Her eyes are blue, as they were so many years ago, and they shine fiercely as they she seeks him out. He backs away into the shadows across the room.

The table creaks as she draws her legs together, struggling to sit upright, and he gapes at her, his eyes devouring her, tensing at the way her muscles
move just beneath her skin, holding his breath at the sight of her ribs barely showing beneath the rise and fall of her breasts, crowned with their rosy halos, *my God, Marisa, you are beautiful*, the fear dropping from him now because there is nothing else in the world except her and the sound of her breathing, the decades vanquished under the arch of her back, swept aside by the curve of her hips. His nostrils quiver with the smell of her and blinking, he looks down, amazed to see the black flag of his lust rising as it had so many times in the past, *this is impossible*, the waving, pointing finger he'd followed through woods and brothels, naming the objects of his desire, catching them one by one, feeling the savage excitement of their writhing beneath him, their gasps kissing his ears. These memories throb in him, twist a soft groan from his bowels. "Where are you?" she demands, turning toward him.

"I am here," he says, his voice straining.

Her eyes flick back and forth, squinting, probing the shadows. "What do you want of me?"

"I want only... your companionship," he whispers. "Nothing more than that." *Oh, you lying wretched bastard*, he thinks, knowing he wants everything about her, *I want to bury my nose in your hair, feel your warmth around me forever*. He watches as she brings her legs over the edge of the table, first one and then the other, and sighs with pleasure when her feet touch the floor and she is able to stand.

"It really is you, isn't it, Marisa."

She freezes at the sound of his voice, then tries to shield her nakedness from him with her arms, looking about her for something to cover herself, and
he briefly considers throwing her the shroud that is wadded up in the corner behind him, but instead he stands where he is, watching, exultant.

"Please show yourself," she says, hearing his breathing.

"Very well, if you wish it." He steps out into the light, smiles ruefully at her gasp of horror. Her eyes linger on the twisted black points of his horns, trace the deep lines etched in his face, now widening as they alight on the prominence of his lust, which bobs as he takes another step toward her.

"What... what are you?" She is horrified, repulsed, and she cannot take her eyes off him.

"I am simply what you made of me."

She shakes her head, "No," and his heart swells in his chest at the way her hair sweeps over her shoulders, shimmering in the lamplight, the hair of a whore transfigured.

"You will grow used to me, Marisa. In time."

"I will not stay. Not with you."

His nostrils flare as he inhales her scent, and the corner of his mouth twitches. "But you will," he says dreamily.

"I beg you, release me," she pleads, hugging herself. "You must." She is looking around her like a cornered animal, a posture he finds infinitely arousing.

"I cannot," he answers with a curt shake of his head. *Nor would I, my dear, it took everything I had to bring you here, I will die before I give you up, return to that wretched solitude, that idiot Kamal. "Speak no more of this, Marisa," he says with the weary indulgence of a father. "You are here. With me." He steps toward her, offering an embrace with his long bony fingers.*
She utters a soft cry as the significance of his look comes home, and searching for an escape, she sees the jeweled crescent of the Berber dagger hanging on the wall. He is moving toward her, breathing heavily through his open mouth, his pink tongue visible, now stumbling as the points of a hoof catch in a frayed spot in the rug. Don’t run, my dear, I’m too old to chase you. She backs away, holding on to the edge of the table, then lunges for the knife, screaming as his hands fall on her shoulders. It falls out of her grip, clatters on the table behind her.

Then he is upon her, turning her roughly toward him, his clutching bony hands pin her hips to the edge of the table, and she shrieks in his ear, twisting and frantic, now reaching for something behind her, but he closes his eyes without seeing, intent only on this achingly familiar rhythm, the surge of his blood heating his old bones, Oh God, Marisa, I would die a thousand deaths for this, and he does not see the flash of the blade as she brings it up under him. There is only a sudden searing pain in his groin as his eyes open wide, and the odd sensation of something dropping away to the floor.

He looks at her in dumb terror, stumbling backwards as his fingers claw at the pain between his legs, knowing with sick certainty that he will never be able to stop the black warmth spreading there, running in rivulets down his thighs. What have you done to me? He turns, falling, pulling down stacks of books, glass vials shattering around him. Bestial groans escape through his clenched teeth, and he does not hear the strong wind scouring the medina outside, stripping the narrow streets of their accumulated filth and debris, rattling his locked shutters.
She is crouched across the room with the bloody crescent of the blade trembling in her hand, and seeing her through the red mist of his pain he suddenly understands that this moment had been coming all along. He hadn't been able to escape it even here, the full circle of cause and effect having been preordained in that sunny classroom of long ago where she had wept with horror and humiliation, God's favorite child defiled, and now it comes like a sibilant whisper, the final sentence having sought him out in the middle of this labyrinth. "Marisa," he croaks, and a shudder runs through him. "I never meant for this to happen." She doesn't move, doesn't answer. "Please... you must believe me." Please. But he sees that the magic has failed. The light is leaving her eyes, and soon it is merely a doll that stares at him. The dagger slips and falls to the floor.

No one sees his tremulous smile of longing and regret, and as the lamp burns lower and finally dies, the tears he weeps mingle with the scarlet flow of his life until the birds stop their singing and the bats drop into lifeless toys on the floor and lay there in the gathering silence of a spell broken.
The Passion Pit Adult Emporium is innocuous enough from the outside: a square white building wedged between a machine shop and the double sets of railroad tracks that bisect our town. The windows are shuttered closed and a sign over the door forbids entry to anyone under the age of 21.

Inside, there's a large front room with shelves of bad porn novels, rows of threatening implements with obscure purposes, all of which fall under the euphemistic aegis of "marital aids," and magazines to fit every taste, from the mundane to the exotic. My favorite this week is Pes, "the international journal of foot fetishists," which mostly contains glossy color photographs of human feet. All kinds of feet, feet of every size, shape and color. I haven't seen any customers pick it up yet, but I'm keeping a close watch, just out of curiosity.

Actually, I'm supposed to enforce a two minute limit on customers who paw through the magazines without buying anything, but I rarely bother unless Jerry, the owner, is around. In the back, past the cashier's counter where I while away the hours reading science fiction, there are four small projection booths with orange curtains. These are where customers can watch videos with titles like "Naughty Schoolgirls," and "Hunky Gladiators" by plugging quarters into the slots. Two bits buys three minutes.
Overall it's not a bad place to work, and while I'm figuring out what to do with my life, I get to earn a few bucks and study the habits of the town deviants up close. I'm pretty sure one of them is a city councilman. He always walks over from the parking lot behind the main street shops with a slouchy brown corduroy hat screwed low on his head. He never buys anything, but seems to have a morbid fascination with a magazine called *Hubba Hubba*. My old man probably voted for him.

Some nights, when business is slow and there are only a few men slinking among the magazines, I'm tempted to just walk out the front door and jump on one of those slow Chicago & Northwestern freight trains as it rumbles past. When we were still in high school, my friend Paul and I used to talk about doing it all the time. Those tracks were the symbols of freedom and adventure, our great escape from the midwest. But I'm a coward in real life, flabby and utterly devoid of grace. Any train heading for the Good Life would have to be crawling at a snail's pace for me to catch it, and even then I probably wouldn't be able to haul myself up into an open boxcar. Paul was always the brave one, and I always depended on him to pull me along in his wake.

But Paul's in the hospital psych ward now. He had another "manic episode" a couple of weeks back, whatever that means. His mother is big on medical nomenclature. She drops words like "bipolar affective disorder," and "hyperveralization" every chance she gets, as if she were some kind of shrink instead of a part-time office secretary over at the university. I know he has his problems, but it's simpler than his mother and doctors think. Paul just experiences life ten times more intensely than the rest of us. That doesn't make him crazy. He has moments of brilliance, moments when he seems to be
reaching for something far greater than himself. His blue eyes blaze with holy
fire then, and it's like a power from another world has seized him. How many
times had I listened to him as he paced around his room or mine, tracing spirals
in the air with his hands, the words coming in torrents, forced out of him by
some deep urgency? And is it any wonder that when it finally leaves him, as it
always does sooner or later, his fall to earth is so long, so terrible?

It's one o'clock in the afternoon when I wake up. I can hear my dad
puttering around downstairs, the scrape of a fork against a plate and the low
murmur of the television. Though he will never admit it to anyone, I know
that he is addicted to daytime talk shows. Oprah, Geraldo, all of them. He's a
retired veterinarian with a lot of time on his hands. He still goes over to the
university's large animal clinic at least once a day, just out of habit I suppose, and
he's supposed to be writing some sort of gee-whiz history book about border
collies. But for a couple hours in the middle of every weekday he sits in front of
the kitchen TV with his coffee cup in hand, spellbound at the endless parade of
freaks that these shows dig up.

I shuffle into the kitchen, and scratch my back with my thumb as I dig in
the fridge for something to eat. My father grunts a hello. He's wearing his blue
clinic coveralls and his gray hair sticks out in unruly tufts around protruding red
ears.

"So, what is it today?" I ask, squinting over at the little back and white
screen. "Manly Men Who Just Wanna Wear Heels?"

He grimaces. "I think that job of yours is starting to have an ill effect on
you."
I plop a bowl on the table and pour in some Cheerios. As I add the milk, my cat, Siddhartha Vicious, trots over to rub adoringly against my leg.

"By the way, Eric," my dad says, "I talked to Phil Rogers again this morning. You remember what morning is, don't you?"

"Vaguely," I say, shoveling in Cheerios as Oprah fires another question at today's guest with a look of utter loathing.

"Well I talked to him this morning, and he says they could still use you out at the disease lab."

"Oh, great. I love diseases. But as it happens, I've already got a job, thanks." We've had this discussion before.

"Yeah, well. You know your mother's position on that, Eric." Oh yes. But then she owns a "pet boutique and grooming salon" where, among other things, people can have their poodles and bichons dyed pink. He doesn't say anything else. We both watch the flicker of the TV. "Think I'll check the mail," I tell him.

Outside in the mailbox a letter from Paul has come, a rambling diatribe about the bankruptcy of religion and a plea for me to visit him. I'd been planning to anyway. I read it at the kitchen table as the legions of Oprah's fans dutifully applaud before the next barrage of commercials.

"So, are you seeing any girls these days?" Dad lobs this one over the rustling of his paper.

I fold up the letter, tuck it back in the envelope. "Nope." What do they expect? I'm thirty pounds overweight, suffering from chronic acne and have thick glasses that keep slipping down my nose. Women do not exactly flock around me, and I have this man's gene pool to thank.
The paper comes down. "Are you doing anything at all that's productive?" he asks.

"How's that book of yours coming, pop?"

"Fine!" he says, jumping up for more coffee. "Just fine. I'm still gathering information."

"Geraldo talks to border collies now?"

"Eric, we just want you to be happy. We want to see you get back into school." He stands over me, gesturing with his cup. "You're just wasting your life now."

"That's not true," I say. "It's just that I'm still gathering information."

A few hours later I'm waiting in the visitor's room until Paul gets out of some group meeting with the doctor and social worker. A surly, white-clad orderly named Franklin told me to wait here. He has a pock-marked face and a strong accent, maybe Mexican or Puerto Rican, and he keeps looking out at me through the glass window of the nurse's station, as if he expects me to steal the furniture or something. If that isn't bad enough, a retarded man named Leo is standing on the other side of the table I'm sitting at, staring at me as the air whistles ominously through his nostrils. I keep my eyes down on the crossword I'm working on, and my pen wiggles in the air above the paper, pretending to scribble in the names of Asian rivers and Gilbert & Sullivan operas. I can't keep a single thought in my head. Every once in a while Leo quizzes me about famous ballplayers in a slurred, slightly hysterical voice. I don't know anything about baseball. Whatever I say, he clutches his head and laughs as if I've just said the funniest thing he's ever heard.
Finally, Paul comes out. He's wearing his own clothes, which seem too big for him, and white socks with no shoes. He looks tired, but happy to see me.

"Hey, man," he says, shaking my hand. "You made it."

"Well, after that letter, I thought I'd better get up here before you slashed your wrists." I can hear Leo shuffling around behind me, and the monotonous, intermittent C-sharp of his nostrils is like a garbage truck backing up.

Paul grins, scratching his wispy blond beard. "Oh, no no no. They would never allow anything like that," he says, nodding toward the nurse station.

"They watch us like hawks up here."

"Seriously," I say. "How are you doing?"

He waves away my concern. "Oh, fine. Couldn't be better. Yesterday in our Therapeutic Recreation group I started making myself a nifty leather wallet."

"Uh huh. What happened, man?"

He frowns then, and the light goes out of his blue eyes as he searches for words. "Oh, I don't know," he says. "A slight loss of control, I guess."

I wait for him to go on. Leo shuffles up to our table now and stops, wheezing like an old bull.

"I was in one of those bars over by the campus, maybe a little drunk, and I got into... let's call it an animated discussion about theology with some stuffy college types. They wouldn't let me make my case, even mocked my point of view, so... I sort of threw a chair through a window."

I stare at him and Leo laughs and laughs, clutching his head like a monkey.

"It was just a little something to grab their attention," Paul shrugs.

"Yeah, and the cops grabbed you."
"They did. I guess it took four of them. I was pretty messed up, don't remember all of it. But I do remember feeling like I had to explain it all to them, like it was the most earth-shattering revelation, but they weren't interested in hearing anything about God from the likes of me." He shrugs again. "They brought me here."

"Wow," I say, and Leo repeats it to himself, peeking out at us from behind his hands.

"Mom pretty much flipped," Paul says. "And she laid down the law. This time I go into treatment, or else." He scratches at something on the edge of the table and squeezes one eye closed. "How about you?" he asks after a moment. "Still peddling porn to the needy masses?"

"Oh... yeah. In fact, we're offering senior citizen discounts now. For those hardy old souls with a yen to try something different."

"Far out," he says, rocking his chair back on its legs. "Geriatric bondage freaks. Just think of it."

"Bondage," Leo says, holding his head.

"Hey Leo, why don't you go stand over there in front of Frankie and show him your favorite trick. You know how he likes it."

Leo thinks it over, then turns and shuffles over to the window of the nurse's station, his thick fingers fumbling with his fly.

"The power of suggestion," Paul says, leering. "This ought to be priceless."

I can't watch this. I look around the room instead, at the racks of old magazines and the old upright piano in the corner. Paul is nudging me, doing his best Dr. Freud. "Ja, I zink he is definitely fixated on der schtinkwürst." I'm focusing on the piano, trying hard not to laugh, trying not to hear the
commotion going on across the room. Apparently Franklin and the nurse are trying to get Leo to pull his pants back up. They don't sound too happy about it.

"Uh oh," Paul says, and bursts out laughing. I feel like crawling under the table. Franklin is coming over to us now, chest out, swinging his arms. I can see how he wears his dinky little hospital nametag like a cop's badge. "Well, lookie here," Paul whispers to me. "If it isn't Mr. Posture."

Franklin ignores him. "Hey," he says to me, his black eyes flat as a snake's under sleepy lids, "is time for you to go, okay?"

"Just a minute longer, man," Paul says.

"Don't man me," Franklin says. "You gotta get clean up for the supper. You frien' gotta go now."

"It's okay, buddy," I tell Paul. "I can..."

Paul's chair squeaks as he slides it back from the table. "Hey Frankie," he asks, looking up at Franklin. "Could you tell me why it is you have to be such a fucking prick all the time?" The muscles in his neck are quivering tight and his hands are gripping the edge of the table, like he's about to jump up and start swinging.

Franklin's eyes are glittering now. He doesn't look the least bit frightened. Just interested, like a lion watching an antelope. His arms are hanging loose at his sides, ready. "You gonna give me some trouble tonight?" he asks quietly, pulling his lips back in a smile so we can see his big white teeth. "You don' remember what the doctor say would happen if you pull anything up here?"

"What?" Paul says. "You mean I won't get to watch "Murder, She Wrote" with my fellow patients? Oh, my God!" And just like that, the tension drains out of him. He turns and gives me a wink, to show that, yes, he's still in control.
I feel a little sick inside. When I get up to leave, he reaches out to clasp my hand. "Hey, man," he says. "I'm really glad you came up to see me. You're the only one, you know, besides my mom."

When I get to the locked door to the ward I have to wait for the nurse to buzz me out. I look back and see that Franklin is still standing over Paul, who hasn't moved.

"Hey!" he yells. "Next time you come up here, bring something from your place of employment for my buddy Frank here! Something with spikes on it!"

Another slow night. I've only had three customers, one of them an obese man draped in a gray sweatshirt who floated by a few minutes ago like a gigantic indoor dirigible. He made the whole place seem smaller, and now I'm uncomfortably aware that I'm also wearing a baggy gray sweatshirt. This bond between us is an unhappy revelation and I resolve for probably the tenth time this month to take up jogging. He's in the back somewhere, maybe at the video booths. The only other customers are glued to the magazines, an Asian man with tiny wire-rimmed glasses holding the magazines about an inch from his face, and a teenager with carrot red hair and a mouth full of gum. I'd considered asking him how old he is, just to rattle him, but it's fun to see him surreptitiously peeking at some of the more deviant publications, like Leather Love and Man's Best Friend. Some of that stuff will probably give him nightmares. I see him flinch when the bell over the front door jingles, but it's just the Asian man leaving. I give him a big, fake smile and he jerks his head down, suddenly absorbed in his "reading."
Then I hear some kind of commotion from the back. The kid hears it, too. A loud thumping. I lock the register and pocket the key, grabbing Jerry's long handled billy from under the counter. I'm a pretty big guy, but this is the first trouble I've had here, and my heart is thumping as I step into the hall.

It sounds like there's a wrestling match going on in one of the video booths. "Hey," I say, deepening my voice. "What the hell's going on back here?"

A muffled "help" comes from inside, followed by more sounds of struggle, a big thump that shakes the entire booth. I take a deep breath, step up, and whisk the stiff orange curtain aside with the billy.

Mr. Dirigible, the obese sweating man I'd seen earlier, has somehow removed all of his clothes in that tiny space, and now he's stuck fast. Perhaps the heat of passion has caused him to expand, I think, slowly lowering the club to my side. He flaps his arms up and down a couple of times like some nearly extinct sea mammal, and when they fall and smack against his sides I can see the shock-waves ripple through sagging folds of flesh. "My God," he wheezes. "I can't... can't breathe!" He grabs the door frame with one hand and pulls, but it's so sweaty he can't get a grip. "Get... me out of here!" he bawls.

"Just take it easy, mister. Try to relax." The kid with the carrot-top comes over and looks over my shoulder. His gum-chewing stops instantly. Neither of us makes a move to help the man. In the back of my mind I know that somewhere beneath this heaving, sweating, stinking mass there is a small defenseless barstool with a red vinyl top. I feel very sorry for the stool for having to endure this and so many other humiliations. I can't see his clothes at all; they must be under there, too. This man absolutely fills the space, like he was poured
in there as liquid, and has now hardened. If we ever get him out, I think, he'll retain the square shape of this cubicle for weeks.

   Finally, carrot-top has had enough gawking. I hear the front door jingle as he cruises out of here, no doubt done with sex for life. The fat man is still wheezing and huffing like a locomotive coming up a long grade. I think his chins are actually swinging as he looks up at me. "Don't just stand there," he cries, "help me!" He holds out a stubby hand. It wavers in the air, glossy and moist.

   "Um, I'll just call 911 for you," I tell him.

   Fifteen minutes later there are ten firemen and four paramedics crowded around the back hall, radios squawking. I can imagine the article in tomorrow's paper, the pithy quotes from the veteran firemen who had thought they'd seen it all, and the outcry from a horrified public. My parents will barricade their doors in shame. I think of my favorite city councilman, exclaiming just like Captain Renault in Casablanca, "I am shocked, shocked that this has been going on right here in our town. And across the street from the Boy's Club. It's a disgrace!"

   Some of the firemen went back outside to their truck a moment ago, and now they're bringing in some sort of bulky apparatus. It looks heavy, with a long narrow snout like a grinning steel alligator. "What the hell is that?" I ask one of the firemen, who's pulling some long black hoses trailing behind it across the floor.

   "A hydraulic cutter," he tells me over his shoulder. "You ever hear of the 'Jaws of Life'?

   I stare at him. "You've got to be kidding."
"Well, he's stuck in there pretty good. We're gonna have to cut him out. We've tried everything else." He turns and walks into the hall, pulling the hoses with him.

My dread gives way to curiosity and I slide along the wall, past a baby-faced cop chuckling into a radio. The paramedics are huddled around Mr. Dirigible. One of them, a stout blonde woman, is clasping his hand and talking to him in a low voice. A blood pressure cuff is wrapped around his arm above the elbow and he's listening to what she's telling him, solemnly nodding his head and blinking slowly, like a turtle. For some reason I find it impossible not to stare at the man. He's calmed down now, breathing more or less normally, and his huge proportions no longer strike me as grotesque. The longer I look at him the more it seems that there is something pleasing, even beautiful, in the symmetry of his folds and wrinkles, the vast white curve of his belly. The paramedics have draped a white blanket over his shoulders and he waits patiently while the firemen shear away at the corner joints of the booth, as if freeing him from a sheet metal cocoon. He is the regal center of activity, detached as a buddha, a fat potentate. He seems real in a way that the rest of this scene doesn't, and I think: he will outlast us all. The cutter emits a loud buzz that vibrates everything in the hall, and a couple firemen with plastic face shields are pulling back on the side panels. Then the noise stops and the blue-shirted paramedics carefully take Mr. Dirigible under the arms and, counting to three, help him to stand as the crowd breaks into spontaneous applause.

Someone helps him back into his clothes as I sign a couple of clipboards for the police and fire departments. Jerry is going to go ballistic when he sees what they did to his booth, but that doesn't really bother me now. I seem to have
absorbed some Mr. Dirigible's preternatural calm. I watch as he thanks each paramedic and fireman in turn, floating among them with a peculiar grace and buoyancy, his mass somehow beyond the reach of gravity. Then he's gone. The firemen gather up the last of their equipment and soon only the baby-faced cop and his partner are left, flipping through the magazines and exchanging low whistles as I sweep the floor.

A half hour later I lock up and leave. The street in front of the Passion Pit is deserted. Moonlight gleams on the polished steel of the railroad tracks, and somewhere to the east, beyond the towering shadow of the grain elevator where they curve out of sight, a freight train announces its coming with a mournful, echoing cry. I jam my hands in my pockets and start walking north towards Main Street, but I stop when I see a dark shape standing on the middle set of tracks about fifty feet to my left, looking in my direction. It's Paul. I walk toward him, stepping carefully between the tracks. The rocks crunch and shift under my feet.

"Hey, what are you doing here? Did they let you out?"

"Not exactly," he says when I get closer. He holds up his foot so I can see his sock. "I eloped. Went AWOL."

I stop and gawk at him.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" he asks. His voice says otherwise.

"What are you doing, man?"

"I'm testing the proposition that 'tomorrow always comes.'" He doesn't look at me, doesn't smile. His attention is focused over my shoulder, down the tracks. I can hear the low diesel rumble of the train, coming on fast.
"Yeah, well it looks to me like you're testing a theory about mortality," I say, turning to look down the tracks with him. "Not that I want to blow the experiment for you, but I'd lay heavy odds that it's a given."

He nods his head but doesn't say anything.

"What do you say we step out of harm's way and go get something to eat? I've got a great story to tell you."

"What's your hurry," he says quietly. "You just got here."

I sniff the air. The tang of oil and creosote from the railroad ties stings my nostrils as I try to think of something witty to say. I'm pretty sure I feel a vibration coming up through the soles of my shoes.

"Well, if you're going to meet your Maker, don't you think you ought to wear something on your feet? I've got some shoes at home that might..."

"I'm done with it, Eric," he interrupts.

"What? Done with what?"

"All of it. Just... fucking... done." He's set his teeth, and his eyes are shining.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He takes a deep breath, pinches the bridge of his nose and wipes his eyes. "I did. That's why I came looking for you." Another breath. "I thought... maybe you could help."

"Maybe I can." But I'm imagining that train entering the outskirts of town, and my pulse is quickening by the second.

He shakes his head. "No. I don't think so. Not this time."

Now I definitely feel the vibration coming up through my feet. "Surely nothing's so bad..."
"Just forget it, man," he says, waving me away with an impatient hand. "I'll be all right. I just want to stand here and think for a little while." He shuts up and concentrates on the tracks, the point where they almost converge as they make the bend around the elevator.

The vibration has left the ground and is now a throbbing hum in the air. I turn and see that the train is already coming around the curve, only a few hundred yards away, and coming fast. I can also see that we're on the same tracks it is. "Shit." I grab Paul's arm, but he jerks it away, furrowing his brow.

"Don't," he says.

I step off the tracks and stand off to the side. "C'mon, buddy," I plead. The train's headlamp is shining at both of us now, casting long shadows across the white rocks and wooden ties. Whoever's driving must see us, because he's laying on his airhorn, one blast after another. He isn't stopping for anything.

"C'mon, man! Move your ass!"

Paul doesn't move or reply. The arms on the crossing gates in front of us start pinging and flashing red as they drop. The train sounds another warning burst. Then another. But he just stands there, staring fascinated into the dazzling white light.

"God damn it, Paul!" I jump over to him, scoop him up in a bear hug and carry him off to the side, nearly tripping over the rail. He seems almost weightless in my arms, and doesn't put up any struggle, but I hold him tightly anyway. My glasses are hanging askew and my heart feels like it's trying to shake itself loose. Everything looks unreal in the shimmering glare of the headlamp.

Then there's a whoosh and a sudden vacuum as the light winks out and the lead engine blows past us, screeching its air horn hysterically, shaking the
ground beneath our feet. I can feel my molecules vibrating, and my ears and head are filled with the clackety-clack of tons of grain heading west to the cattleyards of Omaha and Sioux City. Paul is holding onto me very tightly, so I relax my grip on him somewhat. His head is down on my shoulder and his fingers are digging painfully into my arm as he lets it all out. I can't hear anything, but I can feel the sobs wracking his body. I don't know what else to do, so I pat his back softly, stroke his hair.

It's a long train, and when the last car rattles by us and screeches off into the darkness, Paul pulls away from me and begins to pace, hugging himself and shivering. The crossing gates over on the street stop their pinging and flashing and point their striped fingers back up into the night sky. My ears are ringing. I insert my index fingers and wiggle them around, but it doesn't seem to help.

Finally, Paul emits a long sigh and I look at him. "I'm so sick of this," he says to his socks. His voice is quivering in his chest, and he's rocking slowly back and forth. "Sick and tired."

"I know you are, man. But it's not the end of the world." I step closer to him, put my hand on his shoulder. "You can get help with this."

"It's too late. I've had my chance and blown it."

"No way. It's never too late. You just have to... I don't know, be patient. Some problems don't go away just like that." I wait until he looks up at me. "It takes time. Eventually things do come around, believe me."

He looks at me for a long time, and I hold his gaze until the lines in his face soften a bit, and he seems to relax. He looks away, squinting at the darkness. "So, what's gonna happen tonight?" he asks.
"Nothing's gonna happen. I'm just going to take you back over to the hospital now."

He frowns, looking down at the rocks, digging around with the toe of his sock.

"It's no big deal. It's just until you're feeling better."

He nods, swaying with the motion of his head as if to the beat of some inner rhythm, then looks up at me, searching my eyes. "And you'll help me through it? It could get pretty strange."

"Sure," I say, and warm relief is tingling through me. "Count on it."

I put my arm around his shoulder and pull him close. We start walking toward the street, and far over our heads, above the humming streetlights, the moon and stars twinkle and flare against the infinite dome of the sky.
David Jeffries has been sitting in his thirty-thousand-dollar red sportscar for the past half hour, going nowhere amidst an explosion of flowers. He lifts a sweaty palm off the leather-bound steering wheel and checks his watch as lilies from an elaborate floral centerpiece tickle his cheek. The vase is wedged between his bucket seats behind the parking brake, the only way he could get it to stand upright. Two smaller vases lean back precariously in the passenger seat, spraying up perfumy fountains of snapdragons and birds of paradise. More plantlife peeks out from behind the seats: ferns and palmetto fans, purple orchids and fat pink carnations. Dried tendrils of creeping vine twirl upward in delicate helixes and bob like conductors' batons in the blast of air-conditioning.

His attention, however, is fixed on the sign: "EXIT 226 CLEARVIEW PKWY 1." He's probably seen it hundreds of times without really seeing it, the green rectangle held up by flat steel posts, inching by him now on the right. One mile. How many cars fit end to end in one mile? He feels that he should know this, like it's something he might have learned in school, one of those important little details that might have helped him through life if only he'd been paying attention.

The van ahead of him pulls forward and then stops again as he idles forward to fill in the space, breath whistling out through his teeth. All four lanes
of inbound traffic have been crawling along like this for the past two miles. The Saints are playing in the Dome this afternoon and every redneck and no-neck in the state has made the pilgrimage to see them lose. He should have thought about this and picked up the flowers this morning. He can hear Robert now, pacing around the Contemporary Arts Center in his stiff scarecrow way, flapping his arms and saying "shit, shit, shit" because the flowers aren't there and the reception starts in an hour. Make that fifty minutes. He'll be on the phone soon.

David pats the jacket carefully folded across his lap, pulls out the beeper and sets it on the dash. He shifts in his seat and grips the steering wheel with both hands, while outside his windows Metairie spreads out around him in all its flat suburban ugliness, nothing but billboards, shopping centers and car dealerships. It seems deliberately ugly today, viewed from this sluggish river of traffic. Heat waves shimmer crazily and sunlight blares off the chrome of a thousand bumpers. Some idiot a few cars back keeps honking his horn, a sound that penetrates David somewhere in the base of his skull, shoots down his spine and makes the sweat run in long ticklish fingers between his shoulder blades. Why doesn't someone just shoot the bastard and be done with it? The traffic in his lane lurches ahead another short twenty yards as he punches the buttons on his stereo, desperate for an escape. He settles for something classical on WWNO and twists up the volume to drown out the horns and the ominous quiet of the beeper. Forty-eight minutes.

His mind casts around, lands again on the postcard that lies on his kitchen table at home, dog-eared now from its long journey from Guatemala and from being turned over again and again in his own restless searching fingers. It had arrived three days ago. His heart had missed a beat at the sight of Julia's cryptic
scrawl, smudged by, what? Rain, maybe. A tear. The picture shows Lake Atitlan, a vast crystal blue lake ringed by volcanoes. In the foreground an Indian (he guessed it was an Indian) is paddling by in a sort of dugout pirogue, a straw cowboy hat pushed low on his head. Julie lives in Panajachel, which he assumes is a town on the edge of the lake. Right now he imagines with immense fondness and gratitude a lone Guatemalan postman, hardy and bowlegged, leading a mail-laden donkey through jungles, rain and improbable assaults by drug runners and sombreroed, pistol-waving bandits, and Julie's postcard peeping out from a dew-drenched mailbag the whole while. Most important was "I miss you" dropped like a bomb between the obligatory mention of the weather and something about her research not going so well. The "Love, Julie" was probably just convention, her being polite. It's been too long now to hope otherwise. But still... He blinks twice, focuses on the brake lights of the van in front of him.

Julia. Julie. Smiling across a table at him. High cheekbones and long dark hair flowing over pale, freckled shoulders. Now closing her eyes under him, pulling him down. Julie with her brown Cajun eyes and full lips. For two years they'd shared the little apartment on Camp Street with the milk-crates bookshelves and curtains made of Mardi Gras beads. He loved her, though he hadn't known it then, and only started to guess as he watched her drive away with the last of her things. The last he'd heard she was in Corpus Cristi teaching English to Hispanic kids. Now, a year later, a postcard from Guatemala and "I miss you." The honking seems to have stopped for the moment so he turns the radio down a notch.
Julie was the real adventurer, always wanting to go to new places, dragging him around the Quarter and the Faubourg-Marigny. She was an adult literacy volunteer in the St. Thomas housing project when they met. And now Guatemala, researching something about indigenous women and traditional Maya weaving techniques on what she described as a "hefty corporate conscience grant." When they lived together she came home from campus by a different route every day. Her unpredictability was part of what had attracted him to her.

He's always been the opposite, though, prone to habit and content to linger among familiar things. He has always tended to go from place to place by the most direct route possible, as if the space that separates everything is just so much empty grayness to be traversed, as if points A, B, C or D are the only places that can occupy his attention and the distance between them is there simply to be crossed as quickly as possible. His life is made up of routines: his job, the late nights at the Blue Crystal, late morning coffee, the *Times-Picayune* in the neighborhood café, an occasional date with girls he never sees again, or failing that, six-packs and dope on the Lakefront with the idiots who work under him and worship him. He suspects that to a lot of people he's just a suit and a red sportscar.

Now he thinks about the Indian, paddling smoothly ahead, without hurry. He probably doesn't even own a watch. Lake Atitlan and Panajachel are little more than strange syllables to David, clumsy on his tongue. Yet he feels certain that there are no traffic jams down there, no honking horns. Just the lake, and the cool breeze coming in at night, the smell of roasting fish and the sound of her laughter. Standing there three days ago with the postcard in his hand, he'd realized with some surprise that he would give anything to hear that.
He'd dug the previous weekend's Travel and Leisure section out of the trash as a vague idea formed in his head. Then, still in the grip of this rare whim, he'd called a travel agent, who had in turn referred him to Aviateca, the national airline of Guatemala. They were right there in the yellow pages with three flights a week from New Orleans to Guatemala City. Three hundred and twenty-nine dollars, round-trip. No passport required, just a valid U.S. driver's license. It seemed like it should be harder to get into another country. He had declined to reserve a ticket then, for various reasons, such as the more he'd thought about it, the more ridiculous and risky it became.

But now, faced with the rest of this particular day, this infuriating stasis of backed-up traffic, he thinks, "Yeah, why not?" To hell with Robert and his nervous tic. To hell with Panache Catering, the long hours and no thanks. He used to say that it was only going to be a temporary thing, but it's been four years now, and the realization of all that time gone by comes as a guilty surprise. Somehow every time he'd meant to leave they'd offer him more money to stay.

It was funny at first; they'd laughed about it, he and Julie. But then there was more money and less time together and gradually the jokes stopped and hung in the silences between them. Deep down he'd felt lucky to have any job at all with his degree in art history, even if it was from Tulane. Was he going to stand on street corners and, for a little spare change, tell passersby about Giacometti's use of negative space in his sculpture, or about the flattening out of values in Cézanne's paintings? He convinced himself that his job was important to him and that designing menus and table arrangements was a meaningful, even graceful, activity. He found himself defending his growing
stake in Panache, his weekends all spoken for, his new concern for clothing, for stereo components and CDs.

"Dave," she'd said one day. "Look at you. You're really starting to take this stuff seriously. You never used to." He'd laughed, but she went on. "I'm tired of having to leave you out of all my plans. What about me, Dave? What about us?" He could still hear her voice now, a year later, see the way she looked then as she leaned in the doorway, arms crossed as if to ward off the cold she must have felt emanating from him. Her dark hair gleamed like oil, pulled back in a tight braid, and she'd worn the beaded earrings he'd picked out for her in the Quarter. "We never do anything together anymore. You're either too busy, too tired, or not in the mood."

"I haven't changed," he'd said, though he'd known better.

"David. You have." And what had he said then? Probably some bullshit about telling Robert and Richard to give him some vacation time, or any of a thousand other empty promises he used to placate her, along with lavish gifts, until even that stopped working and they had stopped talking about any future together.

A space opens to his right, and he pushes the flowers out of his face as he glances over his shoulder, cranks the wheel and slips into it, causing a blue station wagon to jump on its brakes. The plants wave their heads in alarm, and he has to reach across the seat to hold the vases upright. College boys from LSU. He can see the purple and gold ballcap on the driver, who pulls right up to his bumper now, horn blaring. "Yeah, yeah," he sighs. "Fuck you, too." He reaches up with one hand to loosen the tie he'd so carefully knotted this morning, while
a little girl in the car next to his sticks out her tongue at him. He taps the
window with his middle finger and watches as her mouth forms a silent "O."

What will he miss, anyway? Just another insipid reception at the CAC for
a gaggle of pretentious Arties and Uptown housewives. He'd been there earlier
to oversee the setting up of the buffet tables and bar because Robert says he can't
trust his regular catering staff to do it right. This is Robert's idea of a "high
profile gig," a sculpture exhibition where the works look like huge piles of
molten metallic dogshit and chrome monoliths twisted and elongated like Coke
bottles won on carnival midways. He can already hear the obsequious
admiration and the pseudo-intellectual commentary. Some of the faces he'll
recognize from his Tulane days, the usual Trendies that come to all these fêtes
wearing black turtlenecks, trick haircuts and ethnic jewelry from Decatur Street
boutiques. They'll devour the cheap shrimp creole and oysters rockefeller and
crawfish etouffée, gush praise to the artist's face while exchanging philistine
smirks behind his back. And there he'll be with Robert, kissing all their asses,
feigning pride as Patrice, the CAC's pasty-faced director, squeezes his arm and
tells him with gin breath what an outstanding job he's doing and how absolutely
divine the food is. It's always the same goddamned thing. He realizes that he's
holding the steering wheel in two tightly clenched hands. He lets go, runs his
fingers through his hair, and adjusts the air conditioner.

The half-mile sign eases by now, and he thinks to himself that he's
actually going to do it, just take that exit and keep going. Throw that nagging
conscience of a beeper out the window with a snappy salute and a "fuck you,
Robert." Just Do It. And then what? Take Highway 61 back out to Kenner and
the airport. Just whip out the Visa and get on the plane. Easy. Imagine the
shock on Julie's face as she opens the door to see him standing there. No suitcase, just a bouquet of orchids and carnations. Then the warmth of their embrace. The softness of her lips on his and her scent familiar enough to make his bones ache. The lily beside him breathes her perfume, strokes his cheek.

He huffs out a breath of air at the windshield, tries not to check his watch again. Those little Swiss hands are against him too, spinning faster and faster in his mind, free from the inertia of this traffic. He sees the buffet table as Robert probably sees it now, the bare chrome of the chafing dishes and the guttering blue glow of sterno, all the unattractive details that these flowers are meant to hide. It's amazing how a few decorative plants here and there completely change the ambiance of a plain setting, he thinks. But it's just a surface change, false confidence. The jambalaya will still be bland enough to appeal to the weakest palates, and the rum sauce over the bread pudding will still be made with bargain rum from the K&B. Who are they trying to fool?

"Hey man!" calls muffled voice outside. David blinks, suddenly back in the car, and sees a young black boy, maybe ten years old, hanging out of the window of a white LTD in front of him. The nodding heads of two adults are visible in the front seat, but they don't seem to be paying any attention to the boy. "Hey, man!" he is yelling. "Dat yo' red car?" He's wearing an oversized black teeshirt with the gold fleur-de-lis of the Saints and below this: I Believe. It hangs on him like a limp flag. "Yo, white man, kick it!" His little fist jerks in tight circles as he grins, leaning far out over the pavement to get a better look. Then another hand reaches around his shoulder and pulls him back inside. His mother. Through the streaked back window, David can see her shaking the boy. The LTD rocks slightly on its springs, and he thinks he sees a hand rise and come
down hard. Then the mother turns around in the front seat and the boy swivels his head and stares back at him and his car with wide eyes. David looks away, troubled by a vague sense of guilt, as if he has somehow brought evil into the world in the form of a red sportscar. No one else seems to have noticed the incident. All around, the ranks of idling vehicles continue to inch forward through the heat, everyone isolated in their little containers of closed space. He clicks the air conditioner switch a couple times, but the air blowing from the vents still seems to be getting warmer.

He has gotten the feeling lately that he's been sitting behind the wheel of a consolation prize, and that his best chance for happiness has already walked out of his life unhindered, and was connected to him now only through the promise of a single postcard, which would probably also wither and die, and for the same reasons: his inertia and lack of courage, his dumb pursuit of objects and the admiration of people he loaths.

What had she said as she shoved the last box of books under the hatchback of her Datsun? He squeezed his eyes shut and thought about it, rubbing the moist tips of his fingers against his forehead. She had paused before slamming the hatch down. Her face was flushed from the effort of moving her things and he remembered that curling strand of wet dark hair plastered to her cheek. "Sometimes the hardest and bravest thing you can do is to walk away from the place where you feel most safe and comfortable," she'd said. She hadn't looked at him when she said it, but down at her feet, and he had followed her gaze to where her toe was digging dark spirals in the crushed white oyster shells of their driveway. "It's how we grow. We take risks. We try new things." She looked up at him, brushing her hair out of her eyes, waiting.
"So," he'd said. "This is going to be your new thing?" He'd been angered all day by his helplessness, his inability to reason with her. "Your time to grow?"

After a moment she nodded, her eyes locked on his. Then she turned and pulled the hatch down, leaning hard on it until the latch clicked shut. "I guess so, David. But I'm not just talking about me." He'd started to protest, to once again try to defend himself against whatever charges were arrayed against him, but she just shook her head no, told him never mind, that it made no difference. Now his mind plays back over the clumsy good-byes, the million things he'd wanted to say and couldn't, her last questioning look back at him as she drove away.

He hisses out some pent-up air, looks in the rearview and feels the lily on his cheek. With his left hand he reaches across, crushes its petals and tears it out of the vase. The sign looms ahead, but comes no closer. "EXIT 226 CLEARVIEW PKWY 3/4." He will never make it.

Late last night he'd driven by their old apartment on Camp Street. There were lights on and the moving silhouette of someone's head behind new curtains. This had been oddly troubling to him, as if part of him had suddenly been wrenched away, and when he'd got home and locked the door behind him, he hadn't turned on the television right away, as he usually did. He'd just stood there instead, in the darkness by the door, letting the silence seep into him like riverwater. For a long time he couldn't decide what to do. Everything looked strange to him, somehow insubstantial. There was nothing there he felt he could cling to, no way he could stop the awful feeling he had of slipping away. Even the car keys dangling from his knuckle, usually a talisman, had become disconnected from him, a cipher. Nothing had stirred, but the silence built
gradually like something uncoiling in the dark, filling up the space, and the feeling came to him that if he waited there long enough something would be revealed. This terrified him, and he had stalked through the apartment flipping on all of the lights. He had grabbed the TV remote, turning up the volume to flood the rooms with voices. Gradually the panic had subsided, but a ghost of the feeling had lingered with him in the room. Two scotches and a bag of microwave popcorn did not succeed in driving it away. He feels it now, growing in the pit of his stomach, a knot of cold dread.

Suddenly an explosion of beeping bounces around the inside of the car, filling the space completely and piercing something deep inside him. He jumps in spite of himself at the sound, grabs the beeper and shuts it off. He thinks for a moment, hefting the little black box in his hand, then squeezes it until the blood flees from his trembling fingers. The window rolls down with an electric whine, letting in the light and heat and the stink of exhaust. He tosses the beeper out, hears it clatter on the pavement. The window comes back up, but the beeping echoes on in his head as urgently as ever. He has gained nothing. He sits motionless in the car that owns him, that's heading in a direction he knows is suffocation. He turns his head, notices every little flaw, the way the windshield doesn't quite fit, the cigarette burn on the dash, the minute dents on the hood left by hailstones. The waste of it all blooms in him like a blood-red flower.

Gripping the warm leather of the steering wheel, he takes mental stock of everything he owns: the stereo and VCR, the Santa Fe pottery, the Léger prints, the handwoven Indian rugs, all of it. It's all his, and no one can better appreciate the singular elegance of each object. Yet he sees with sickening clarity how everything has somehow eluded him, as if he's paid for it all without really
buying it, making it his. There is nothing, really, with any deep significance to him, nothing on which he can't imagine a pricetag. The few pictures he has kept of Julie and himself fit in a Reebok shoebox in the closet. The emptiness is still there, he knows, waiting for him at home, even lurking here in the car with him, just behind the trembling fronds of ferns in the rearview mirror. Who has he fooled? And the answer he has known all along comes to him.

"God damn it!" he shouts, thumping the steering wheel with the palms of his hands. The cars in his lane have stopped again and he can feel his pulse throbbing in his head and neck. The air conditioner definitely isn't working right and his shirt is soaked through and clinging to his back. He hauls in a tight breath, lets it out. Then another. Still no movement. Everything is pinned down under the sun, waiting. "Well," he says aloud, fingers curling around the wheel. "Fuck this noise. I'll see y'all later." He imagines the whole world watching him as he eases around the bumper of the car ahead of him, crosses the narrow glass-strewn shoulder and noses his car into the shallow drainage ditch between the expressway and the fenced-in frontage road. There's a dull "whump!" and a jerk of the steering wheel as a reflector post disappears under the car and his back end slews around in the grass as he floors the accelerator. "Just do it!" he shouts. There's a bump that turns his heart inside-out, and in the corner of his eye he sees the vases in the passenger seat tip, disgorging flowers and water onto the floormat. Cars are sliding by now, above and to the left as he downshifts, engine howling. There's the piff! piff! of roadside trash catching the underside of the car and he's certain he hears the wailing of a siren. Then the whole world tilts crazily as he hits the grassy embankment of the offramp. He hears another loud thump, the screech of tires and the shrill
honking of a horn behind him. There is a sickening moment and the near miss of a Lexus and then he's surprised to find himself straightened out and roaring in second gear around the graceful curve of the exit, the mass of traffic receding behind him, forever stalled on the brink of the overpass, gone.

He shifts up to third, then to fourth as he signals onto Clearview. A brief smile and a flood of relief accompanies the fugitive hammering of his heart. There are no police cars, no sirens.

He heads south past a Winn Dixie and a K-Mart, carefully passing cars. A tapping sound comes from under the hood as he pulls up to the line of cars waiting at the Highway 61 intersection. The airport is four or five miles away, and he tries to imagine himself standing at the ticket counter, without luggage. He wonders: *Is there even a flight today?* What if he has to wait until tomorrow? He rolls the window down so he can better hear the engine. His mind is churning. He sees himself lost in Guatemala, unable to speak the language. He imagines not finding Julie at all, or worse, finding her with another man. He squeezes his eyes closed, opens them, and reaches out to turn off the monotonous clicking of the turn signal.

There's not nearly as much traffic here, he notices. Cars are whizzing by unrestrained, both east and west, and he suddenly realizes that he could probably make it to the Contemporary Arts Center more or less on time. Just go in the back way, he thinks, via River Road and Magazine Street. Guatemala is no longer in the car with him. He knows that it is far from here. He'll tell Robert he got into a little fender-bender. No big deal. Insurance should cover most of it. And tomorrow he'll write Julie a letter. He has some vacation time coming to
him, and Guatemala will still be there. His hands are shaking as he straightens the jacket on his lap. Jesus, what had gotten into him?

After a moment he glances at his watch and, hearing the steady dripping of water, looks with puzzled thoughtfulness at the leafy stalks and petals floating in the puddle on the floor. A single drop of sweat tickles down the side of his face, and the light stays red for a long time.
The birds spoke to Juana Alvarado.
Or rather, they spoke to anyone who cared to listen, but by some caprice of God she alone was able to understand what they were saying.

They were grackles, with iridescent black feathers and long tails, and every evening just before sunset they would come from miles around to roost in the trees of the Avenida de los Arboles. Juana Alvarado had watched them for years from her place on the sidewalk in front of the post office, and it had always been the same for as long as she could remember. First two or three of them would be seen circling high overhead, pinpoints almost lost in the dying afternoon sky, and gradually they would spiral down to earth as others joined them from every direction until the air was full of them. Hundreds of black arrows swooped and glided over the rooftops, gradually coalescing into a living black cloud. Then at some signal they would all flow downward into the leaves and branches in an undulating wave, raising puffs and wisps of dust like a mythological serpent taking possession of a deserted lair.

The first to land would start the song, the others joining in after finding suitable perches, until they were all singing, filling the twilight with a cacophony of chirps, shrieks and whistles that would sometimes drown out the grinding roars of the buses on the Avenida and cause people to slap their shutters closed.
in irritation. This concert would go on, with only the occasional backfiring exhaust causing the flock to temporarily scatter with indignant squawks, until the crimson glow had completely faded from behind the dark volcanic peaks of Fuego and Acatenango and the night had settled itself firmly upon the old city. Only after the birds had said everything that they wanted to say, Juana Alvarado knew, would they be silent.

When she'd first begun to understand them, she had thought she was going mad. She'd felt their garbled phrases drifting all around her, and she tried to see where these voices were coming from with her one good eye, making sweeps with her withered and shrunken face, craning left and right in an attitude of resigned concern. And she saw only couples walking in the distance, obscured by the haze of eternally suspended dust, and the silent musing old men standing together in doorways, smoking and contemplating the depths of the shadows. Little by little she began to realize that the words were coming to her from the trees growing out of the broad median which ran down the center of the Avenida de los Arboles. They were coming to her from the birds! She could hardly make them out, dark fluttering shapes barely visible behind the screen of leaves.

The more she listened, the more she began to pick out distinct phrases in her own native Kakchikel, and long soliloquies in rapid Spanish. They weren't just singing nonsense, she realized. They were all conversing with one another, all at once, in a vast gathering of families and friends. She was so amazed at this revelation that she wept silent tears that crept through the wrinkles of her face. Shudders ran up through her ancient and crippled frame and her dirt-smudged fingers groped at the cracks that spread out from beneath her blanket across the
sidewalk. She could understand them! An old forgotten pobre like Juana Alvarado! Perhaps age and a hard life had finally succeeded in driving her insane. She sighed at the idea. But this was a gift! One that she'd never thought to ask for after countless sunsets beneath these same birds. The more Juana Alvarado thought about this inexplicable new ability, the more she began to cherish it, because she had never in her long life been given anything so special. And she firmly believed that such a gift could only come through the sudden grace of God.

From that evening onward, she had begun to look forward to the setting of the sun, quite contrary to the natural inclination of the very old. She would spend her days sitting in the glare in front of the post office, the air choked with the dust and fumes of passing buses, her gnarled hands raised in piteous supplication to every passer-by. Her one seeing eye would implore them for the change left from mailing letters and jingling after bus fares, and even a single coin would be answered with heaps of honest blessings on not only the person, but the entire family of the giver. She shared this stretch of sidewalk with two other pobres, one of them a legless Indian girl who used a piece of board with metal skate wheels to get from place to place. The other pobres seldom spoke to Juana Alvarado, and she, like them, focused her attention on the people getting off the buses and going in and out of the post office. She would nibble at the tortillas she kept wrapped in cloth under her shabby embroidered huipil, softening small pieces with her saliva and grinding them between her gums before swallowing them. And sometimes the men whose job it was to call people to the buses would buy her warm sodas, or bring her plastic bags of tepid water to drink, just to be kind, and she would cross herself and murmur
blessings to them. Each day she usually earned enough money for food, and she could rest for a time in the lengthening shadows of the trees and enjoy the gossip of the birds.

The grackles would talk about everything they'd seen in their journeys. Subjects ranging from insect feasts beyond the shadow of the volcano Agua to the patterns in the land as viewed from above would be covered in great detail, their singsong voices clamoring over one another with added points of view and irrelevant anecdotes. They talked about the cycle of life and death, in an apparent effort to educate their young. The elders of the flock recounted histories and fanciful tales of the journeys they had undertaken in their youth. It was all quite overwhelming to Juana Alvarado, and she would list slowly from side to side in amazement, her mouth open in a toothless grin, her one seeing eye gleaming in the darkness.

None of the people who walked by her ever gave any sign that they were hearing the birds as she was. Some of the tourists, the gringos, would look up into the darkened branches and try to imitate the sounds, but the voices of the birds obviously meant nothing to them and they laughed it off to each other and brushed by Juana Alvarado on their way to the restaurants and bars or the single cinema. Of course the ciudadanos scarcely paid any attention to them at all, except to express annoyance. Juana Alvarado, it seemed, was the solitary understanding listener to the birds on the Avenida de los Arboles.

Every night, after the birds had ceased their talking, she would labor home through the darkness, stopping at the restaurant between a tourist hostel and a weedy vacant lot enclosed by corrugated tin walls. If gringos were eating there she would be turned away, but she could usually get a meal. She would then
turn and creep slowly up the Calle Cuatro Poniente, past a ruined church, one of many in the old city. The walls of this one had been worn down by the rains and by the urine of drunks who had the habit of stopping here to relieve themselves. Generations of them had washed the mortar out from between the old bricks and cut small rivers through centuries of dust. She would always cross herself against this unholy stench, feeling the shame of what had once been a house of God. Saints peered forlornly out of the niches they shared with the tangled nests of pigeons.

Very quietly, as if fearing discovery, she would ease open the wooden gate across the street under a sign that said "Helados del Volcán." Juana Alvarado could not read the name on the sign, which was repeated in bright, careless paint on each of the vendors' carts lined up against a stone wall and bound through the wheels with chains. She had been staying in this place for close to a year. Mostly it was shelter from the starving outcast dogs that scavenged the streets at night. The man who owned it had once found her sleeping in the dirt-floored shack in the back of the courtyard, beyond where the carts were kept, and to her surprise had not kicked her out. He had never spoken more than a few words to her, but he always left the gate unlocked for her. In return, she never left her hiding place when the vendors would pick up their carts in the early morning, though they certainly knew she was there, and she would sometimes wipe the dust off the carts with a rag before they arrived. Later in the morning she would make her way to her place in front of the post office to earn her living from the crowds on their way to the buses and to the marketplace beyond.

Many weeks passed this way until Juana Alvarado noticed a growing obsession with death in the evening conversations of the birds. Their tone, of
course, was unchanged, and belied a cheerful exchange of news, but their talk
grew ever more morbid with each setting sun. It was not the inevitable passing
of their brethren that concerned them, but rather the deaths of human beings
they had witnessed far away in the hills and forests. They spoke of the killing of
ordinary peasants, many of them young men with wives and babies, and the
burning of villages, the destruction of sizable tracts of crops carried out by men
with guns. Juana Alvarado was greatly saddened and puzzled by these tidings.
She had not been out of the city for many long forgotten years, and therefore had
no sense of life beyond its walls. Who would kill poor farmers and burn healthy
crops when there were so many starving in the streets? Neither Juana Alvarado
nor the birds of the Avenida de los Arboles could understand these things.

Night after night the grackles would brood noisily on the murders they
had seen at the hands of quick and efficient killers who came without warning,
raining death and terror on the innocent people of the hills. They began to sing
out the names of the dead and described them with such vividness that Juana
Alvarado felt intimate grief and pity for them. The grackles would chirp and
whistle their condolences to the unhearing bereaved who came in buses to the
old city every day, shocked and confused and seeking help from the police and
the local Army garrison. When they received no answers or help, they joined
the pobres on the streets, sleeping in doorways and churches, not daring to
return to their homes in the mountains.

One evening, the grackles were lamenting the deaths of fifteen men who
had, while looking for lost cattle, been shot and buried in a small valley outside
of Chimaltenango, an Indian town to the northwest. Already their families had
come into the city, looking for answers after their fruitless search, not yet aware
of the tragedy, but filled with dread. Juana Alvarado could see them gathered together around evening meals they ate out of baskets, small fires barely visible beyond the line of waiting buses. She felt an immense pity for them. Their anguish and desperation to know what had happened brought tears to her face.

And it suddenly came to her that this was the purpose of the Gift. The birds were the witnesses of these terrible deaths, but it was for Juana Alvarado to tell these things to those who could not understand their language as she could.

Very slowly she lifted herself from the blanket and wrapped it around herself. Her splayed, dirty feet began to find their way among the cracks and broken glass of the Avenida, her one good eye peering through the darkness beneath the grackles. The fires grew closer. She would not fail in this one task before God.

When she finally reached the solemn vigils of peasant families, she stood apart from them in the shadows, not certain what to say. A few of them noticed her and indicated that they had no extra food to give. She shook her head sadly, and all at once before her courage failed her, she began to tell them how sorry she was that the friends and loved ones they sought to find were dead. She told them in a soft, sobbing chant of uncertain words where they could find the bodies, recalling every detail as she had been told by the grackles, even the fact that the killers had cut down small trees and laid them over the grave to conceal the fresh dirt. She wrung her hands together, clasping them to her chest. They were listening to her. She recalled some of the names and heard wails of sorrow from young wives who clutched at their children as if to protect them from her words. "¡Mentirosa!" some of them shouted. "¡Qué loca!" Old crazy woman! One of the men got up and demanded to know who had told her these lies. She
could hear the rustling in the trees behind her, as if the birds were all listening to her, waiting for her to answer.

An awful quiet fell over the old city. The darkness seemed to grow from the shadows and spread over the ground at her feet. And all Juana Alvarado could do was tell them the truth. The birds told her, she said, fluttering her hand at the trees behind her. Some of them laughed. An old woman muttered curses and turned away, trying to comfort a young girl who was sobbing quietly beside her. The man in front of Juana Alvarado turned and spat into the dust. "Go away, loca," he said. "Go back to your begging." But he was afraid. She could see it in the tight lines of his face and the way his hand had strayed to the hilt of the machete he wore. There were doubtful whispers, and several of the men rose and climbed into the back of a pickup truck, which then sped away in a cloud of dust toward Chimaltenango. Juana Alvarado watched them go, and then, feeling the sting of a small stone, turned and hobbled as quickly as she could into the darkness.

A few days passed, and people began to murmur about the bodies found outside of Chimaltenango and point discreetly at the old woman on the blanket in front of the post office. Juana Alvarado slowly began to be noticed by people who had never paid attention to her at all. As word of her prophesy spread through quiet whisperings along the Avenida los Arboles, her curse of invisibility fell away from her, leaving her withered and exposed in the sunlight, a possessor of terrible secrets.

Some of the men read newspapers aloud to small crowds gathered between the buses and vendors' stands, reciting the official denials from the Army and the government's promises to investigate this "tragedia humana."
The old ones in the shaded doorways of tiendas began to ruminate darkly about the half-blind Indian woman who could apparently see many things beyond her exile on the sidewalk.

Juana Alvarado was oblivious to the curious gawkers who would walk by her several times, trying to guess at her magic, wondering if her messages came to her from the muted popping of the telegraph inside the post office. Desperate seekers of news of the desaparecidos, their vanished loved ones, would be directed to her from the buses, expressing both wonder and disappointment at the sight of her, but they nevertheless stood a few feet away in silent hopeful groups. Soon everyone came to see her, from neatly dressed schoolgirls to peasant farmers with ancient sweat-stained hats and their wives with great bundles of food balanced on their heads. Gringos in search of quaint attractions threaded their way through the mass of peasants. By the time the heat and light of the afternoon had begun to fade into dusk the crowd was blocking the Avenida, causing tired bus drivers to curse in exasperation. As the grackles began to assemble in the trees, a couple of policemen began, with ever increasing agitation, to wave people out of the way of the lurching, impatient traffic.

Juana Alvarado had huddled under her miserable shawl, not daring to move from her place on the sidewalk. As the throng pressed in on her, expectant looks on dark sweating faces, she came to the realization that they were all waiting for her to speak again. Some of them offered her food, which she accepted with humble gratitude and her customary blessing. They soothed her with quiet voices, calling her "Abuelita," and offered her piles of blankets on which to rest, while the others rustled and fidgeted in the shadows. And at last she sighed and began to listen, and presently she began to speak out the names
and places of tragedy, just as she heard them, to the earnest young men leaning over her, who would then turn and call out her words to the crowd. There were sometimes terrible cries of despair at the mention of a single name. Shouts of outrage rang out over the bobbing sea of hats. People were elbowing their way past others to get a glimpse of the old woman, while others walked numbly to the buses after hearing the answers to their unasked questions.

Though she was tired and frightened of the crowd, Juana Alvarado continued to translate for the birds well into darkness. They asked her who the killers were. She said that she didn't know. The birds had merely called them "the men with guns." There were hateful and speculative whispers about the soldiers of the Army who were everywhere and who blamed these murders on "subversives" who were never seen, but these were soon hushed, because now there were soldiers in the crowd. They stood in twos and threes among the nervous Indian peasants. A line of them blocked the doorway of the post office, their hands resting lightly on the carbines slung around their shoulders. The crowd milled about uneasily under their watchful eyes. People began to leave.

Juana Alvarado was exhausted. When the songs of the grackles had ended and she had indicated to the people around her that there was nothing else, she was allowed to get up and leave. The remaining crowd shrank back from her as she passed, as if fearing the stigma of her filthy touch. Several people crossed themselves and muttered prayers as she shuffled by them. The soldiers regarded her with interest as they talked among themselves in low tones. Three of them broke away to follow her, keeping a discreet distance, to see where she would lead them. The few peasants remaining scattered into the night with whispers of superstitious awe and foreboding.
When Juana Alvarado finally reached the gate of the "Helados del Volcán," she found it locked against her. Pain and fatigue throbbed through her joints and limbs. She was too old, too tired to go on. She pulled her blanket around her and lay down on the sidewalk, huddled against the door. Across the street loomed the shadow of the ruined church, its crumbling parapets thrust up into the night like a beggar's hand. She fell asleep mumbling a plea for God to take her, because she was old and tired and unworthy of the gift He had given her. And it was some time later, before the city had awakened with the distant yawn of morning buses, that she found herself being shaken awake by three young men who expressed surprise to each other that such a harmless old pobrecita could be the cause of so much trouble. Despite her feeble protests, she was carried into a van without a license plate, which roared away from the curb and was gone.

That night the grackles of the Avenida de los Arboles sang out the name of Juana Alvarado with great sadness and reverence, but to the people scurrying along the sidewalks on their way home, or to an evening meal, it was merely an irritating chaos of shrieks and whistles and chirps, the senseless chattering of birds.
THE DIVE

It was way out there, really beautiful. He'd snapped his legs together at just the right time and entered the river with hardly a splash. I was told later that his name was Quinn and he had been a championship swimmer. Well, there's not a swimmer in the world who can tangle with the Mississippi in late April and live to brag about it. More than once I've seen entire trees rolling out in the channel, their stripped branches like crowds of skeletal hands reaching for the sun as the river carries them toward the Gulf.

I was right there when it happened because I work as a bartender on the Evangeline, and had picked up the afternoon shift that day. I was standing maybe fifty feet away, by the midship life-vest box, sneaking a quick cigarette with Amos the cook before cleaning up the bar. I don't think Berry was there, and Jeanette was inside, counting out the tips. Amos was throwing bits of andouille sausage over the rail for the catfish, really putting his arm into it, as if he meant to hurt them. We were wrapping up the day cruise, and I was just smoking with my eyes half closed and daydreaming about Vicky the hostess, the same old dream about an unlikely Ship Island beach rendezvous, both of us frolicking in the briny surf and soothing each other's sand-chafed skin with lots of coconut oil.

I turned around when a girl screamed behind me, and there he was, standing on the rail like a carrot-topped Errol Flynn, his tie flapping. His face
wasn't much like the one plastered on the walls and lamp-posts around the Quarter in the months that followed, but it could be I just didn't look at him closely enough. He wasn't smiling, but he didn't seem to be unhappy either. He was just looking out at the river in a way that made me look, too, at all that angry water rushing by between us and the West Bank. His fraternity brothers were laughing at him, chanting \textit{jump, jump, jump}, and their girlfriends giggled behind their hands, and hid their eyes. They had rented the boat for some kind of theme party, and half of them looked liked extras from \textit{Gone With the Wind}. A big guy in a Confederate officer's uniform looked around at everyone with a big guilty grin, shrugging as if to say "Isn't this just the craziest thing you ever saw?" There weren't any deckhands around. Dickhands, Amos called them, flinging the last of the sausage away. They were all down along the port side, getting ready to throw out the lines and tie us up to the dock. Amos took a step toward the Quinn kid and yelled at him to get his ass down from there and behave. That's when Quinn took a deep breath and launched himself. The metal rail hummed from the force of his legs.

\textit{The rest is always in slow motion. Everyone draws in their breath when he jumps and he seems to hang in the air for a long time, stretching out to reach for whatever secret he sees beneath the brown water. Then there is a slow blooming of bubbles where he went in, white on brown, which is soon torn apart by the current. I think someone has the presence of mind to throw out some life vests, orange ones with Evangeline stenciled on them in sloppy black letters. They float on the water like limp, dead things, and the river pulls them away, too. We are shouting down at the water and the big red sternwheel is backslapping the river into a froth as Captain Charlie eases us up to the dock. I}
feel the bump under our feet when we touch the pilings. Amos' gold teeth flash in the sunlight, a sad smile, and when I see him shaking his head I know it is all over. One of the girls bawls in the arms of another girl, and their Plantation-style dresses flare out like Christmas bells, shuddering in the breeze. Quinn never comes up. No one will see him again. Not alive, not dead, not ever.

It's been three months since it happened, and I've lived through this over and over in my dreams. That moment of terror and elation when I realized that he was really going to do it. Where I once dreamt nightly about Vicky shaking out her long dark hair and pulling a lacy black strap off her shoulder or wrapping me in her arms in front of the bandstand, I see instead the cool concentration on Quinn's face, the thrilling, graceful arc of his dive. Jeanette says she doesn't know which is more sad, his drowning because of a stupid stunt or his family's belief that he is still alive somewhere, wandering around New Orleans with a concussion, unable to remember who he is or where he's from. They come down every weekend from Meridian, Mississippi, where Quinn was from, and have put up missing person posters and flyers from the Quarter all the way down to Belle Chasse. One afternoon I followed who I took to be Quinn's father, a huge, stoop-shouldered man with reddish hair going gray. He had a canvas newspaper bag full of flyers, and rolls of duct tape. I watched him talk to policemen and bored waiters, tourist couples from Alabama and Texas, saw them all shake their heads one by one and move away, touched by the tragedy of it, probably thinking to themselves what a poor bastard, and how lucky they were that nothing of the sort had ever happened to them. I'd wanted to talk to him, but couldn't bring myself to do it; I had no idea what I would have said to him.
So the months go by, the Quinns keep their posters and hopes up, and the locals have ceased to notice them. I haven’t, though. In fact, I am secretly on the Quinns’ side, and hope they are right about their son. I’m glad for the mystery, in fact. I’ve taken to talking to him out loud when I’m by myself, confiding secrets in the dead of night. As long as he remains lost, I can imagine him wandering through the streets with me like a faithful shadow. Especially when I see those spooky posters fluttering on lamp-posts and brick walls, faded by the sun and the rain. *John Allen Quinn. Will you please call home?* And his photocopied smiling face is like a gray ghost staring at me, following me down the sidewalk.

John Quinn is the least of my worries, though. My real problem is that I am becoming invisible. I’m not imagining this. In a way this has been an ongoing condition, but it seems to have gotten worse ever since that day in April, when Quinn took his dive. There are days now when it seems like no one can see or hear me. People crowd me off the sidewalks, close doors in my face, and step ahead of me in lines. I have a soft voice, and have to shout, sometimes, to be heard. Maybe it’s my own fault. My friend Mark Wayne will listen to me, but I think he really seeks me out because I’m quiet, and a good audience. I almost never interrupt and I’m too polite to openly question his more fantastic stories. In short, I am as patient and faithful as an old hound, the kind that sleeps in the shade and is frequently tripped over.

I guess I just don’t have what it takes to be noticed by people. I come from a very large Catholic family, and I don’t think my parents knew half the time whether I was there or not. I used to think this was an advantage, but now I
know better. Nine times out of ten, my daddy calls me Michael if he sees me on the street. It's my older brother's name, but lately I've been letting it go because he doesn't like to be argued with. I've learned that whole days can pass without anyone speaking to me, beyond ordering a drink or begging my pardon. It makes me frantic. Last week I purposely held on to my rent money, just so Ruby, my landlady, would come knocking at my door, hollering my name for all the neighbors to hear.

But I'm still mostly invisible. The quiet guy in apartment 6, or a fixture behind the bar. A ghost, perhaps. I thought about this when I woke up this morning. I looked around my apartment, which is small even by Vieux Carré standards, and it was like a stranger's place. I have very few possessions. Just a few books, and clothes that could belong to anybody. Some beads and doubloons from this year's Carnival. The walls are bare except for a small crucifix, which was a gift from my grandfather, and a Hibernia Bank calendar. I poked around my things for a while, pretending to be an amnesiac searching for clues to my identity. I discovered that I have an unidentifiable key on my keyring, and that my library card has expired. I recited "Thomas Virgil Fontenot" (the name on my social security card) over and over again until it began to sound strange to me, a random grouping of sounds that had no connection to anything. I wondered, what if I really did disappear? Would anyone come looking for me? Would Amos smile his sad, golden smile? Would Vicky weep for me? Would my father paper the neighborhood with my picture for months, long after all hope had gone?
Mark Wayne and I are in Cecil's Washeteria on Esplanade Avenue. It's eleven in the morning, still a little early for Mark Wayne, but he says he can't stand waiting in line for a dryer, so we came early to beat the crowds. It's plenty warm, though, and we're sweating beneath the hum of the ceiling fans. There's no one else here but Hahn, the Vietnamese attendant, and a couple of drag queens. I've seen them around. One of them is wearing a pink silk blouse and tight jeans with pumps. He looks a lot like Dionne Warwick, but much taller, and with bigger hands. The other one, who has long hennaed hair, a halter top and short-shorts, has been talking on the phone for half an hour, and occasionally screeches "Oh my gawd, really?" at whoever's on the other end. I can tell this is getting on Mark Wayne's nerves. With every screech he blinks slowly and makes a big show of turning around to give the Telephone Queen a dirty look.

"It's like a fucking police siren after a while," he says, wiping his brow and plugging another quarter into his dryer. "Not the kind of thing you wanna hear first thing in the morning, Darling." That last word comes out "Derlyin"—a hyperbolic Faubourg Marigny pronunciation—because Mark Wayne's been living over there since he graduated high school, even though he's from Uptown, like me. He also likes to eat "ersters" and "berled" crawfish, and he'd probably put "erl" in his car, if he had one. He does a good fakey Cajun accent, too. Sounds just like Justin Wilson. "Gimme those dryer sheets, wouldya Babe?" he says, tensing up as the Telephone Queen lets off another volley of squeals and clacks his heels on the linoleum.

I try to toss him the box, but it sticks to my moist palm and drops to the floor. I shrug and scoot it over to him with the toe of my shoe.
“You’re not good for much, are you Thomas?” he says, bending over to snatch it. There’s a beard of lint hanging from it, and he picks it off, making a face, and lets it float to the floor. The breeze from the fans catches it and it goes slip-sliding along the bottoms of the dryers.

“A little lagniappe for you,” I tell him.

“Uh huh.” He peels off three sheets and tosses them in his dryer. “So they’ll be extra soft,” he says. The Telephone Queen is just whispering now, and Dionne Warwick has settled down with a magazine. There’s a clattering in Mark Wayne’s dryer like a loose quarter.

Cecil’s Washeteria is actually one of my favorite places in the Quarter. Hahn keeps it spic and span, and has recently put up some hand-lettered signs above the dryers that say things like “Ink pen in pocket leave stain forever!” and “Donut feed dryer more than it can eat!” I can’t deny these truths, and feel that they are much more useful and far-reaching than fortunes in cookies. And there’s something about the whir of all these machines that soothes my soul. Rows of washers and dryers doing their work without complaint, asking only for a little spare change. It’s deeply satisfying. I love to listen to them and recite Hahn’s wise little sayings to myself in my best Hop Sing voice.

“Say, whatever happened to that girl you were interested in, the one on the boat?” Mark Wayne asks suddenly. “What was her name?”

Farewell, Hop Sing. Mark Wayne has no use for washeteria wisdom. I grab two of my tuxedo shirts out of my dryer and slip them on hangers. My bartending uniform. I’ve got a couple pairs of black dress slacks tumbling around in there, too. They’re murder to wear on days like this, but shorts and teeshirts
aren't allowed behind the bar. "Vicky," I say at last. "Vicky Delchamp." I don't really want to get him started on this.

"Like the grocery stores?"

"Her uncle, I think."

He hops up on top of one of the washers and dangles his feet. "So... what happened?"

Mark Wayne has a relentless fascination for the sex lives of everyone he knows, and makes no secret of his own, to the eternal shame of his family. The Guidrys have a big house just off St. Charles Avenue, overlooking Audubon Park, and I don't think they speak to Mark Wayne, or acknowledge his existence. He knows, though, that my sex life is mostly theoretical, so I don't know if he's asking out of real curiosity, or if it's a polite segue into his own latest infatuation.

"All right," I say, wanting to beat him to it. "You know that poem I was writing for her? The one I wouldn't read to you?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, I finished it and mailed it to her a couple weeks back. I got her address out of the phone book." I'm straightening out one of my hanging shirts, tugging down on the sleeves and shirttails to pull out the wrinkles. It never works, but I do it anyway.

"And...?" he says. But I can see he's not really listening. He's looking over his shoulder at the Telephone Queen, who is aggressively scratching his behind with a red lacquered thumbnail and whispering "You're so mean to me. Why do you have to be so mean?" into the phone. Mark Wayne arches his eyebrows at me and pretends to gag. Dionne Warwick is watching him from
over a folded People magazine. He's starting to sweat through his makeup a little, but otherwise he still looks pretty good. He'd fool you at a distance.

"I'm sorry," Mark Wayne says. "It's just that I get distracted by that kind of thing. Tell me what she thought of the poem."

"I don't know," I say. I don't feel like talking about it now.

"Didn't she say anything to you? How do you know she got it?"

"I sent it anonymously," I tell him. "I don't know if she got it or not."

This is a lie. Jeanette, the woman I work with on the Evangeline, passed on that Vicky told her last week she'd gotten something "creepy" in the mail. I didn't tell Jeanette that I was the one responsible, and I don't know if Vicky suspects me or not. One of the more prominent images is the Ponchartrain lighthouse penetrating the fog. Mulling over it now I can see how she could read it as being vaguely obscene. I've probably offended every particle of her debutante being.

"You didn't sign it?" Mark Wayne asks. "All that work and you didn't even scribble your name at the bottom?" He sounds like I've told him I accidentally left a million dollars out in the middle of the street.

I don't answer, and in truth I'm feeling a little sick inside. What had seemed like a beautiful romantic gesture now seems ill-advised and doomed. Hahn should put up another sign to warn me about this, something like "Bad poet make good bachelor." Mark Wayne has his dryer open and is rooting around in his clothes, humming the theme to "The Love Boat." I look across the room at the bulletin board next to the telephone. I hadn't noticed it before, but there's a copy of the John Quinn flyer, "MISSING" printed across the top. The Telephone Queen has now removed one of his high-heeled pumps and is using it to scratch his back. It leaves red marks that stand out against the freckled white
of his skin. Mark Wayne starts going on about how most of these goddamned queens have no taste at all, no true sense of style or grace. But there’s no real anger in it, and I get the feeling that he’s mostly attentive to the sound of his own voice. I watch John Quinn rise and fall on the bulletin board under the fans. *Please call home.* “I wonder where he is right now,” I say, hoping to make myself feel better.

Mark Wayne pauses in his tirade and looks at me, then over his shoulder at the bulletin board. “Fish food, I expect,” he says. “He’s sitting in the bellies of two hundred catfish.”

I don’t reply, and I feel him looking at me.

“Say, you’re not thinking he’s still alive, are you? The Amnesia Poster Boy still at large? You were *there,* weren’t you? You saw him go for his last swim.”

I think to myself: *there, he’s missed it.* He is immune to the mystery, to even the possibility of mystery. What’s worse, he’s ruining the magic of Cecil’s Washeteria for me, now when I need it the most. What good are Hahn’s pithy maxims and a six-foot-four Dionne Warwick in the face of this kind of skepticism and indifference? We might as well be blind, or in Shreveport.

“Excuse me,” says a quiet, husky voice. Dionne Warwick steps past us with a quick smile on his way to the ladies room, walking slowly and carefully, as if he’s afraid of bruising the air. It’s the walk of someone who’s used to being gawked at, who’s always conscious of it. I stare, trying to regain the wonder, but the illusion has been dispelled.
“Don’t forget to lift the seat, Honey,” Mark Wayne mutters under his breath. The quarter rattling in his dryer settles into a monotonous rhythm and neither of us speaks for a long time.

I have little tricks that I use on days like today to keep from slipping away completely. For example, if I can make it, without cheating, from my front gate on Royal Street through the carriageway and courtyard to my front door in exactly twenty-one evenly spaced steps (which is three times seven, both lucky numbers), I can feel better. When this fails, I go out in search of an omen, some singular sign that I can see and recognize as being real. If I can see a mule carriage from the sidewalk by the front gate, that’s a good sign. Gray mules are doubly lucky; the last time I saw one of those I found a twenty dollar bill at my feet. I usually don’t have to go far to find something. What I need is simply this: to feel, somehow, that I am alive in a particular place and time. I need an anchor to keep me from just floating away. Otherwise, the invisibility overwhelms me and I become detached from everything, a nobody, a lost and wandering shadow. It isn’t enough to be attentive to the world around me, I’ve found. I must also be an integral part of it. If I can cross a 200 year-old courtyard in exactly 21 steps without trying, a courtyard that has gone mostly unnoticed and therefore unoccupied by generations of people, or both see and recognize the significance of a gray mule pulling a carriage-load of tourists, I have validated my existence. New Orleans forms around me like a protective envelope. I have become a somebody somewhere, and I can go on about my business.

Today, though, it’s no use. Royal Street is empty of mules, gray or otherwise, and the twenty-one steps bring me to my apartment door and nothing
else. Inside, I set my basket of clothes down and look around me. It is the same place I left this morning, silent and mostly bare. The calendar, the crucifix, the beads mean nothing. I lock the door, walk into the bedroom and lie on the bed, rigid as a board, watching the slow spin of the ceiling fan. "What are we going to do about this, John?" I say. In my mind I again see the hump of Quinn's back before he straightens out, and the slow, mysterious blooming of bubbles he left behind. There was a message there, I'm sure, and I think that if I can just picture it in my mind clearly enough, I will know how to save myself.

Later, after dark, I'm working on the Evangeline. At nine o'clock the band is well into its second set of canned Dixieland, and Captain Charlie is turning us around in front of the Chalmette Texaco refinery for the return trip upriver. It's a small crowd tonight, some trickle-over from the municipal utilities convention at the Marriott, so I don't have much to do but stand around and listen to Jeanette chomp her gum and bitch about her boyfriend back in New Iberia. Vicky is off somewhere else, probably up in the pilothouse. She'd asked me for a glass of ice water earlier, and when I gave it to her she smiled, but it was just politeness, the kind of smile that looks right through you. I had thought of Ship Island and the Ponchartrain lighthouse, wanting to look in her eyes and recite a few words, just enough to get a smile, a hint of recognition. But I could never do it. It's too easy to imagine her cold stare, a disgusted click of the tongue. So I did the usual thing and stood there like an idiot, pouring her water without a word. I could smell her perfume, it was like sweet olive blossoms, and see a tiny droplet of sweat run down the side of her neck. She looked through me at the mirror behind the call liquors and tucked her hair behind one ear with her
fingertips. She might as well have stabbed me through the heart with one of the plastic cutlasses I use to spear martini olives and lemon wedges. After she left, I had to turn around and look, too, just to make sure I could be seen. My bow tie was crooked.

In the last hour I've set up some "Paddlewheel Punch" and Hurricanes in souvenir glasses, and uncapped a few bottles of beer, but the drinking is slowing down. Nobody's dancing. The band goes through the motions anyway, nodding to themselves in that way old jazzmen have, like they're listening to a sermon hidden deep in the music. There's a big window behind the bandstand, and in the spotlights outside you can see the glittering arcs of water kicked up by the paddlewheel as it pushes us up the river. I can't listen to "Won't You Come Home, Bill Bailey" for the thousandth time, or I'll fade away completely. So I turn the bar over to Jeanette and walk back to the galley with a couple of cherry cokes. Amos usually comes out to the bar for them, but he got a peace sign shaved into the back of his head last week, and he's confined to the galley on Captain Charlie's orders until it grows out. He and Berry are back there cleaning up after the buffet.

As usual, Amos is doing the dishes. Berry's perched on the prep table doing one of his funny raps about Captain Charlie, swiveling his head back and forth, eyes as big as silver dollars. His chef's jacket is unbuttoned and I can see he's wearing a black silk shirt underneath, and a gold chain with a crucifix. "Mistah T," he says, when I hand him one of the cokes. I sit down on a stack of boxes and lean back against the wall, breathing in the steam and sweat and the smell of leftover gumbo and shrimp etouffee.
“Yo, Fame,” Berry says, jerking his head up toward Amos at the sink. “Look alive over dere. Doncha know it pay day?”

Amos flashes a gold-toothed smile over his shoulder at us. “I been knowin’ it, Bee. An’ tonight I goin’ over by the St. Thomas project an’ buy me some rocks, and maybe some wiggy.” He bends his knees and wiggles his head just thinking about it. He’s talking about crack and five dollar whores, the great loves of his life, and the reasons why he’s always broke two days after payday. Jeanette says he’s starting to act a little crazy, but I haven’t noticed it.

“Amos sho’ do love dem rock stars,” Berry says, chewing on an ice cube. “Look out.”

“Amos,” I say, pulling out a bent cigarette, “why do you wanna go messing with that stuff? You’re just asking for trouble.”

Amos doesn’t say anything. I study the peace sign on the back of his head as he scrubs a bread pudding pan and rinses it out. Berry asks me if I’ve got another smoke, and I fish one out for him.

“I mean, half those guys are out there selling baking soda and mothballs, looking to burn somebody.” I don’t know if this is true. It’s just something I heard somewhere. “And who knows what some of those girls have got,” I tell him.

“Ain’t nobody axed you nothin’ about it,” Amos says to the sink, hosing crab shells and rice out of a stainless steel pot. “Shit. I know I sho’ din’t.”

I shrug and let it go. He’s right. It’s none of my business. What could I know about it? Berry starts his rap again, farting air out from between his lips to mark the beat, his dark face shining with sweat, and Amos bobs in time at the sink, drumming on it with a pair of forks. It’s like they are the only two people
in the room. After a while I get up and push through the door to the forward
deck.

It’s cooler out there, and quiet. I can hear the rush of riverwater under the
bow as we glide by a Panamanian freighter tied up at the Piety Street Wharf. *La
Luz.* The catwalk swings out in the breeze like a pendulum. I stand by the rail
and smoke my cigarette down to the filter, thinking that I wouldn’t mind going
with Amos tonight, living a different kind of life for a change. There might be
something to it, for all I know, spending all my money on crack and prostitutes.
It could be a good, simple life, full of fellowship and good cheer. Maybe Amos
and Berry could even teach me how to rap. This is so ridiculous that I have to
grin, in spite of the sickness I’m feeling inside. “What do you think, John?” I say
to the darkness. “Could it work?” There’s no answer, of course, and I glance
around to make sure no one has seen me talking to myself. Then I flick the butt
out into the darkness, watching its long arc until it hits the water and disappears.

After work, I don’t go home right away like I usually do. Instead I walk
over to the Spanish Plaza. I buy a strawberry snowball from the stand there and
walk once around the fountain, looking at the tile mosaics. There are teenagers
making out on the benches, shadows huddled together, and a few tourists
walking arm in arm with their cameras and shopping bags. I feel like I’m
hovering just off the pavement, like a strong gust of wind might blow me away
forever. A gang of kids on rollerblades almost runs me down as I make my way
around the Canal Street ferry landing, heading toward the Aquarium and
Woldenberg Riverfront Park. Behind me, the downtown buildings glitter like
jewels, hotel signs blinking, and the air has a creosote tang from the dock pilings.
Usually these things hold me spellbound, but tonight I am immune to them. I feel as numb as a frozen fish.

I find a quiet spot on the Toulouse Street dock, overlooking the riverbend and Algiers Point beyond, and lean on the rail, resting my arms. I can hear laughter from the direction of the old Jax Brewery as I drink the dregs of my snowball and crush the white paper cone in my hand. I roll it around on my palm, and then pitch it out into the river. I can barely see it float away, a ghostlike speck in the darkness that is soon gone.

I've been spending a lot of time these past several days watching this river. The Mighty Mississippi. I'd been out on this same river hundreds of times, riding the *Evangeline* seven miles down to Chalmette Battlefield and back. I'd flipped cigarette butts into it, poured leftover coffee into it, and tossed half-eaten dinner rolls in for the gulls and catfish to fight over. I'd walked along the river on the levee to and from work, and watched the fireworks explode over it every Fourth of July I can remember. But I don't think I ever really saw the river until that day last April. This river is an omen, maybe the most important one, and Quinn gave it to me with his dive. It's quite a bit lower now, and moving more slowly, but there's still a good current out in the middle of the channel, and in the darkness I can barely make out floating bits of junk going by. I can hear the water lapping against the pilings below me, and it sounds almost friendly. Hadn't I seen black kids swimming in this river summers ago, in the calm water below the Jackson Avenue ferry landing? What did they know that Quinn hadn't?

Pretty soon I'm standing on the very edge of the dock, next to a mooring cleat. I don't remember climbing over the rail, though I must have done it. My
mind is blank, and I feel a calmness that I haven’t felt for a long time. Another moment goes by, and by the time I realize that I’ve made up my mind to do it, I’ve jumped.

Falling. It feels like a long time before I actually hit the surface, and then my knees suddenly buckle with an exploding sound, and water is closing over my head. It’s colder than I expect, dark and very quiet. For a moment I don’t fight it, and just drift in the darkness. Then I’m clawing and kicking my way to the surface, popping up like a cork.

Dying is the last thing on my mind; I’ve got to live through this if it’s going to work. I’ve gulped some riverwater, though, bland and fishy-tasting, and the current is spinning me around so that I’m looking first at the underside of the Toulouse docks and then out across the river, which seems a lot wider now than it did a moment ago. My ears have filled up with water, but I seem to hear people shouting, as if from a great distance. The calmness is draining out of me now as I see the shore getting farther and farther away. I’m moving past the Jax Brewery now, and the end of St. Peter Street, heading around the bend. I start to swim, slowly at first, but then faster, harder. I keep getting mouthfuls of riverwater, gagging on it. My breath sounds ragged and panicky and I can feel my heart knocking. In my head I hear Mark Wayne’s voice saying You should’ve quit smoking a long time ago, Derlyin’. Now you’re in deep shit! I’m measuring my life in breaths. After eight breaths I look up to make sure I’m not drifting farther out.

I’m kicking for all I’m worth now, flailing against the current, and when I look up again I think I’m making some progress toward the wooden walkways
and lamps in front of Jackson Square, now drifting slowly by. Crowds of people are standing up there yelling and pointing at me, shadows backlit by moving traffic. Some are climbing down to the river's edge. I focus on their voices, and my arms slap the water like pieces of wood. Pretty soon my foot kicks something, and then I slam my knee into the shore revetment, sending a jolt clear down to my toes. I kick with my good leg and pretty soon I can reach down and feel the thick wire mesh that holds the big rocks in place against the current. I feel my finger snag something, some broken glass maybe, and then there's a searing warmth. I manage to crawl up the revetment a little farther, and I let myself be pulled out of the water by a couple of shirtless black men who smell strongly of sweat and beer.

"Dam n," one of them is saying. "You gotta be crazy, be swimmin' out in dat nasty ass rivah! All dem chem'cals an' shit." His fingers are digging painfully into my arm.

"I'm tellin' you," his friend says in my ear. My legs are weak and stumbling, but soon I'm falling into step with them, climbing up over the meshed-in rocks, mumbling about how it was an accident, how I'd been trying to reach a watch that I'd dropped. I can't think of anything else to say.

"You best let dem fishes have dat watch o' yarn," the first man says. "Or dey gonna gobble you up, too!" And he laughs, a demented "hee hee hee" that I'll probably be hearing for the rest of my life. We get up to the boardwalk, where there's a crowd gathered, and they turn me loose. I put my hands on my knees and cough, spitting to get the taste of riverwater out of my mouth. "Crazy ass fool," I hear someone say.
No one else approaches me, and after a few minutes of being gawked at I start walking toward the square. My shirt is transparent with water, clinging coldly to me, and my shoes are gurgling as I shift my weight from foot to foot. My hand is throbbing, bloody, and I don't want to look at it, so I clench it into a fist and jam it deep in a waterlogged trouser pocket. As I shuffle by the Café du Monde, I can feel the stares of the people at the sidewalk tables. I don't feel bad about any of this, exactly. I don't know what it is. Something has happened to me, but I couldn't say what it is.

I'm halfway across Decatur Street when I notice a lemony sliver of moon hanging above the lit-up face of the cathedral. It's so beautiful and strange that I stop in the middle of the crosswalk, struck dumb. The mule carriages are lined up in a row in front of me, mules flicking their ears and stamping their hooves, and the mounted statue of Andrew Jackson seems to be doffing its hat to the Pontalba buildings facing the square. The banana trees by the black cast-iron gate shudder in the breeze when I look at them. For a long moment, I feel all the streets in the city stretching out from where I stand like a vast spider's web. And they're all mine. I'm lit up by headlights and the honking of the held-up taxis is like a hymn singing my presence to the world.