In the Dreams, the Everliving—

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Abstract

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SINCE seven-thirty in the morning, Carl had sat on the back porch, on the old green chair by the old green table. It had been cool at first, but now the sun came through the vines, dappling the floor and the table with warm yellow pools. The glass felt solid and cool in his hand; the gingerale bubbled contentedly, the tiny bubbles fizzing through the amber whiskey. In the exact center of the table he had carefully placed the two bottles, the mix on the left, the whiskey on the right. Now it didn't matter so much, but at first he had known that they must be in the exact center. Any unbalance would have been the end.

He pulled a cigaret from his shirt and struck a match. The flame matched the sunlight just as Lauren, his younger brother, came out from the kitchen.

"Elaine is crying," Lauren leaned against the kitchen wall, watching Carl.

Carl held the match, still burning, and exhaled a cloud of smoke over it. When it went out, he placed it carefully in the ash tray. He poured more mix in the glass and watched it bubble, not looking at Lauren.

"I said," Lauren repeated, "Elaine is in there crying."

Carl looked up, annoyed. "So?" He drank deeply.

"I just thought," Lauren started slowly, then rushing on, "You ought to do something."

Carl looked back at the glass, muttering, "If you're so worried about her, go rub her belly."

Lauren's breath came in sharply. For a long moment Carl could hear the dry leaves brushing the porch screen as they fluttered from the old oak. Then Lauren spat: "Why, you dirty bastard."

In one gliding motion, Carl was on his feet, his palm drawn back, ready to strike. In the warm splotches of sun, under the slanting porch roof, the brothers stood, glaring.

Carl dropped his hand. "I should beat the hell out of you." His voice was flat. "But I can't. Sit down." He jerked his thumb toward the other side of the table.
Lauren hesitated, then eased into the chair, watching Carl carefully.

"Well?" Lauren demanded.

Carl was silent, trying desperately to think of something to say to this tall blonde stranger who was his brother, something that would partly justify the things he had been doing the past few weeks. He forced his voice to be casual. "Are you going to the dance tonight?"

Lauren considered him contemptuously. "What do you care what I do tonight? By then you'll be too drunk to know. You'll be drinking the money I was going to get that bow tie with. And all the time your wife . . ."

"Shut up." Carl's voice rose in anger, settled as he continued, "You will get your tie money. You know I get paid this afternoon. And as for Elaine," his voice went flat again, he sounded tired, "she is a bitch. She has been spinning little steel threads around me for five years; now she's got me." Suddenly his voice became intense, he looked directly at Lauren. "Do you know what integrity is?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Do you know what it means to have everything you have ever believed in pulled from you? To lose, one by one, your dreams, even your lusts? Like a chicken being plucked alive, feather by feather—" He paused, aware that he must sound like a fool.

"You're drunk now," Lauren said evenly. He stood up and moved toward the kitchen . . . inside he got a glass from the cabinet, then returned to the porch, eyeing Carl expectantly.

Sure, I'm drunk, thought Carl. Tight enough to try and say things that the son of a strong man can't say. Tight enough to let you inside my mind. But you're afraid of what you might see there: something familiar even at your age, because the old man hung a few conventions on you, too.

He noticed that Lauren was fixing himself a drink and his eyebrows went up.

Lauren said, "Don't get excited, brother. If you can buy liquor with my money, I should get at least one drink of it." He took a deep gulp and shuddered.

Carl had another match in his hands, gently blowing smoke over it. "You are a damn fool, kid," he spoke softly. "It burns all the way down now—it hurts. Someday it will be like lying down when you are tired."
March, 1948

Lauren took another swallow, not answering. He set the glass down. "Gotta go to class," he said. He opened the porch door and went down the path through the garden, his hair golden in the sun. Carl watched until he reached the alley, then poured the remains of the drink into his own glass.

At a quarter of twelve, Carl's Aunt Rachel came to the kitchen door, thin lips pursed in distaste. Carl grinned at her. "Go ahead and say it, Aunt Rachel. Mother and Dad are rolling in their graves." He watched the words cut her. Funny thing, he thought. She and all the rest of them, not liking Elaine, hating him, but sticking because they thought it was their duty. "I'd think you would at least have some respect for the dead, Carl," she hissed, rolling her eyes piously. She jerked her head back inside the house, and continued, "if not for the living."

Carl returned her gaze until she looked away. "By God, Aunt Rachel, you never had an honest emotion in your life. Even laying under old Henry, I'll bet you thought you were sinning."

"Why, you filthy thing," she gasped, turning back into the house. Over her shoulder she flung, "I came out to ask you what you wanted for lunch, but now you can starve for all I care."

So Carl sat alone, sat and listened to the old dead leaves slipping down the sun-flecked screen behind the cool old vines, drank slowly, and listened to the occasional small moans from inside the house and the querulous whine of Aunt Rachel's voice. It's the evidence, he thought. It's what you show, not what you feel, that counts. Old Aunty could call up the correct size tears for any occasion. But unless the emotion fits the correct groove, it is sacrilege to her—to the rest of the family. What the hell, he told himself,—you knew all this years ago, you didn't play ball—how could you expect them to act any other way? Yessir, Carl, the leaves fall gently in the bright air—tomorrow is an old and lonely Sunday, and today you, ego, you Carl; you, muffled somewhere in the muck of experience, webbed in the net of your father's strength; you are drinking and your wife is thirty feet away trying to have a baby. What if she should die and—yes, what if she should die? He squeezed the glass hard. That is a bastard thing. Down deep, what your old man put in you is still there. Out of a thousand evil nights, no man wishes a woman to die because she has devoured one man to make
another. But the mocker is down there, too, and he is stronger, and you know it would be a good thing.

Without Elaine, he could finish college. Without Elaine . . . his eyes followed a brown leaf floating slowly down the sunlight, down, and down . . .

Five years and a hundred and twenty nights, back into April: April with a small rain and the sweet bitterness of primordial return. Neon rippled the wet macadam, darted under hissing auto wheels, slipped into the cool dark under old elms, then shrunk back into the tube-arteries of the city.

In his small room, Carl felt an intense awareness, a sharp expectancy of the night, a pull from the little room such as geese must feel in the cold rain. He caught a bus on the little square in front of the apartment.

The huge bus motor shattered the night solidly and Carl sat, hunched in his rain coat, looking out the dirty bus window; whenever the wind stirred the curtain behind the driver, Carl wondered idly if there was a man behind the curtain, or if he were completely alone in some half-world of mist and endless streets.

Downtown, he wandered the streets, breathed deeply the wet night, traced with his eye the powerful silhouette of the Mellon gallery. Up Ninth, he walked past the cheap theaters, through the oily cloud of popcorn and sweat, on past the shooting gallery and the all-night cafes, and walked on, not knowing where, still expectant. On New York, he stopped to watch the grinding presses, printing the morning paper, and stood fascinated in the heavy rumble of their revolving, watching the tuat white ribbon curve under and over the steel rollers.

Presently he became aware of another sound, wild and lonely above the bass of the press machines, and as he heard the sound he was pulled toward it, knowing why he had come down town. He followed dirty steps down under a tavern, toward the sound, toward the haunting notes of a steel guitar. A negro was playing, his eyes closed, an unlit cigaret in his mouth. Carl sat and ordered a beer and listened while the guitar twanged the biting loneliness of the city night, the misery, the proud joy of all life. Suddenly the player stopped, laid the guitar on a chair, and lit the cigaret. He stopped from no plan, no final cord or conclusion: one moment he was playing, the next he was striking
Carl, annoyed, wanting a conclusion, grinned a little at his own annoyance. The man knew. Things end that way, and the music ended that way. Carl smiled at the player, but the smile was not returned... the blank gaze wandered on across Carl and around the room and back to the cigaret... I am a fool, though Carl. There is no way across the gap between him and me; not even the guitar is a bridge. All he is was in that music, and I knew the music, but that is not enough, nor is any knowledge.

Again the negro played, softly at first, his eyes closed and the cigaret stub hanging to his lips, played of bony pines in red clay and icy smoke on grey-ridged mountains; played of aching heart and no death, of heat and wild passion, played on, arrogant in his soul—flaunting, unashamed. Carl drank and thought slowly, watched the door open, watched her come in.

For a long time he watched her and knew that he should leave, and wondered that she should look down at his stare and even blush a little. Then the music stopped, and for a taut moment the night stopped, and the table was hard and solid and the lights were bright as small suns, and he knew the moment was with him forever. She is ripe, he thought, she is mine. So he went across the room, knowing he should leave, and sat across from her.

“You are lovely,” he said.

Her eyes met his, and she smiled, and answered almost shyly, “No. I am Elaine.”

They laughed at this and then once again the music pulsed—but a background now for their laughter. Carl ordered her a gin fizz, which she drank experimentally, and they chattered gaily. For awhile he talked of where he worked and what he did and she listened eagerly. Then the music came into his mind again; the room glowed warmly, and he talked of other things...

At six-thirty she was still asleep, so he slipped out of bed and dressed quietly. He stood and looked at her for a moment—young and innocent, he thought. By God, she really was—especially for a woman who came in to a beer joint, hunting. He debated waking her and decided not to. We shall leave this a memory of night and rain, he thought.

The spring days grew and became hot and heavy with honeysuckle. Carl did not see Elaine, nor call her. He worked and
ate and read and slept, and in May, received notice that his father had died. The telegram came in the morning, before he had finished breakfast.

They had had eggs and Dalhine said, just before the knock on the door, "Listen, the crows. Listen to the black bastards yell in the sun."

And Nermise said, "They don't sound any different to me than they ever do in the morning. Must be you have a bigger than usual hangover."

But the knock came, and there was the telegram for Carl. Dalhine went to the door, carried it carefully back into the room, and marvelled again, "The crows. The tree on the hill—hundreds of 'em, pitching in the sunlight."

Carl read the telegram and then read it aloud, and Bob Nermise looked at Don Dalhine for a time and then Bob said, "I'll go call and see—the next train, and Don can help you pack. God damn the crows. I can hear them now, the black ones."

... So there is another club car and another train, thought Carl. Here are things going by—rivers and dirty cold mountains and soon the plains: and soon my father—dead. Aunts and uncles and cousins to face the code the old man left in you... "If you ordered the drink, you pay for it." A part of you molded while you were plastic, now hardened. There is a gaunt silhouette, the skin on the skull soon gone, but there is also a large part of what you are and will be. Aunt Rachel can weep and remember heaven; you cannot weep but neither can you forget your father.

Back in the city again, he worked, and it was June.

At three one afternoon came the call. Carl answered and a tired old voice said, "This is Elaine's mother."

"Yes?" His voice was uncertain. What was Elaine? Then he knew—One night in the rain.

"It's about Elaine—we have got to see you. Will you meet us on Tenth and F at seven this evening?"

"What is it? Why do you want to see me?" Sound as if you did not know, sound as if you could not know.

"I'd rather not say on the phone."

She hung up and the room hung tensely on the moment, and Carl stood, holding the handset.
"I don't feel well. Think I'd better go home if you don't mind," he said to Roy, at the other desk.

"Sure." Roy looked at him curiously. "Go ahead."

He trudged slowly up the hill toward the apartment, kicking the dust. "I don't want to get married," he thought, over and over. "I'll get out of here—anywhere. But in the way of escape is the net of experience—the net made by my father. . . "No man can do such a thing, son. If you order the drink, you pay for it."

But why in the name of God should a libertine be set in a steel cage? Why should I marry her, a women who was only one night? About all I remember is the size of her breasts,—and even that fades.

He laughed in the warm May air, and the laugh rolled back to him on the porch. Carl continued drinking. Inside, Lauren and Aunt Rachel were eating, mumbling to each other occasionally, and the low sobs continued from Elaine's bedroom. I am drinking too much, Carl thought, disinterestedly. My flesh is sliding down my frame, growing mushy. Like an upright corpse. He grinned and again traced a leaf down the sky. Far on the horizon the leaf intersected a small dark cloud. His thoughts drifted again to the past . . .

There was the curious tobacco quid underneath the desk in the office of the justice of the peace. Through all the words of the marriage ceremony Carl's eyes roamed from the man himself, dirty and licking his lips, to the piece of misshapen tobacco. After the ceremony, the justice inquired, still licking his lips, if he should kiss the bride. Carl looked at the quid, gave the man five dollars, and pulled Elaine out. The justice laughed grossly, still licking his lips.

During the third week of the marriage, Carl was drafted. The night before he left for the induction center, Elaine told him that she was not and never had been pregnant. . .

He was, for a time, an excellent soldier, hating everyone with an equal and intense hatred. He walked his post in a military manner. During a month's illness in the army hospital, Carl had time to consider a great many things. He began to read Elaine's letters, long pleas for forgiveness. She had a job and she was saving money; all the subsistence checks were in the bank. He thought much of his father and his love of the soil.
and his solidness in having something he was sure of. It was the sureness of knowledge from the ever-returning seeds that life was not meaningless. That, Carl thought, was what it took to make the steel cage, the net of responsibility, a thing of pride rather than torture. It was, basically, the sureness of knowledge. To know was to justify, to make man God.

... It seemed to Carl, on the porch tracing each falling leaf, each gently whirling leaf bright in the sun, that it had been years since they had moved: that he had been here on the porch for a thousand shimmering years. The leaves fell slowly, and he remembered the arrival of Lauren and his mother, come to live with him, Lauren young and confused, his mother old and worn and lost without her husband—remembered Elaine's long bitter campaign for a baby—remembered the time when he could no longer hold the faith he had acquired in the hospital—remembered the start of his drinking and the abandonment of his knowledge.

There are not enough leaves, he thought. Not enough for all those thousand shimmering years and the dull ache and fear of the cage. Sure—for a brief moment the sun's glow was dimmed and he desperately wanted his father's faith: If I quit, I'll be back in the cage, the steel net, and it will close tighter and tighter and there will be nothing left but a hole in the temple. Then the sun was warm again, and the bottle hard and real on the table.

On the morning of the second day of February, Carl and Lauren were silently eating breakfast, both depressed by the bitter cold murk outside. Elaine was making toast in the kitchen, sluffling back and forth in her house slippers. The old clock on the china closet began to chime unevenly. They both heard Elaine slam the toaster shut and mutter, "Damn" as she burnt her finger. The clock continued striking; it went on striking every hour, until someone stopped it.

Suddenly Carl started laughing. Elaine came out of the kitchen, sucking her finger, glaring at him. "By God, school boy," she hissed, "I'll give you something to laugh about. I'm going to have a baby."

The clock continued to strike. Lauren looked at the two of them foolishly, got up hastily and jarred the clock violently. It struck one more time, and then was silent. He left the room.
Carl stared at Elaine for a long moment, then he too, got up and went out. . . .

. . . On the porch, Carl listened speculatively to the sobs from the house. The bottle was empty. Maybe she will die, he thought, hopefully. Nothing like a fifth of whiskey to remove silly scruples. He rose, stretched, opened the screen door, and went down the shaded back walk to the alley. Down the alley the brilliance of the birch trees, fire and white, struck his senses sharply. The alley cinders crunched; every sound and sight contained a tight expectancy, a sharp awareness. Far in the West there were clouds, growing together, but here the air was keen and Carl breathed it deeply.

He had decided to go down and get his check—Lauren wanted a bow tie and he wanted more whiskey. The small store, where he worked evenings, was four blocks away, and he walked slowly. After Hendricks had paid him for the week's work, he went across the street, got a brilliant red bow tie in Sampson's Store, a fifth of whiskey from the liquor store, and then went next door to a bar and ordered a beer. He sat alone, drinking slowly. "Libertine bird in an ungilded cage," he thought, over and over.

"What in hell are you muttering about, Carl?"

"Oh. Hello, Jake. Have a beer. You might say I'm doing into this amber liquid what five years ago would have been crying. Did you go to class this morning?"

"Yeah. They hold 'em regularly, you know."

"Might as well join me. I'll tell you all about life." Carl lit a cigarette from a butt in the ash tray. "I'll tell you how to live inside a set of rigid conventions with no morals. I'll even buy you a beer. Then you can tell me what to do when the conventions start closing in—" His voice trailed and the sneer faded. Over the bar, the red neon sign hummed, and the musty odor of old beer hung thick in the air.

Jake considered Carl curiously, then went over to the juke box and dropped in a nickel. "Bring me a Bud, Shorty." He turned and sat across from Carl.

"How's your wife," he asked, running his thumb around the bottle top and looking at Carl.

"Pregnant as hell. Any time now there will be three of us. There is a woman who wants things—but doesn't know what they are." He made a wet dot on the table. "Here is a man who wants things—and doesn't know what they are." He made
another dot. He made still a third dot. "And here is a man who knows what he wants but can't get it . . . because the other two won't let him. Their names are, reading from dot to dot, Elaine, Carl, and Carl." His voice was growing a little thick. "Do you see what I mean?" He didn't wait for an answer. "All my life I've been weak enough to get into every mess that came along, and strong enough—" he hesistated, —"or stupid enough not to take the easy way out."

"Self pity," Jake said. "You didn't take the easy way out because there isn't any."

A girl came in and sat at the bar. Carl watched her cross her legs. The afternoon moved on, and night came, and they drank on, talking. Around seven-thirty, Jake remembered he was hungry and left. Carl picked up the loosely-wrapped bow tie and the fifth of whiskey and staggered toward the door. Outside, the gentle sun and the golden colors were gone. An icy mist stung his face. Garish patches of light filtered across the street, shuttered by the close packed clouds scudding eastward across the moon. The street was deserted.

From far behind the deserted street, a train whistled mournfully, like a bowling ball down the endless alleys of time, careening hollowly from building to wall, rolling closer. In sudden panic, Carl began to run. The bottle slapped his leg and the cold rain leaped at him, and the sound of the train filled the night and his fevered mind. Faster he ran, and clammy sweat mixed with the rain. The sound came at him from the right and the left, from ahead and behind, and pulsed his brain into a raw ballon. Suddenly the sound was his father's voice laughing at him, "... you ordered the drink . . ." and then it bounced on down the timeless street, no longer laughing, but with all the sadness of memory, and it rolled on, and was gone. A wordless scream was on Carl's lips, but no sound could come, and the street was silent,—but for his running.

Around the corner, he saw his house, the porch light on—saw through a fogged mind, a car parked in the drive, and on the street gleaming whitely evil in the half light, an ambulance.

He walked carefully up the front porch steps, opened the door, and stared around stupidly, blinking at the sudden light.

Aunt Rachel lay on the sofa, her dry old body heaving. Lauren sat upright in the arm chair, looking through Carl and at
the door, as though he had not seen him come in. Carl stood in the doorway, the bottle in one hand, the red tie hanging limp from its wet wrapper in the other. Two men in white came from the bedroom, and then the doctor. He looked at Carl with contempt.

"Maybe this will sober you up a little," the doctor said, lighting a cigarette, "Your wife is dead."

The tie slipped from Carl's hand. His mouth worked but no sound came.

"And you have a seven-pound son."

Carl's voice came then and he began to laugh. His voice mounted until the room shook, great gasping sounds that rolled out into the wet night. The doctor walked across the room and with all his strength, slapped Carl.

"Better give him a hypo," he said to the men.

On the way out, the doctor kicked the package and it rolled along the floor. Lauren lifted his eyes from the door, then, and sat staring at the brilliant red bow tie.

-Dick Ellis, E. E., Jr.

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A Spinster's Song

I pass by Love
And she cares not for me.
What matter if the moon dips low
And trails her slender figure in the sea?
She does not lead the heart, I know—
It is just the tide she has in tow.

-Elinor Chase, H. Ec. So.