

The trouble with Lucien Lastman was that he had seen God, and the memory of that experience haunted him day by day.

Still, I had no idea of what possessed him when I offered him and his woman companion a ride one evening in March 1973 along a vacant stretch of New Mexico highway. Recently hired to teach comparative religions, among other subjects, at a Colorado university, I was enroute to Santa Fe, where I planned to visit some ethnological museums in order to augment my knowledge of Southwestern Indian history, mythology, and rituals. My wife, ~~that~~ five months pregnant with our son, had insisted on staying at home, for we could not afford motels, and she did not savor the prospect of camping several subfreezing nights beside the road, as I was determined to do. I was speeding in my Volkswagen van down highway 64 between Raton and Taos. The sun had just dropped in the west behind the blue, spectral hulks of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, leaving its last, rosy, shimmer beneath a cold, chrome sky. The car radio had just lost the only remaining station to crackling static. Flicking it off, I settled into a pensive vigil at the wheel, my ears relaxing to the steady hiss of tires on the pavement. The road traced monotonously, an interminable pencil line drawn with straight edge, into the distance. If to the side I caught sight of a scraggly bird winging low over the road, then skimming noiselessly away into the dusk. It was several miles further on, where the road went into a wide bend and began its ascent into the mountains, that I encountered them. My headlights scanned two fugitive forms on the highway shoulder, which I mistook at first as stray deer, until I swept past and saw them waving like starved suppli-

cants beside their little mound of rucksacks and bedrolls.

Hitchhikers at night have always left me with spasms of conscience. My fear of crime tugs with my concern for anyone misfortunate enough to be stranded miles from habitation. However, I noticed that they were a man and a woman together, which was not quite so risky. Braking the van to a standstill, I switched on my safety flashers to signal them of my good intentions. Then I lit my pipe and waited for them to come running up.

Soon I heard their footfalls beside the car. The man, who spoke in a taut, but polite voice, punched his head through the window and inquired whether I was headed for Taos. I said "yes" and instructed him to pull open the sliding door in the rear and come aboard, whereupon we went on our way together.

At the outset I balked at striking up a conversation with my riders, and they too reciprocated with a strained silence. Awhile later I overheard the woman whispering something to the man, who subsequently opened his mouth and introduced himself casually as "Lucien," pronouncing it in the French manner. He and his wife, he said, were returning from the East Coast to their home near San Francisco. Having followed I-40 westward all the way from Little Rock to Amarillo, they were now making a short detour north to visit the farm of a friend in the San Luis Valley of Colorado. Since he had not mentioned it, and she had not volunteered it, I asked the woman what her name was. With affable, but correct speech and in a lightly midwestern accent she identified herself as "Laura." But her husband interjected with a chuckle, that she also went by the nickname of "Changing Woman" which a Hopi Indian friend had conferred on her.

Then the conversation tailed off into silence once more. My attention drifted back to the road, which had narrowed into a gloomy and hazardous

track that snaked up the mountainside into a thickening pine forest. It had been an unusually long spell since passing any oncoming car. The van's headlights swayed back and forth around unremitting curves, whisking shadows from their path into the woods beyond. For an instant I glimpsed what looked like the sheen of the rising moon through a hollow in some tree limbs, but the light swiftly vanished behind an embankment, and when the car came to where it should have been visible again, it was gone.

I sought to pick back up the conversation. "You must have been glad I came along when I did," I said, but I received no reply. At once I felt awkward and unnerved. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, I observed the woman had lit a cigarette, which glowed like a ghostly candle wick in the darkness. There was a wispy brightness off in the sky. The highway crested in a large meadow overrun with the shadows of some huge boulders. I peered in the direction where the light had first shown itself, and again to my surprise nothing hung to the horizon but the glossy twinkle of a few early stars. It was then that I had an intimation of something eerie about the situation: the lonely road, my mute passengers, the light in the sky. Yet I could not actually define for myself what was so uncanny, and impatiently I pressed them: "Did you see a light over there? I think the moon is rising."

"The moon isn't up," Lucien came back.

"I don't know, but I saw a light."

"I saw something too, I think," Laura added reticently.

"No," the man retorted, "You couldn't have seen the moon. It's not up yet."

I detected a nervous edge to his words. I wanted very much to convey to him that he could be at ease with me, but the right gesture escaped me. I sensed that there was a bar of mutual uncertainty between us that could

not be removed until we had the chance to know each other better. In the meantime I could only remain apprehensive. There boiled inside me the terrible feeling of an invisible force or presence menacing us all from the environing darkness. The ghostly light was perhaps an omen of some kind, though I did not know what. For a moment I shuddered to myself, thinking that whatever it was lay in wait somewhere up the road, that he knew it was there and that it would soon fall upon us.

The highway lunged and twisted up still another grade, which I had to negotiate in second gear. I was confronted with the light for a third time. Over the rim of the hill a glow appeared, and grew brighter. I had a frightful premonition that the light would not go away as it had done before, that suddenly it would be revealed for what it actually was. I called out to my passengers: "Don't you see it? It's coming. Oh, my God!" I was about to slam on the brakes when I was shocked into happy recognition. It was only the headlights of another car. Arriving concomitantly at the top of the grade, we switched on our low beams together, and my stomach fluttered with foolish embarrassment. The car rushed on into the night.

On the other side of the hill more lights came into view. The mountains glided away into a sweeping valley in the center of which huddled the streetlamps and blinking neon signs of a town. We raced on until we were cruising down the deserted thoroughfare. As we halted for a solitary red traffic signal, it occurred to me that we should proceed no further until I could chat with my riders face to face. I had aimed anyway to stop for supper about this time, and I asked them if they were hungry. They said they were, so I pulled up to the only eating place I could see -- a weather-bitten, little adobe tavern with a Spanish name such as one always forgets because it is so common in the wayside villages of the American

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Southwest.

Indoors a juke box was blaring country and Western music. The tavern was congested with swarthy Indians drinking and chattering in their strange, but beautiful language which white men rarely understand. A chubby-faced Chicano waitress in tight Levi's escorted us to a table beside the fireplace, stacked high with sputtering and smoky pine logs, and with crisp indifference slapped some menus in front of us and walked away.

In the faint light of the room I was able to study the physical appearance of my companions. Casting discreet glances at them while they inspected their menus, I determined that there was nothing extraordinary about either one of them. The man, Lucien, was thick-set with slightly hunched shoulders bundled by a padded army parka which he kept on, despite the warmth from the fire. He had a ravel of hair and a tangled, full beard, like so many of the new vagrants who wander the highways of America these days, shading a pair of flitting blue eyes that seemed to avoid my glances. His nose was curved in the middle and disfigured by a small hump, as if once it had been broken severely without healing properly. He looked in his late twenties or early thirties, though the creases in his forehead told me he could have been even older. Laura was perhaps a little younger; she was slender and of darker complexion; which could have made her of Hispanic descent, or possibly Indian, as her nickname suggested. She had deep, brown eyes and a long, drawn face which cramped at her cheekbones into a steady and winsome smile. Hersleek, black hair, which needed combing, washed down over her frail shoulders. Without regarding each other, the two of them nudged affectionately together, intimating that, even though perhaps they had been a couple for many years, they were still very much in love.

Finding nothing on the menu which particularly interested me, I

decided at last on a bowl of chile. The waitress returned, this time with more amenity, and took our orders. After stickling, Lucien asked the price of the chile, and on receiving a satisfactory response from the waitress, ordered the same for both of them. I suspected they did not have much money. When the waitress left, Lucien pulled out a cheap, briar pipe, stuffed it with tobacco from a packet in his coat, and then turned his eyes squarely on me for the first time. He asked me for a match, which I did not have, shrugged, and laid the pipe unlit on the table. I could see he was fumbling for some pretext on which to start up conversation. Staring momentarily at the table, then at his wife, he broke abruptly into an amiable grin and said: "We were happy to see you come along when you did."

"I can imagine," I said. "I usually don't pick up strangers, but I couldn't leave anyone out there in that godforsaken spot."

Lucien smiled. "We often get dropped off in those kinds of situations, but we always seem to haul ourselves out."

Laura, too, now became animated, and squeezing her husband's hand as it rested on the table, she added: "We'd been waiting since midday. We watched the sun go down, and frankly I was a little scared, not knowing whether we would have to stay there. It was our plan to make it to Taos tonight, and fortunately we'll make it."

I asked them whether they wished to sleep in the van with me that night, providing we found a decent campground.

"Oh, that's very nice of you," Laura chirped, eager to seize my offer, but Lucien remained close-lipped. "Is there something wrong?" Laura asked, puzzled. "I think that's an offer that would be difficult to turn down."

Lucien smiled weakly at her. He was sunk in some private thoughts which he refused to share. Distractedly, he plucked a paper napkin from

the dispenser on the table, rolled it up, and made a little torch from the candle on the table to light his pipe. Dense spirals of smoke rose about his beard and hair as he took the initial puffs, veiling his face. As the smoke cleared, I noted that his countenance had grown rigid with a pallor of anxiety in his eyes. I recalled his snappish retort to my mention of the light on the first occasion I had seen it. I sensed some sort of shadowy fury welling up inside him, but I couldn't be certain.

A log cracked in the fireplace, spewing sparks. Suddenly Lucien shoved his fist on the table and started rattling on to me: "You think there's something not right with me or this situation," he began in earnest and with an ardor that seemed calculated to smother any polite protests on my part. "Well, you are probably right. Something is loose here. You were wondering about the light in the sky. I saw it too, and I was worried about it. I don't know what it is, but perhaps it means something, something I'll have to think about for awile." Then he managed a chuckle which seemed somehow out of place. "The shepherds saw a light in the sky two thousand years ago which they didn't quite understand, but they followed it. Oh, what am I talking about? I musn't give you the wrong idea, or sound all so grave and mysterious. I'm not sure I myself believe in omens, but sometimes I wonder. Anyway, I must admit I am a bit out of sorts. Perhaps I was afraid also of having to spend the night in the darkness."

He paused to light his pipe again, using the same method as before. He seemed to be retreating rapidly into the cloudy reaches of his own thoughts, and he no longer appeared to take account of me or Laura. At the same time, his manner became more relaxed. As he spoke, his words mellowed into a gentle singsong. "But now we're among friends," he said, waving to the fire with his pipe. "Friends come along to save us from the darkness. It's hard to

figure what I mean by that. You wouldn't know unless you had experienced it -- the darkness, I mean. But that sounds too theatrical. No, you see, we rarely know the darkness. We know it's there, but we don't really discover it. When you're with somebody else, you don't have a chance to discover it. It's a terrible discovery, and you certainly don't want to let the world know about it. Am I making sense? Probably not. You have to have a touch of madness to get my point. Yes, madness." He stared directly at me and smiled. "You see, I went mad once, but now I'm sane. There's a time in everyone's life for a little madness."

He shrugged and laid his pipe down. Then he glanced lovingly at his wife. "Changing woman, she's the one who saves you from darkness."

"I have to admit," Laura said mildly, "he goes on like this all the time. But I learn to listen. He tries to be a philosopher of sorts, even though it doesn't always come out sounding the way he means it. He's told me stories about this...madness. And I listen. He tells me about the time..."

But Lucien grabbed her hand and firmly shut her off. "No," he said kindly to her, "he doesn't need to hear about that."

The waitress arrived with three huge, steaming bowls of chile, and we hungrily began to store it away. There was no more conversation while we ate. It was evident that Lucien preferred to concentrate only on one activity at a time, and that he was relishing his fare, as if food itself were a rare, but engaging pasttime. Still, he took quick spoonfulls, even though the chile was very hot, and he finished his portion long before Laura or I were halfway through ours. Easing his bowl aside, he rekindled his pipe and gazed off into the fire. The music from the juke box had ceased, and the murmuring of other voices in the room wafted to my ears. I was eager to get back on the road. Although I now felt a kind of wordless

comradeship with him, his queer and distant manner continued to make me fret. And I would have on that occasion been quite pleased for them to stay behind in the tavern.

As the waitress handed me the check, however, a great commotion suddenly erupted in a far corner of the room. A young Indian, obviously drunk, was shrieking and carrying on in a squall of personal abuse. Immediately I realized that the object of his rage was Lucien, though precisely what had set him off was unclear. Lucien himself appeared both startled and frightened at the Indian's hectoring. A scrawny stalk of a man with a wild mane of black hair, the Indian swaggered out of the shadows and poised himself in front of us, his chest puffed out and his body swaying from his haunches in a posture of sotted pugnacity. "Violator," he screamed, and he raised his fist in a daunting salute, but before he could swing, he tumbled backward and was captured by one of his cronies, who gave us a swift, dumb look of embarrassment. Another man, a tall and dapper Chicano who must have been the proprietor, thrust himself in the midst of the fracas, and whispered something to a pair of patrons who hauled the Indian, now tamed, out through a rear door.

The man apologized curtly: "You have to understand, there's some bad feelings toward whites in this place, and it comes out when they drink too much. Forget the check. It's the best I can do to make up for the nuisance."

I thought Lucien would be even more edgy because of the incident, but as soon as we were in the car, he was chuckling. "I guess my bad looks got us a free meal." The disconcerting little affair seemed actually to have loosened him up. As we drove out of town his air of solemnity lifted, and he turned remarkably light-hearted and chatty. Seated up front with me, he breezed along with small talk, giving a number of trivial details about himself

doesn't, and he snickered. "Very little can matter a very lot," he said, and let the subject drop.

By now we were travelling through the mountains again. I wondered whether we would see that light as before, but we did not. I was feeling sufficiently relaxed in his presence in spite of the fact that I could not really figure him out. And in those moments there came to me the bland and relieving awareness (which had also arisen in certain past instances, particularly whenever I was struggling to get to know somebody who is not easily calculable) that his detachment, his riddling remarks, were due doubtlessly to his own unsureness about me. One can never be all that direct with strangers, especially if one is tuned to the other's quirks and sensibilities. After all, he and his wife were virtual prisoners in my automobile. From his standpoint I could have been a quiet, canny psychopath who might be pricked into rash behavior at the most insipid provocation. We were slowly, however, groping toward a mutual trust in each other. And his growing easiness with me matched my rising confidence in him.

After an hour or so a highway marker reared up in the headlights with the notice that we were ten miles from Taos. Once more I asked if they wished to remain the night with me in the van. If not, I would drop them off in town, and go find a rest area along the road where I would sleep alone. Once more Lucien declined my invitation, though with a little reluctance this time and some forethought. We rolled along a two-lane strip of pavement into the dusty and deserted center of Taos. Stopping at the intersection of the two main highways in the village, I hopped out to open the side door so that they could unload their gear from the back. Laura climbed down on to the street, lugging the two pack frames along with her, and I reached inside to lend her some assistance. The wan light from an overhanging street

lamp trickled down over her dark hair and dimly illumined her cheeks. For an instant I noticed something strangely beautiful about her, which I had not bothered to observe until now. Yet she was not beautiful in the everyday sense of the word. The longish and angular contours of her face were somewhat out of proportion to what one customarily expects in the physiognomy of a woman. Her beauty seemed to seep from an unseen well of vitality inside her. Her diffident nature was unlike the common feminine kind. There was a suppressed masculine aura about her, a firmness and inner solidity which contrasted with the volatility of her husband. Throughout the evening she had struck me as somehow comprehending, rather than being disturbed by, Lucien's fits and shifts of mood. I stood before her and smiled timidly, for I was a little afraid to say anything that might sound silly.

She gave me back a look of convivial assurance, and I turned to give my parting respects to Lucien, whom I discovered still sat in the car. Laura stepped past me to open the door for him. He did not look at us, but was staring through the windshield toward the lighted intersection.

"Honey, let's go," she urged gently.

But I saw that his eyes were welded in a frontward gaze, as though he had suddenly fallen into a trance. Laura was dumbfounded. Sidling up to his shoulder, she gingerly drew back.

"What's the matter?" she asked softly with alarm.

He made no response. I squinted in the direction where he fixed his attention. In the remote shadows I caught sight of two small figures, perhaps children, ambling down the street away from us, yet there appeared nothing unusual about them. Off in the distance a dog was yelping, then everything turned silent again. No sound came from the figures, who gradually shrunk away into the darkness. Soon there was the roar of another

automobile, and a pickup truck with growling gears and a sputtering engine slowed up to the intersection, made a turn, and pulled into a nearby service station. A young woman got out, and went to fill the tank with gas.

Lucien rubbed his eyes, and came back to us. He cast a look of helpless fright at Laura, who tossed her head as a sign of reproof. Shrugging, he demanded like a petulant child that he did not want to get out after all, causing Laura to become visibly peeved.

"For God's sake," she exclaimed, "what's going on with you? Can't you wait until we get to sleep to have your nightmares?"

Her reprimand made him flash with anger. His mouth tensing, he came to the verge of recrimination, but he glanced at me and said nothing at all to her. Then he beckoned me to get back in the driver's seat.

"I'm sorry, I guess you think I'm wierd," he said. "I had a premonition that we couldn't catch another ride north this time of night. There's nowhere to stay in town. We're glad for your invitation, professor."

We clambered back into the van, and I swung round to traverse the road back into the mountains a way, for I remembered having passed, just before entering town, one of those brown and yellow National Forest markers which read "campground." I could sense that Laura was smoldering in the backseat. Her husband's antics had evidently brought her at last to embarrassment. His most recent whim seemed to have pierced the limit of her understanding and tolerance.

We came to the campground and pulled off the road into a small, rutted parking area where a picnic table lay beneath some tall, arching trees crusted with icicles which spangled in the glow of the now risen moon. I got out to inspect the place. My footfalls crinkled in a layer of hard frozen snow. I heard the car door open, and immediately Lucien was at my side, following

me as I wandered down among the trees through a thicket of dead bushes to the bank of a frozen stream. The moon was hovering above the black skirt of a closeby mountain and winking, as I walked along, between the treetops.

Lucien tapped me softly on the shoulder. "I want to apologize," he said meekly, "for stirring things up with you. I know I've got Laura mad, but that happens with her and me. We can't predict each other a hundred per cent. I imagine you're convinced you've got a queer fish on your hands."

I assured him that he wasn't causing me any grief at this point, but I knew something was disturbing him. I added that, of course, I did not necessarily expect to have him tell me about it, that I did not demand a mere acquaintance pour out his soul to me in any case.

"But maybe that's the problem," he mused. "We don't pour our souls out but to a few people, and then only rarely."

"So?" I was not sure what he was driving at.

"Look," he said, "I'm coming across to you as crazy perhaps, because you don't know me, and until you do, you'll say to your self that I'm a little touched or something. Right?"

I nodded. I could not see his face which was steeped in the shadows of the trees. I began to stroll back toward the van, but he stayed where he was.

"Listen, professor," he called to me, "don't go for a minute."

I returned to the spot where we had been standing together.

"See the moon," he said, waving his hand against the sky. "It's a common sight. We've seen it many evenings of our lives, so we're not afraid of it. But suppose you had never seen the moon before. What would you think? You would think, that's an eerie object up there in the heavens. It throws out light, but no warmth. It might be a ghost, or a spaceship, or a super-

time in the wintry tomb that nature provides. They're waiting for spring, you see, to be freed. But with freedom sometimes comes madness. When we have freedom to see --"

"See what? I think I'm following you," I said, though I was actually confounded.

"You see, one spring I went mad. I can't tell you about it now. It would take too long. Sometime, perhaps, when the time is ripe, I will tell you about it. Not even my wife knows everything about it. I suppose I'm like that frozen stream. My real thoughts are wintering right now, yet soon it will be spring, and then it will be time."

Now he stepped out of the shadows and I could make out his face. It was so serene that it startled me.

"Yes," he said, "it will be time. I think I will be able to find you when it is time. Do I have your address?"

I reached into my wallet and handed him one of my cards.

"Good. We musn't talk about this to Laura. I will come back some day and see you. You know, I've been wandering now for a number of years. Not wandering in space, I mean, but wandering in my own restless hunches and imaginings. Professor, there is something coming. Something that is here now, but in truth, not yet. And I have seen it. I'm no seer of the occult variety. I have no powers. I can't even be mad any longer. I will return to California, but I will come back, and you will hear me out. When the time is ripe, I will come to you. Perhaps by then I will be able to share secrets for the first time. I've learned the secret -- with flesh and blood -- since knowing Laura. But my secrets are yours too, and ...and possibly the world's. For we are waiting for the end time to be our time. It will come, just as we all are wondering if we're all mad, just as we think that

winter is eternal. It's March now, and it will be spring in a short while. You see, professor, I have a story that is both sane and insane at once. I have seen ~~no~~—I can't tell you that now."

With that he squeezed my arm amicably and bade me follow him back to the car. Inside the van Laura was undoing her sleeping bag. I pulled down the folding bed that made up automatically from the rear seat, and offered it to my two guests, who graciously accepted. I myself blew up an air mattress and contrived a cramped, but cozy bunk on the floor in the space beneath the bed.

Laura seemed mollified. As I lay in my bedroll I could hear her whispering and cooing with Lucien up above. In a short while all was silent. It took me incalculable time to fall asleep. My mind heaved and churned as I pondered what Lucien had spoken to me out there in the moonlight. I struggled to convince myself that what he said had no depth or significance, that they were the lenient ravings of a man not altogether in balance. He had said he had been mad, yet he sincerely believed he was that way "no longer." In one respect he seemed to have a kind of intense, though somewhat inchoate vision of things which beggared clear and precise language. And in another respect, his "ravings" struck me as making some strange sense, even if I could not specify what that sense entailed. Perhaps I could not state the sense, because I refused unwittingly to concede his ultimate claim that there was a tremendous mystery escaping my notice, and that this mystery was pushing inexorably toward the threshold of revelation. Ever since a young boy I had always been wary of the night and unmanned by its wordless, wraith-like bodings; but my fears were the fears, I reasoned, of an adult hounded by the unplaced hobgoblins of childhood. When I was three years old I woke up screaming at the flickering of heat lightening through the windowpane

on a summer's evening. Even now I am a bit restive when I sleep alone in a strange room. Such fears are all too primitive. It occurred to me, however, that Lucien had been referring to something of which I should not be afraid. He was talking not about the unearthly, but the unfamiliar, and that was what made his intimations sound "mad."

That night I had bizarre and fretful dreams. At one point I opened my eyes and thought to my astonishment that I saw the moon resting on the ground right beside the trees. Its shine seemed indescribably brilliant. I was afraid to look any more, and I quickly let it pass as the figment of a dream, whereupon I did not look out again until morning.

The dawn light was now rilling through the side curtains. My guests were awake. According to my watch it was seven fifteen. We wormed out of our sleeping bags and got on the road. I invited them to have breakfast with me in Taos, but this time Laura suggested they had better hasten on their way. They hoped to reach the home of their friends in Colorado by afternoon. I left them off at the intersection where we had stopped the previous night. For a minute or so I watched them hike up the road that led north out of town. After several steps Laura waved goodbye to me, but Lucien did not turn around. I revved up the engine of the bus, and headed south to Santa Fe. I tried not to think much more about my encounter for the rest of the trip. On returning home, I mentioned the episode to my wife, who commented that she was glad I had made some company after all.

Every so often I reflected back on what had gone on between us that night. I wondered if he would keep his promise to see me once more.

It was March again, the year 1975. The day was Saturday. I had slipped over to my office that afternoon to finish grading a bale of term papers and examinations at the close of the academic quarter. After an hour,

however, I lost my concentration and began to daydream. My office is on the third floor and has a broad window with a southwest prospect toward the mountains. The mountains themselves were only faintly discernible, peeping forth at intervals from behind a mucid overcast. It was a blustery day. Swirls of snow were borne along on blasts of wind, which rumbled against the window and souged in the corners of the building. From the sky dark, ragged tusks of clouds seems to dip toward the ground and lift back up again. Then a snow flurry would made the air heavy and white, only to be dissipated quickly by the roiling wind. I noticed the fractured image of my desk lamp mirrored in the window, and I caught a glimpse of my own personage as part of the diffuse reflection, which seemed to grow transparent as the sky thickened and the light outside waned. I drew a deep breath and was about to return to my papers when suddenly I felt an obscure presence behind me. In the glass I descried my own face, but there was something which seemed to lurk behind it. Impulsively I wheeled around in my chair, and I beheld him in the doorway. I recollected every detail of his face, though his beard had grown longer and shaggier. He was wearing the same army jacket.

"So you recognize me," he said, smiling.

"Of course, how could I not remember you," I said.

"I meant what I said about coming back."

"So you did. But how did you get in the building? The doors are locked."

"The door was ajar. Perhaps you left it open for me unconsciously. I called your house. Your wife gave me the phone number, and I considered ringing you up, but I chose the element of surprise."

"Indeed," I said. "I'd wondered if you would come, if you weren't giving me a line."

"No," he said. "I was faithful and true. I said I would come. How are you, professor?"

"Fine, I presume. And you?"

He eased toward me and, espying an empty chair which I keep for student appointments, settled into it. He was grinning widely. "I came a long way, professor," he said. "It took a while, but I had to because, you see, it's the right time now."

"Time for what?" I blurted the words at him. "Stop being so goddamn enigmatic. What do you have to say to me? I don't want anymore of your oblique whatevers."

"Of course," he said assuringly. "I have something to tell you now." Then his mien became absolutely serious. "I will tell you all about it. You say you want to be a writer, professor." Springing up from his chair, he leaned across the desk at me with a fury and earnestness that took me wholly aback. "You must write it down, for my words are faithful and true."

"Write what?"

"Can you listen?"

"Yes."

"I will tell you something you may believe, but will probably not understand. But at least you must write it down. I can't hold it within me any longer. It's like hot lava shut up in my bones. You must be my voice, if that is proper."

"Do you want to dictate it to me?" I asked.

"No," he said, "you must listen, and you will remember. The right words will come to tell it in your own way later on."

And he began to recount to me his story, which I realized now would also be my story as well as that of others. I listened intently. What I

relate from hereon is reconstructed out of memory, though I have not tried to subtract one scintilla of detail, nor even the scantest thread of truth.

His story began on the main in June of 1966, when his father died. Twenty-two years old at the time, he was left without parents. The shock of his father's death, stemming from a sudden and massive heart attack, was further aggravated by his sense of complete abandonment, which had nagged him since the age of ten when his mother also had left. Perhaps his father's death in itself had not been all that devastating, since the old man was close to sixty and had a known heart condition. Expecting such a day might come Lucien had tried to prepare himself for it. While he had close, respectful relations with his father, he knew in his own soul that the time might arrive when he would find himself alone in life. No, his father's death was calamitous, because it reminded him grievously of the earlier loss of his mother, whom he had deeply loved. Her loss had not been due to natural factors, and thus the pain was deeper. The incident rankled in his memory. One spring afternoon he came home from school to find that his mother, who always presented for his arrival; was not there. When his father came from work at suppertime, he discovered a note tacked to his dresser. The note said she would not be coming back.

On that occasion his father revealed some facts about the past which as a young child he had been ignorant of. The more difficult details were divulged to him by his father shortly before his death. His mother was not German, as his family name suggested, but a French Jew from Alsace-Lorraine. Lucien had no knowledge he was half-Jewish. It was the "family secret," his father explained. The secret was kept, not because either his father or mother was ashamed of Jewish blood, but because his mother, in particular,

wanted to bury forever her terrible past. More precisely, she did not want her children aware of the horrors which she had experienced. She, along with the rest of her own parents, two brothers, and a mentally retarded sister, had been swept up in the dragnet of Jews following the Nazi occupation of France in 1940. The local authorities had marched to their house in a little village not far from Strasbourg, read the detention warrant, and spirited the family members away. A day later they were all separated from each other. His mother was told that she would be put on a train with others who had been "confined" for "security reasons" and sent to an undisclosed destination. However, she had a dreadful prescience about what lay in store for her on the journey. At that juncture she compromised herself for the sake of survival by doing something that would dog her with guilt and self-loathing for much of her life. The night before the train's departure she seduced a young male guard at the detention center. He was not German, but a French quisling employed by the Vichy government authorities. He was a mere farm boy, and she duped him into believing that she was Aryan, that she would grant him sexual favors if he would alter her papers and keep her in France. The young guard succeeded in freeing her, but extracted from her a severe price. He took her on as his personal harlot, and not only did he have an insatiable appetite for what often amounted to bestial acts, finally out of sheer boredom he began to vilify her and to beat her on the slightest pretext, all the while threatening to deliver her to the police "as a Jew" if she dared resist. Then one evening her tormentor was arrested by the Germans for being drunk and raucous in a tavern. Recognizing her chance, she took her false identity papers, and boarded a train west, apprising the gendarmes that she was traveling to visit her sister in Reims. In Reims she made contact with the Resistance, who escorted her

to Calais and managed to sneak her, together with two other Frenchmen hunted by the Nazis, across the English channel at night in a rowboat. In Britain she surrendered to the Anglo-American military command, and there she met Lucien's father, an Army lieutenant, who fell in love with her and married her within a month. In late May of 1944, about a month before D-Day, she gave birth to her son.

Nobody else in the household ten years later knew about the letter which came in the mail. The letter was from an elderly lady in Dijon, a Mme. LaMettrie, who had traced through the U.S. naturalization officials the whereabouts of Lucien's mother in order to convey to her some happy news. Lucien's mother had believed all along that her entire family was dead. But Mme. LaMettrie informed her that her retarded sister was still alive and under care in a state hospital in the countryside near her childhood home. Lucien's mother wept at the news. The disclosure, however, left her topsy-turvy. No longer able to deny her past, even to herself, she decided on the spur of the moment to make instant restitution for her double life. Perhaps it was her intractable guilt over the humiliating ruse by which she had personally escaped the holocaust. Perhaps it was a gesture of reconciliation with her original family. Perhaps it was her conviction she had somehow to ransom her heritage. She could never be anybody but a Jew, not so much in the religious sense, for she was willing at least formally to adopt the Protestant faith of her husband, but in respect to her own passion to preserve her connections with history. She would go back to France for a period to nurse her sister, though she could not tell her husband the decision. She left surreptitiously. The note said she planned to return within six months, but she never did. She had written another note for Lucien, which she laid under his pillow. It read: "My dearest son, I want

you to know how much I love you. You are too young to really know why I have to go right now, but I will explain all when I come back. I will write you soon." Several weeks thereafter the promised letter came. It described the beauty of the Vosges mountains in spring. After that there were no more letters.

Lucien pined for over a year. He waited for his mother to come back. When he could not envision her face to his satisfaction, he would steal away to his father's room and stare at the small, cameo photograph of her as a young woman in a silver frame on a bedside table. One day his father removed the picture, and Lucien was unable to find it. As the years passed his father talked less and less about her. He seemed to want to forget her, and to induce his son gently to do the same. The two of them began attending church regularly, except on mother's day, when his father always concocted some excuse for staying home. As an adolescent Lucien became very religious. He learned from the pastor's sermons about the mercy of God and the mysterious will of his Heavenly Father. He became resigned what had happened to him, and came to accept the divine plan for his life as well. He knew now only a father.

During his senior year in high school Lucien fell in love with a girl, aged fifteen, named Arleen. He dated her for over a year and became so enthralled with her that on graduation he proposed marriage to her "some day." Arleen consented happily, but the following year when Lucien went off to college (having been awarded a scholarship at a small institution near Los Angeles), the two of them slowly grew estranged from each other. The break came during Christmas vacation after they had gone a little too far petting in Lucien's parked car one evening. Perhaps Arleen had discovered for herself that she did not love him at all now. Perhaps she was punished

by her girlish compunctions for having yielded to a desire which she did not realize was so intense. At any event, several days after his return to college he received a terse letter from her declaring that everything had ended. Lucien reeled from the letter; he felt an unsearchable loneliness once again. And for many weeks thereafter he held high the torch of Arlene, as he had done with his mother. On occasions his dismay and self-pity would flare into rage; he would waver between damning himself for his own unhappiness and blaming it unmindfully on the selfishness and inconstancy of woman-kind. One day he seized the whole of Arlene's letters and dumped them into the incinerator of the dormitory where he lived, though that night he regretted tearfully what he had done. For he recognized that he had suddenly severed himself from the happiest portion of his immediate past, despite the bruising memories. Frightened, he cursed his own recklessness. He conjured up the image of Arlene, whom he tried to imagine as she had been to him in happier days. And he thought of his mother over whom he mourned again for the first time in a long spell.

The episode with Arlene left him with a confounding sense of woman's unsolvable mystery. He had loved Arlene very much, yet something had come between him on which he had not counted at all. Arlene in the letter had subtly accused him of being overbearing with her. "Lucien," she wrote, "you are too strong and stubborn. You want to make me in your own image. You say you love me, but you really love what I can give you, nothing more. You are also too much wrapped up with your religious beliefs to make me feel comfortable."

On numerous occasions he had discussed religion with Arlene. The letter startled him, because he had always been impressed with her youthful, hopeful kind of faith. He loved her because of that. Perhaps he had loved that

side of her too much. He had been extremely zealous in conveying his own faith, his will to surrender to the divine purpose. Just as his mother's leaving had accorded such a purpose, so did their love as well, including their plans for marriage and living happily together. It was what would happen, if God were just. But he seemed not to have figured out God very well and he had a hard time telling whether he was angry at God or at Arlene or at his mother. He became a somber young man, who had few friends throughout college. He plied hard at his studies, sometimes to the edge of desperation, as though success in that worldly pursuit would repair his wretched life. During his junior year he became very ill. The doctor diagnosed an ulcer and advised him to stop working so much. But it was not work itself which drove him at heart, and he did not recover. He was unable to eat without vomiting his food, and he lost considerable weight. He prayed to God, unsuccessfully, to be relieved. When he was twenty-one he gave up believing in God and in the divine purpose. After graduation he came back to his father's house in Oakland, and there, for a few weeks at least, he came to terms with himself and the universe. He talked with his father about many things with an ease and candor which had not marked their relationship before. He discovered what a true and abiding friend his father was, even though the latter never mentioned his mother. But it all came to an end much too swiftly and suddenly.

It was a mild and bright afternoon with a flickering breeze that came in from the San Francisco Bay and swished through trees and hedgerows. Lucien had driven in his car, an old and stuttering '59 Plymouth, over to Berkeley to browse through the bookstores and to hunt for a job of some kind, which he needed now that he had graduated. About four o'clock he pulled up to the house, a two-bedroom stucco residence on a quiet street up the hill south

and east from the busy intersection of MacArthur Boulevard and Broadway, not too far from the Kaiser Hospital. Built back in the early 1920s, the house which his father owned and in which he had grown up, was well-kept, but treillised with dark grape vines and climbing ivy lending it the look of undue age and ripeness. A clump of *Pyrocantha* bushes crowded the wrought iron gate at the front. Two towering *Ponderosa* pines overreached the walkway and helped keep the yard, for which the only other possible sluice of sunlight during the day was blocked by the eaves of neighboring houses, in uninterrupted shadow.

Nearing the porch, Lucien caught sight of Emery, his brindled tomcat, crouching behind a column. Emery was usually waiting around the porch to be let indoors, but this time he did not come frisking up, as he normally did, when Lucien twisted the key in the latch. The cat peered at Lucien with cold, vitreous eyes, flaunted its bushy tail, and darted off into the ivy, as though it were afraid of his very steps. The cat's behavior was strange. Within the house, though, everything appeared quite customary. Nothing was out of place. Through the bay window in the dinette at the back the sunlight was cascading in and splashing all over the shiny, teakwood table and chairs on which he and his father ate dinner each evening. The great, walnut ancestral clock, which lay on the stone mantle above the fireplace in the livingroom, continued to tick in sonorous rhythm. Next to the kitchen window a covey of playful sparrows were scampering about the twigs and chirruping loudly. On the pink tile counter beside the sink was the morning newspaper that his father had left unread that morning.

Lucien riffled through the newspaper for a few minutes. In recent days he had mulled over the possibility of securing a job as a newspaper reporter somewhere. He had majored in English while in college, and surmised that he

might have some talents in that area. Certainly he could report the news as well as the unnamed local journalists who padded the columns with dry and soulless little accounts of automobile accidents and muggings, of venal public officials at their fulsome press interviews. The front page, slathered with Associate Press wire stories, was all about the Vietnam war and the commotion in the land it was causing. The war, which he knew or thought little about, somehow worried him. Having finally graduated, he was bound to lose his student deferment. That in itself was not alarming, since the doctor had assured him he was safe from conscription because of his stomach disorder. But he was aware that every day other young men his age were being called up to fight a war which they considered senseless and atrocious, and were having to go with anxiety and loathing, or flee to Canada. Already several of his classmates, whom he knew mostly by name, had been sent away to Asia, and one had committed suicide to avoid that fate.

The newsprint bristled with language about death and mass death. Three young children had perished from a fire-alarm blaze at an apartment building in the city. A hundred or so American soldiers has been killed the day before in the jungles around Saigon. He folded the pages of newspaper back together and laid them aside. Just as he was leaving the kitchen, the telephone on the wall jingled. It was Ted Domeshek, the shop foreman at the tool and dye plant where Lucien's father was manager. Could he make it to the hospital quickly? His father had dropped unconscious and had been rushed by ambulance to the emergency ward. "Oh, my God," were Lucien's sole words as he hung up the receiver. The silence of the house swelled up into a giddy terror which stampeded through his head and settled down into the very soles of his feet. The sound of the clock

became a vicious pounding mingled with a relentless rasping noise, which he confusedly interpreted as that of the cat clawing the screen. Racing to the door, however, he found that the cat was not there. He felt cold and nauseous. But he finally mustered the resolve to confront the emergency and to do what was necessary.

On arriving at the hospital, he was informed that his father was already dead. He had not survived the ambulance ride. The attending doctor was condolent, but curt and very official as doctors who police the traffic of death from day to day inevitably are.

Lucien asked if he could see his father's body.

"Yes, well," the doctor, a stocky and balding man with furry eyebrows replied, "but it might be best if you could see the receptionist first, regarding the papers and other matters." Then he excused himself and bustled away.

Lucien did not go to the receptionist first, but hurried to where his father lay. A middle-aged nurse, sympathetic to his misfortune, greeted as he entered the whitewashed room that stunk of disinfectant. She drew off the shroud from the old man's face. Lucien had expected to see an ashen and flintlike countenance, the mask of death; but instead he beheld in his father's brow and cheeks a hale and ruddy hue which Lucien had seldom witnessed even when the old man was alive. His jaw was not stiff but supple, and his mouth arched gently into a placid smile.

Lucien stared at the corpse. His father seemed almost vital, and Lucien had the odd feeling that the lips were poised to speak a few last, consoling words to the bereaved. Shyly he reached out to lay his fingers on the face. The nurse noticed his astonishment.

"It is extraordinary," she said benignly. "I guess that's what

happens when one dies suddenly. It must have been beautiful and easy for him."

He continued to gaze into his father's face.

"I know how hard it is for you," the nurse went on, "but you must rejoice that he died in peace. God must have had a special blessing for him, if you believe in God."

"I don't," Lucien snarled. "No," he said after a pause, "I can't thank God for any kind of death," and he began to weep. "Don't you see," he objected, transfixing her with anger, "a happy death can only be enjoyed by the dead. I can't. It wasn't his time to die, and it's not my time to have this. Oh, God."

And he turned from her to rush out the door. The sight of death, no matter how peaceful, now struck him as horrible. Everything in the hospital reeked of death. He was furious with his father for dying that way, in fact, for dying at all. Furthermore, he was distraught that he had not been able to be at his father's side at that cruel instant, to hear him speak some last words, even if they had only been banal. His father's words would never come to him again, and that realization pressed on his mind with a wrath which threatened to annihilate whatever courage remained for him. The thought of his mother trilled through his brain, but now in the midst of his frenzy it had no sting. It was just one among many spinning memories whose energy was being rapidly spent. Walking down the corridor, his wish to run away immediately collapsed, and he halted, with his head in his arms and sobbing against the wall.

The nurse came up quickly behind him. "Sir, we have a chapel. Possibly ~~—~~ I know what's happening to you right now."

He spun around and looked at her shamefaced. "It's alright," he

begged, "just let me be what I am for awhile."

Now there came to his ears the dull chatter of the hospital personnel on the floor. Down the hallway two candy-stripers, pretty little blonde girls in their teens, were carrying on a giggly conversation. They made him feel guilty for being so wrought up. He remembered what the doctor had said about the "papers." He hunted for the right desk and was told by an orderly to go to the hospital lobby. Soon he was in a jostle of people leaving and entering through a revolving glass door. He had gone too far. Near an exit sign, he found the desk. A young woman in a lavender, spaghetti-strap dress greeted him with a pert smile. He was struck by her somewhat homely appearance. She was quite skinny, which showed both in her bare, lean shoulders and in her meager breasts tucked away against her body like the frail blossoms of an early spring crocus. Her face, arms, and chest were thicketed with deep freckles, and she had long flosses of carroty hair which dangled behind her head.

"I'm sorry," Lucien said to her, "but you see, my father died here today, and I need to get the right things filled out and signed, so I can take care of him."

The young woman cocked her head and gave him a businesslike glance. "Have you claimed the body?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Have you made arrangements with a funeral home?"

"No. I was just informed."

"It would be best you do that before we give you the release."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you should settle with a mortuary first. Then we can put everything in order. Did your father have insurance?"

"Yes, but what does that matter. He's dead."

"I mean with regard to the emergency room services."

"Yes, he did, I presume, with his company."

"Which was?"

"Lamda, Incorporated, of San Leandro."

The young woman sat at her typewriter transcribing the information onto a yellow form.

"His birthdate?"

"February eight, nineteen eleven."

"Married, widower, or divorced?"

"None of those."

"I don't understand."

"Say divorced."

"Any surviving children other than yourself?"

"No."

"Address?"

"279 Monte Vista Avenue."

"His name, please, and yours."

"Lucien Lastman. His name was Karl."

"One more item. Place of birth?"

"Hartford, Connecticut."

The young woman plucked the yellow form out of the typewriter with ceremonial dash, and handed him a blue copy for his signature. "You need to arrange for the services, if that's what you're intending to do," she said. "I can direct you to someone who can assist you here at the hospital."

As she spoke, however, her words droned off into a curious bemusement.

She looked at him, slightly stunned. "You're trying to hide how upset

you really are," she declared.

Such a gratuitous observation took Lucien aback. He thought that he had gained a hold on himself and had been concealing his mood well. His eyes met hers in a gaze of surprise and recognition, and he had the quizzical sense that she was no longer merely a clerk with whom he had to carry out a tedious transaction, but a person who had some intimate knowledge of him which seemed quite untimely and outlandish. He studied her cautiously.

"You must have psychic abilities," he chortled.

"Oh no," she said, "but I know nobody, even you, can come up to me and talk to me in such a trying situation as if they were simply answering to a census taker. I have to fill out these forms all the time, you know, and it all has to do with somebody close to them who died, but they never let on that's what it's all about. They think they can be brave by covering it all up with that cool sort of matter-of-factness. But they're not being honest with me. They deal with death by making a mere *thing* out of it, if you know what I mean. And they deal with *me* by treating me only as the mouth that asks them questions. They give me the information, they leave, and they're never really aware that I was here all the time taking these facts -- about the dead, that is -- down on the typewriter. You know, I've typed a thousand bits of information about the dead, and they never wonder if it's all real to me. I guess they think it can't be, because they're the ones who are all sad, angry, and hung-up, as you are, though you won't admit it to me, because why should you? I just work this typewriter, correct?"

She broke into a wry, toothy grin. Lucien was a bit embarrassed.

"I get what you're saying," he said. "No, I suppose I wasn't actually figuring you at all in the picture."

"Sure," she said, "that's your right. You're the aggrieved one."

"What's your first name?" she asked.

"Lucien."

"That's French, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I've got a French name too. It's Lille." She pronounced it "Lilly."

"It sounds like the flower, but I was named after a town in France. My father was in the war and happened to be near there on the day I was born, so he named me after it. My father died too, some years back."

"I'm sorry."

"It's OK. It was sudden. He was killed in a private plane crash. He was a pilot, but he got a little too reckless. You can't fly a twin-engine job like a fighter-bomber. He was careless, and it cost him his life."

"How long ago?" Lucien thought that he might be prying, but since she had broached the topic he would inquire, if only to keep the conversation going.

"Aha." Her face brightened. "Now you're being matter-of-fact again. You don't really want to know, but you presumed it was a good thing to say, correct?"

"No, not really."

"Yes, really. You know, Lucien, I could talk things out with you, if you wanted. I guess what I'm really saying is that we don't need to carry this chatter on anymore at such a superficial level. I'm sick of having to screw around with the subject of death. I don't get along very well with this kind of job. You can't really talk to people, especially those who need somebody to talk to. I'd walk away from this typewriter in a flash, if I could. But you don't need to hear my complaints."

"Do you want to get together?" he asked, realizing that she was making

some sort of friendly advance toward him, even though he was not sure whether he was prepared to discuss his problems with anybody at the moment. He did not find her particularly attractive, and he was uncertain as to what she genuinely had in mind.

"Yes, that would be nice."

"After work?"

"I'm ready to quit about now, anyway."

Lucien had not noticed that it was almost five-thirty, and he was on the spot.

"But can you leave just now?"

"I can take off. I should have quit at five. Listen, let me tell my supervisor." And she got up from her desk and disappeared into a back room. It seemed that she was being inordinately forward with him. No girl before had ever taken such a precipitous and profound interest in him, even the ones with whom he had been acquainted under ordinary circumstances. His feet tapped the floor nervously while he waited for her return.

She appeared in the doorway with a gleeful smile. "God, I'm free for another day," she warbled. "Let's go," and she clutched his arm. "I'd like to get out of this charnel house, if you don't mind."

Outside the late afternoon sun was soaking the pavement and glaring in their faces. He took her to his car, which he had parked at a pay lot, and they drove off in the direction of his house.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked. "I ought to go home for a minute -- I just live a half-mile or so from here -- and make a phone call."

"To the funeral home?"

"No, to one of my dad's associates. He should know."

"Can it wait?" She inched up to him on the seat.

"Yes, it can wait a while. Why don't we have dinner together?"

"Fine. Anywhere would please me."

"We can go to Berkeley."

"I'm agreeable." She gave him a warm, ingratiating smile.

"But I really should stop by home first."

"OK, but don't get wrapped up in something you can't handle. That's why you need me right now."

They came to the house.

"Just a minute, if you wait here, I'll only be a minute."

But Lille opened the door before he could complete his sentence.

"I really don't think you want to come in," he said. "There's nothing..."

"I know. You do what you have to do. I just don't like to sit in parked cars, and besides, your yard looks very intriguing." She glanced idly at the wrought iron gate. "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!" she exclaimed whimsically and with laughter, but then her face wrinkled with mock seriousness. "Oh, I apologize, I shouldn't make light of these things. Don't mind me. But Lucien, you musn't be so grave, after all. No pun intended. After all..." And she sidled up to him, gently taking his arm again. "Lucien, I want to be honest with you. It may sound crazy, all of a sudden like this, but I really like you, and I want you to know that."

Her words pierced his melancholy. Something was happening to him, and it was all like a strange a pleasant little fantasy. His brooding thoughts about the tragedy of the day, the loss of his father, the sight of the corpse, began to melt away in the warmth of the evening. He stared up at the sky. The sun was sending flat, brilliant shafts of light out from behind humps of woolly clouds, and the birds were twittering in the black needles of the pine trees.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said, and he took her hand as he unclasped the gate.

The cat was waiting by the steps. Spying the animal, Lille stole up to it and stooped down to stroke its fluffy head. The cat rubbed affectionately against her ankles and gave out a faint purr.

"He's beautiful," she said.

"He was out of sorts a few hours ago," Lucien said. "I think he knew what was up. He knew that Dad had the heart attack even before I got the telephone call."

"Yes," she said, "cats know things we don't. See how loving he is right now. He's convinced things are going to be alright, aren't you," she said to the cat. "What's his name?"

"Emery."

"I like that name. I've got two Angora cats myself -- Belle and Taffy. They're at home now with my mother in Seattle." She scratched the cat's ruff vigorously, and it rolled over on its back inviting her to caress its underside. "That's enough," she said to the cat firmly. "You'll get plenty of loving from me."

"Are you from Seattle originally?"

"Yes. I was brought up there."

He opened the front door. "You can come in, if you really want?"

She followed him inside.

"Let me make that call," he said.

Searching through the telephone directory on the counter, he found the home number of Ted Domeshek. He dialed, but there was no answer.

"Perhaps he's still at work," she said.

"No, I'm sure he's left. I can wait a little while." Then he thought

that he ought to call his Aunt Dorothy, his father's sister, in Hartford. He barely knew his Aunt Dorothy. She was eleven years younger than his father, and he had only encountered her once, right after his mother left, when she came out west to visit for a day. Her number was scribbled in a small address book in a kitchen drawer. He rang, but again there was no answer.

"Damn!" He hung up the phone.

"I guess that means there really isn't anybody to tell," she said coyly.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just a reminder of the fact that everybody dies alone."

Lille had ensconced herself on the living room sofa. She was fingering the hard, knurly little leaves of a miniature jade plant that grew in a tiny, white plastic pot on the coffee table. Her dress was drawn up slightly above her knees, revealing her pale and delicate stockingless legs. There was a small bluish, bruise mark on one of her calves. She looked up at him and smiled. Her face, at least, was somewhat pretty, he thought. She had bright, hazel eyes and a stub nose that was very enchanting.

"Well, what do we do now?" she asked.

"We could go for dinner, but I would like to get hold of somebody first."

"You still haven't called the funeral home," she said teasingly.

"No. I suppose in the morning."

"Why don't we talk awhile? Do you have anything to drink?"

"Beer?"

She nodded. Lucien went to the kitchen and brought back two frothing glasses.

Lille sipped her glass pensively.

"Lucien, are you wondering how we happened to be here right now?"

"Yes, a bit."

"Do you ever believe in providence, or in fate?"

"I used to believe it, but I've quit trying to make sense out of the way things happen."

She grinned. "I don't believe that much of what happens is determined, or all that, but there *are* some things that seemed planned in a way we don't comprehend. For instance, I *knew* that I wasn't going right home this evening."

Lucien gaped at her inquisitively, and she looked slightly abashed.

"Now don't get me wrong," she said. "I bet you're reasoning, well this was some sort of setup, or I forced myself on you because I had it all planned out from the beginning. That's not what I'm implying. You see, Lucien, I had the sense this morning that something significant would happen to me today, and when I came across you, well, I thought I'd better heed the call of destiny. Do you get what I'm driving at?"

"You thought that leaving with me was following your hunch."

"Yes, that's right. I never had you personally in mind, but..." She shrugged. "That's the way it turned out."

Because he was gulping his beer, a speck of foam lodged in Lucien's nostrils, causing him to sneeze and to spill a little of the beer on his shirt. As he wiped the beer off blushing, she leaned over and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Even spilling the beer," she remarked.

"As what?"

"Part of fate."

"Phooey. You're talking about prophecies after the fact."

"I don't know what that means."

He could see that she was easing up to him as a polite signal of her intentions. Earlier he had been positive that he did not want to make love to her, given the opportunity. The thought of making love, when mingled with all his morbid feelings and anxieties, was definitely incongruous, if not distasteful. But somehow it didn't seem to matter. He was eager to do what she seemed to have in mind, perhaps he was pleased to find a woman so genuinely fond of him. And he dealt away any scruples he might have had then about what might appear improper or impulsive. Smiling broadly at her for the first time, he reached over, took her chin, and kissed her. She curled up in his arms, her eyelids shut, her mouth pushing gladly his. He was happy too. He had not been so happy in a long while. It was a miracle of sorts. The clock on the mantle ticked away through the vanishing minutes. Then she pulled away with little, straining sighs, and she gazed at him, tamely and meekly.

"So are we friends?"

"Of course," he said, and he placed another kiss on her neck.

"Lucien," she said, "you've got to tell me more about yourself, and I'll let you know about myself."

"What do you want to know?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly," she replied, glancing about the house.

"I take it you're all alone now."

But he did not feel lonely now. It all had the piquancy of an unfurbished, little fairy tale. Joy had driven out despair. Gratefully, he beamed at her.

"Really," she said. "I didn't have it planned this far."

"It doesn't matter," he said.

The Coming I take it, your mother, she's gone too?"

"Yes."

"Did she die? Was it tragic?"

"No," he whispered. He did not want to discuss that affair.

"You seem to know death well," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know." She nestled back against his chest and looked up at the ceiling. "Lucien, I have an odd feeling about you. I feel . . . welll . . . I feel that you've brought something to me. I can't put my finger on it, but it's beautiful. That's all I can say. You see, Lucien, there's something big about my life that's not complete. One part of it's my job. I'm one of those college graduate types who's not really doing with my life what I ought to be doing. I'm an artist, you know. I got my degree from Mills, right here in Oakland, last year. I was going to splash my life--my moods, my intuitions, my experiences--on rough canvas. But I wound up typing sickness and death. It's such an aboration, of my aptitudes, that is. But even I was going to spend more time with my brush and paints, there still was something I needed before I could color the world the way I wanted. You see, you can only paint with love. Do you understand, Lucien? Maybe I'm getting too far ahead of myself to talk about . . . love."

"No."

"I don't want to say at this point that I love you," she said with an air of abstraction. "Love has to find itself out, but I think the experiment has been set up."

"Of course," he said, and he kissed her again. "Of course."

The house was growing dark with the advent of twilight. He suggested dinner to her once more.

"I'm not all that hungry anymore," she sighed.

He offered to fix something in the kitchen, as there was left over lamb roast in the refrigerator for sandwiches. She nodded dreamily, and he sauntered into the kitchen to put the meal together. They sat down at the table together and munched the sandwiches along with more glasses of beer. The mellow and diffuse light of a Tiffany lamp, hanging from the ceiling, dusted her hair like moonglow. She reached across the table and nabbed his hand, caressing it with shy strokes.

"Lucien," she said finally, "I've something else I want to tell you. It's queer; it's downright maniacal, but I feel I've always known this house, as though it were my house, my home. Isn't that what a good guest is supposed to say?"

He did not reply. His thoughts were all converging on one aim now, about which he had no qualms. Hurriedly he finished his meal, and watched her silently as she went about doing the same. She took her time, then mopped her mouth with a paper napkin. "OK," she said with sweet satisfaction.

He rose and led her away from the chair back to the couch. She requested some music, and he switched on the radio. Strains of some unidentified rock music came wailing and raging into the room. The sounds, however, were soon cut short by the yammering of a disc jockey, whose speech immediately fused into the lyrical bleat of more guitars overborn by the gravel voice of the pop singer Bob Dylan: "I want you, I want you, so bad." He went back to turn out the Tiffany lamp, leaving the room dark, but luminescent from the dusk and the firefly streaks through the curtains from a faraway street light.

". . . with the king of spades, and talked with her chambermaid. . ."

They were kissing with deep plunges into the murkiness of each other's face and body, and he could hear her breathing fitfully. The radio blared:

". . . the cracked bells and washed out horns, blow into my face with scorn. . ." She was pressing on, much faster than he was. Her hand gamely slid through the buttons of his shirt and on to his bare chest. He felt the glassy skin of her back and the tight, little nubs of her breasts. He did not have to force her, as she was the one who was urging them forward, as though she were a priestess summoning some spirits from a cloud. Her fingers were now exploring his lap, where they fumbled to find the stalk of his erect penis. When they reached there, he trembled, captured at last by her hot, tendrilous fingers. She let out a tiny moan. Then she gave a start, like a fluttering sparrow.

"No." she panted. "It's going too fast. Lucien, wait a moment," and she padded off into the shadows of the house. He heard the bathroom door creak softly. As he stared out in the darkness, the song on the radio ebbed away, and a raucous commercial, a jingle advertising a new automobile, came on. He was anxious about her absence. He could hear nothing but the loud radio, and he began to worry that she had fled from him. Perhaps she had sudden and shaming scruples about what was going on. He remembered Arlene. Perhaps, like Arlene, she was silently blaming him, and he grew restive and angry, for he knew that she was the one who had led him on.

The music resumed. Another entire song went by, and the disc jockey burst in again, then more music. He was afraid. The sense of his dead father was stalking him all of a sudden. He called for her. A minute passed. The door creaked, and he looked up to see a white, ethereal shape near the hall leading to the bedroom. There was a pause in the music, and he heard her cooing to come her way.

She was beckoning him toward his father's bedroom. He saw now that she was naked. Her body glimmered, like a white crypt, in the faint light.

She shoved open the door to the bedroom, but something discomfited him.

"No, Lille," he breathed. "That's where Dad slept. It'd be a sacrilege."

"Why?" she protested. "He's not here."

"No, he isn't." The dark nipples of her breasts stood out from her pale torso, like the heads of white daisies. She seemed so innocent of propriety.

"He'd be happy for you," she murmured. "Come," and she moved toward him with outstretched arms. He could not resist her. In an instant he was undressed together with her, and they were lying atop the sheeting of the great, flabby bed. She said nothing, but pulled him tenderly onto her, etching her finger playfully down his back across his buttocks. She kissed him deeply. Slowly their bodies merged, then ravelled together in heaving embraces. He tried to enter her.

"You've got to open me up," she whispered with a slight note of rebuke, and she placed his hand in the right spot. Her legs tensed. She was rocking back and forth on the bed, then furiously, fastening her lips to his, and commanding him wordlessly to quench her desire. No longer did he have any control over her. Her eyes were shut, and it was though she had departed for another universe. He struggled with her and with himself. Suddenly he felt cold and drained of emotion. She wanted too much of him, for he was not at all experienced. Rolling on top of her, he fought to reach the ecstasy she demanded of him, but he was unable. At last he gave up, exhausted, and with acute embarrassment.

"Damn," he uttered with an agony that failed to justify his own concern about failure.

Now she opened her eyes in a daze, and he expected the worst. But she was kind and forgiving, even apologetic.

"Oh Lucien," she said, "I didn't mean to frighten you. I get carried away. The time wasn't exactly right, I guess, but we can learn together."

"I'm sorry," he whined. "You musn't think bad of me. It was the first time,"

and he squeezed a tear. Suddenly she was like an alien in his bed.

"I don't," she said sunnily, drawing the covers over the both of them. "We must sleep and forget for now. Tomorrow."

Throughtout the night he had awful dreams. He dreamed he was running down an empty hospital corridor in search of the room of his father. But he could not locate the room, and he staggered through a great, sliding panel door into a garden, which too was void of people. Lilacs, oleanders, and larkspur grew in confused and magled stands. There was a fissured, marble birdbath and a solitary belvedere with a brass staircase spiraling up to an observation deck. Climbing tje staircase, he found himself peering out over the Bay and at one of the bridges, swathed in an eerie mist. Out of the fog, on the burnished water, Lille came gliding toward him, dressed in a satiny, fairy gown. She was frowning.

He awoke to the piping of birds outside the window. He noticed that Lille had gotten out of bed. Quickly he dressed and hunted for her. The house was as still as the hour of matins, except for the familiar clock's ticktock. Emery was scratching at the front screen, as he had been left out all night. The cat bounded in as Lucien opened the door, mewling and purring in a feline dither, and scudded into the ketichen, where he heard Lille softly coaxing the animal. Clad in her clothing of the day before, she was nibbling from a box of bran flakes which she had fetched from the cupboard. His appearance gave her a start.

"I didn't hear you get up."

"I was as quiet as a pussy cat."

She held out the box of bran flakes. "Would you like some? I found them. I'm always famished when I first get up."

"Lille, I'm sorry about last night."

Cocking her head, she gazed at him with arch amusement. "What's there to be sorry about? You did your thing."

"Oh, come off it. You must feel like any other woman." With that comment she slunk up to him and draped her arms about his neck. "Don't let it worry you," she said complacently and squashed his nose with a stab of the finger. "Men get all concerned about performance." She spoke the last word with derision. "The point is --"

"Yes?"

"The point is not what happened on the mere physical plane. That's temporal, you see. It can be done over, and if it works, well. But Lucien --" Her eyes sparked with girlish gaiety. "But Lucien, but Lucien, I've --- dammit, I want to say it right. Now --" She kissed him wildly. "I'm in love." She gave him a hangdog look. "Do I mean it? I don't know. Yes, yes, I do. Oh Lucien, have you ever been in love before?"

"Once, but it didn't work out."

"The first ones never do. They're like the early tulips that wither in the snow."

"You're poetic," he said.

"I'm an artist. Lucien, say you love me, if you do." Her speech quavered, as though she were chagrined from what she had just asked him to do. Her challenge was disconcerting. He wanted to say exactly what she dared him to say, but her levity grated on him. Did he really love her? Yes, he supposed, but he felt more the charm of love than a love for her in particular. For years he had craved love -- the love of a woman. The peculiarity of the situation into which he had been thrown stopped his appetite.

Enfolding her with a strong hug, he said finally, "I love you."

"Lucien, do you believe in God?"

"No, not really." He wondered why she had brought that up. He had already hinted at his views on the subject.

"I'm not talking about fate," she said. "I'm talking about God. I think God is love."

He recalled the phrase from the Bible, and he mentioned that fact to her.

"I know what the Bible says. I've heard preachers recite that line with their tiring twaddle. No, I'm asking, do they take it seriously? God is love. Love is God. Is God more than love? That's what they don't understand. God and love are one and the same thing, I believe. It's not the inclusion of one class of things in another, the predicate being inadequate to the subject. That's a distinction I learned from philosophy," she said, smirking with self-congratulation.

"I don't know," he said, not being interested in philosophy.

"You don't have to know, you have to *find out*," she caroled. And she broke past him into the living room. "What's today?"

"Wednesday."

"The day after."

"And the day after that?"

"You like to talk in riddles, don't you?"

"It's the only way to get sense out of things."

"There are things to do today." He realized he would have to attend to burying his father, and ~~she~~ he should call Ted Domeshek. It was strange that Ted himself had not called. Possibly, he had learned already what had happened. He noticed it was almost eight o'clock. "Aren't you going to be late for work?"

His question caught her off guard. "Oh yes," she said, pondering a moment. "No, I'm not going to work today. I need to be here. I couldn't sit at that desk for eight hours thinking about --"

An absence came over her, as if she were plotting much more than this simple decision. Staring toward the window, she said, after scuffling with her thoughts, "No, I couldn't. Lucien, it's ordained, I have to be here with you."

Her decision pleased him immensely. It gave him comfort that he would not have to deal with the matters of the day alone. And, besides, she was letting him know that she was committed to him. She did love him, although it was astounding she could do it so recklessly. The prospect was, to say the least, frightening, but he

tried not to think about it.

"I'm glad."

"I'll call my supervisor and tell her I'm sick. I'll say I'm down with beriberi. Not enough nutrition on my job, you know." She laughed. "No, I'll wait til tomorrow, and then explain. Where shall we go today?"

"The funeral home."

"Of course, I forgot. Lucien, I can make you breakfast. She went back into the kitchen and began rifling through the refrigerator. "Some scrambled eggs? I can make scrambled eggs."

She went about cooking him breakfast. He wandered outside and picked up the morning newspaper on the front lawn. The paper was damp, as it had been tossed by the newsboy into a patch of wet grass left by the sprinkler the day before. There was more news about the war. "Seventy-five yanks dead from fighting near DaNang. "Western Senator critical of administration war goals." His mind was elsewhere. He wondered how to dispose of his father's remains. He did not want to view the body again, nor did he desire a pompous ceremony with people whom he did not know well at all and about whom he cared little.

Flipping through the yellow pages, he found a mortuary with a nearby address. A woman came on the line with a santimonious "hello" and "good morning," listened to him for a few seconds, then with an orderly air connected him with the funeral director. The funeral director, a Mr. Davey, heard him out politely. with businesslike aplomb and no hint of grief Lucien attempted to talk to Mr. Davey, who had a pulpy Texas twang; Lucien was suspicious of whatever "sympathy" the man might offer. He was convinced that all morticians were hypocritical and venal, and he wished he did not have to be going through with the entire affair. Mr. Davey recommended cremation. "That would suit your needs," he drawled, "especially if you want to dispense with unnecessary details -- and ceremony."

Lucien thanked Mr. Davey and hung up. Lille had set on the table scrambled eggs and toast, as well as instant coffee, exhaling in beige, plastic mugs.

"The guy at the funeral home suggested cremation."

"Did your father want that?"

"He never said."

"Is it in his will?"

"I'm sure it's not." Lucien had never read his father's will.

"Some people's religion forbids it."

"My father didn't say anything about it." His father, like himself, had been Presbyterian. So far as he knew, there was no religious ban in the church on cremation.

"Then we're all right," Lille said. "I think that would be best. anyway. I hate it when they doll the corpse all up, and the relatives come to snivel and grieve. It makes it hard to forget -- and for the living to go on living. You can take the ashes out to the sea and fling them to the wind."

He smiled at her.

When they were done with breakfast, he called his aunt again. Still there was no answer. Lucien sighed and called back the funeral home. The funeral home would pick up the body, if he could come out and sign the appropriate papers.

Lille asked to accompany him to the mortuary. It was a bright and warm morning. They drove out of the city and up into the hills, which had changed from their winter verdancy into a desolate, cornflake brown, as they did at this time each year, from the rainless summer weather. Spots of live oak and groves of eucalyptus hugged the otherwise vacant hillsides through which the road meandered until it emptied back onto a narrow esplanade with a clutter of new, freshly landscaped ranch houses along wide asphalt streets and a forest of sprinkler jets whizzing about in the sunlight. About a mile further on they came to the access road for the mortuary. A black, painted steel pylon hinged to stone turrets marked the entrance, where there began a narrow lane flanked by blooming acacia trees

Lucien introduced Lille, who seemed to blush slightly.

"Very pleased to make your acquaintance," Haskings said. "You'll have to come again with Lucien to our church."

Lille gave him a correct smile. Haskings folded the handkerchief neatly and stuffed it back into a pocket beneath his gown. Lucien thought it proper at this time to inquire about the fee for the service.

Haskings smiled. "Please, it's alright. We can take care of that later." Looking up at the sun, he muttered: "It's finally summer, isn't it now?" Ted and Liz suddenly appeared again. Lucien wished they would stop bothering him, but they had in mind to say something to Haskings instead.

"Reverend Haskings," Liz trilled, we wanted to thank you -- thank you so much for handling it as you did."

At that point Lucien excused himself and went back with Lille to the car. Lille said she was very glad it was over. "I hate sermons!"

He had hated the sermon as well. He hated having to put his father to rest in such a way. The image of the cross kept popping up in his mind, and he became furious with himself for having submitted to Haskings' service. It all seemed a vicious farce. Lille was right -- he was too conventional to let it be any other way. Then again, he had no right to feel so strongly in that manner. After all, they -- Haskings, the Domesheks, and the others -- were trying to do the best they could for him, even if the result seemed hollow. After all, they were good people.

Lille remained quite the whole way home. When they got out of the car, however, her face met him with a puckish smile, and she began giggling. Lucien asked her what was so funny.

"It's the absurdity of it all," she cackled. "Come on, I know what we can do." She gravvied his hand and led him suspensefully into the house, where burst into wild laughter.

"Dammit, what's so funny?" But he was starting to laugh too. Her peculiar

and forsyntia interspersed with sinuous beds of varicolored flowers. Puffs of yellow pollen sifted down from the acacias, blanketing the roadway.

The reception building for the mortuary was a soulless, rust-brick and tinted glass miscreation. Beneath the overhang, just before one entered the vestibule, a little cyanic tile fountains was splash-ng. At the desk Lucien asked for Mr. Davey. The receptionist buzzed him somewhere in the building, and in less than a minute Mr. Davey came strutting down the red carpeted stair. He was a thick-hided mastadon of a man; his whole form gellied in his blue suit, and his jowls flapped against a creviced, sunburnt neck. Yet he turned out to be a very discreet gentleman. Without mincing words, he escorted the two of them into his office, referring to them as "Mr. and Mrs. Lastman." The death papers were awaiting signature.

"Yes, Mr. Lastman," he sniffed as they walked away, "you can trust us to care best for your father. You may pick up his ashes day after tomorrow."

Lucien wanted to go right home, but Lille was fascinated with the gardens. Off in the shade of some walnuts were cankering rows of tombstone and flat grave markers. Somewhat further loomed the granite facade of a mausoleum. And there were numberless varieties of flowers in plots and in enormous redwood planters -- irises, chrynsanthymums, fuchsias, azaleas, gladiolias, hydrangeas, and lilies. Lille wandered out among the flowers. A clump of lavender irises caught her eye. She bent over and plucked one, then presented her trophy to him with the glib innocence of a child in the wildwood.

Lucien was irritated. "That wasn't a smart thing to do," he said.

She peeped at him with a sry, but slightly wounded expression. Then her face became defiant. "Why? The dead can't enjoy them."

"Because they don't belong to us." He caught himself soundling like a father lecturing sternly to his naughty, little daughter.

"Oh, Lucien, I didn't realize you could be uptight." Now it was he who was worried she might be angry with him.

"I'm sorry, I was afraid someone might have seen you."

"So what if they did? They're going to charge you an arm and a leg for burying the old man. The least they can do is let us have one of their flowers. Isn't it beautiful?" she asked, as she mooned over the iris.

Her frivolity was starting to bother him. He resented her calling his father "the old man." The thought of the cremation passed before him. He watched the pollen falling from the trees; it reminded him his father would soon be dust as well. Why couldn't she take it as seriously as he? There was a brash irreverence about her which he both admired and felt disgusted with. Of course, she had never known his father.

She was not paying any attention to him. She scampered off toward the graveyard and gadded among some older, high, baroque tombstone. He went after her. She was studying the inscription on one of them. *Arnold A. Shopneck and Marie V. Shopneck*. The dates were at least two generations old. A weather-bitten trellis of climbing roses had been set beside the tombstone.

"Do you see how they used to make death ornamental?" she remarked. She was still holding the flower.

He did not answer. Up above he could hear the doleful whirr of a small airplane. She moved on, away from him.

"Lille, we'd better be going."

"Sure," she said. "But it's lovely here."

In the car she was disturbingly quiet. Finally, he blurted out: "Look, I didn't mean to be so hard on you about the flower. I was startled, that's all."

"Sure," she said, glancing at him with indifference. "I know." She reflected for a moment, then muttered something to herself. "Lucien," she said aloud, "there's part of me you can't have. I want you to be aware of that."

Her mood baffled him. What could he have done or said to make her be that way? A mysterious side of her personality seemed to have been dredged up. A veil

had been drawn between them. He prayed not to upset her again.

An unfamiliar, chocolate-colored Chevrolet Impala was parked in front of the house when they got home. He noticed that Lille had left the iris, its dainty petals now drooping in the heat, on the upholstery of the front seat. A man and a woman were loitering on the porch in wait for him. Lucien recognized Ted Domeshek, and he presumed the woman, middle-aged and matronly, was Ted's wife.

Domeshek greeted Lucien diffidently. "We just stopped by," he said. Domeshek was a lank and grizzled man with wire spectacles on his nose. He was dressed in courderoy slacks and a loose-fitting, creamy sport shirt. "We got the news, and we wanted to pay our respects." His wife, who was carrying a bouquet of pink roses, managed a starched smile.

"It was a terrible thing" Ted Domeshek continued. "We called the hospital this morning. You must have tried to reach us last night, but we were out. Is it alright now if we come in?"

Lille was holding back at a distance, next to the gate.

"Yes," Lucien replied. "Here, I want you to meet a friend of mine," and he beckoned to Lille, who came shyly up to them.

"Pleased to meet you," Ted said. His wife nodded.

Lucien opened the door. The house smelled a little musty. It was funny that he had not observed the odor earlier. One was never aware of the smell of his own house. The smell becomes only apparent when one has been away for some time.

Ted and his wife seated themselves on the sofa. His wife handed Lucien the roses. "These are for Karl's memory," she said with ceremony.

Ted gave Lucien a questioning look. "I don't really know if you've met my wife."

Lucien shook his head.

"This is Liz," he said.

Despite her plump and pleasant face, Liz had the dowdy appearance of so many working class women over forty who inhabit the supermarkets and bowling alleys on weekdays. Her frosted hair was stacked up in an outsize bouffant; her cheeks were rouged and her mouth gummy with a salmon-colored lipstick. A tumid, silk blouse with gray sequins at the waist flopped over a pair of ivory torreador pants that fitted so tight as to make her hips seem ready to pop out. Liz reminded him of a housekeeper his father had hired when he was in junior high school.

Ted Domeshek himself looked more respectable. He had a thick, dry head of hair combed into a light swirl at the forehead. His shoes were impeccably shiny, and he maintained a deadpan, paternal manner which had always made Lucien feel deferential to him the times he had visited the house. Lucien remembered many lengthy and humorless conversations which Ted and his father had carried on in the living room. Lucien's father had described Domeshek simply as "a level-headed guy." The Domesheks were also members of his father's church. They were reputed to be quite devout.

"Lille is a friend of mine," Lucien said blandly.

"Oh yes," Liz put in.

"Your acquaintance must be recent," Ted said to Lille. "Karl never mentioned you."

Lille smiled politely. "Yes, our acquaintance is rather recent."

"We're very sorry about Karl," Ted said. "He was such a fine man. He was very proud of you, Lucien. It was a terrible thing -- such a terrible thing. He was with me on the job, you know, when he just dropped." Ted paused solemnly. "It was hard for him to talk, but he insisted that I get you right away, Lucien."

"We were praying for him last night," Liz added, "and for you too. I know how hard it is. Do you have any relatives in the area?"

Lucien mentioned that the only close relative was his Aunt Dorothy in Pennsylvania,

and that he still had not been able to contact her.

With a warmth of concern, Lille said, "well, of course, you have us to turn to. We want to do everything we can to help, but we don't, of course, want to interfere." Inspecting Lille with casual approval, she said, "but I'm sure this nice young lady is caring for you."

Lille smiled weakly and shrunk away to the kitchen.

While Ted had been talking, he had pulled out a green, bound, pocket edition of the Bible without opening it.

"Have you arranged for a service?" Ted asked.

"Not yet," Lucien replied. He had not considered the matter seriously.

"I've told Reverend Haskings." Haskings was the pastor of the Mountain View Presbyterian Church, his father's church. "He should be calling on you."

"Thank you," Lucien said, though he did not really desire to see Reverend Haskings at this point. He did not know Haskings very well, only his somnolent Sunday sermons. Their only contact was in shaking hands after church on several occasions -- that was all.

"We've been praying for you," Liz said.

At last Ted opened the Bible, cautiously, and said: "If you don't mind, Liz and I are fond of this passage. It's from First Corinthians." He looked down to read. *So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.* He stopped reading and peered at Lucien from under his spectacles. "I think this tells us we should be rejoicing in Karl's glory. There's no dishonor in what's happened. We have to rejoice that he has a spiritual body."

Lucien stared at Ted blankly, trying to appear consoled. "That's very fine," he said. "Dad would have appreciated your concern."

"It gives us hope," Liz said.

Just then Lille returned.

"I hope you're a young lady of great faith," Liz said to her triumphally.

"When we're sad, we need others for our strength, too." And she stretched out her hand to Lille, who let her give it an encouraging squeeze. "Do you go to church around here?" she asked Lille.

Lille shook her head. "I'm from Seattle," she said.

"You must come to our church," Lille said. "You would love Pastor Haskings."

"At the service perhaps," Ted suggested.

"I have to make the arrangements today," Lucien said.

"I hope everything is done really nice," Liz said in a bubbly voice.

"People don't give much thought to funerals today, which is too bad. A beautiful funeral, well, it makes God pleased, I'm sure. You understand, Lucien, we're willing to do anything we can to help. You know Ted has mentioned about your mother --"

But Ted warned her with a silent shake of the head against what she might be about to say. "Oh, I mean" she fluttered, "we want to be on hand if trouble comes up. We want to think of you as our boy."

"Yes, you are *our* boy," Ted said, repeating her.

"Ted knew Karl very well," Liz said, "and I think he can help with whatever you need. We look at you as part of our family now, we really do."

Lucien had an uncomfortable feeling about the Domesheks. They were quite conventional people, perhaps too much so. Their concern for him was too heavily smirched with the kind of religion he had disowned. He suspected they wanted something much more out of him than to accept their offers of assistance. They

wanted a clear confession, perhaps, that in turning to them, he would actually be turning to God.

Lucien noticed that Liz was twirling her fingers nervously. Liz said: "Lucien, we did have a few things we wanted to talk to you about. We know you've been to our church and well -- I know what a hard part of your life this is -- and if we can help you can what you're looking for -- we're just simple people, but we know God's word and what it says, and God's word has done a lot for us in our lives, and we thought, maybe, since your father is gone and your mother probably never helped you in this --"

Ted rose up abruptly. "We just wanted to stop by," he said. "We wanted to share a moment with you. There's one other thing, but you don't need to worry about it right now. Your father has a life insurance policy with the company. I can see to it right away that the benefit comes to you. And the will -- I don't know if Karl had a lawyer, but I know who can help. Whatever Liz and I can do, please call on us. Well, we won't keep you tied up today."

Thanking them once more, Lucien followed them to the door.

"Do let us help you out, honey," Liz insisted. "We want to think of you as our boy now."

Lucien closed the door behind them with a sigh. "They're nice," he said to Lille, "but I don't feel at all good about them."

Lille shrugged. "They're Bible-thumpers, plain and simple. They didn't really come to comfort you. They wanted to lay that religion on you."

"Ted Domeshek was my father's good friend."

"So I should care? Lucien, I want your body, but they want your soul," she said with a simper, then gave him a teasing and seductive look.

He was taken by surprise. "You're so cheerful all of a sudden. I thought you were mad at me."

"Why?"

"The way you were cold-shouldering me in the car."

"I was just meditating on things, that's all," she said. "You must realize that I rarely get mad."

"Then it wasn't anything? I know I was silly to make a fuss about the flower you had --"

"Of course not," she crooned.

He stared at her in wonderment. He felt perfectly at one with her again. Stealthily, she twined herself around him, like ivy about a thrysus, and kissed him.

"Some lunch?"

She laughed loudly. "It's still breakfast time for me," she said. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes glistened with the color of jadestone. "Let's make love."

Though it was quite early in the day, he was not inclined to refuse. She wriggled up to him and let down the strap of her dress. He burrowed his lips into her bare shoulder. He was still a bit curious as to what had been going through her mind, and he suspected she was not being entirely honest with him. But what did it matter? She wanted to make love, and that was a very good sign.

They adjourned to the bedroom and undressed. For the first time he beheld her naked body in full light. While she was not really as beautiful in the nude as he had fancied, she had nonetheless the beguiling flesh of a woman -- his woman. He was able to make love to her with confidence for once, and with a skillfulness he hardly knew he had. Toward the climax she let out some little screeches, short and strident like that of a gull in flight. When it was over she lolled into a deep reverie. He was beside himself with happiness. He watched the rays of sun piercing through the jalousie, shedding light over their white bodies, and he listened to the birds-- they seemed to be everywhere -- chattering

in a muted ensemble in the translucent world beyond the window glass.

Lille had fallen asleep. He lay quietly with his head against her breasts, that undulated with her tranquil breaths. It was impossible for him to think any more of death. In such serenity death had been vanquished. He was in love with her, and she with him. Pain and suffering had been expelled from his world.

But, again, the doorbell clanged. At first he heard it only as a faint dissonance within the bird chorale. The noise persisted. Flying from the bed, he threw on his robe and went to see who had violated his joy. Through the glass peephole in the front door he recognized Reverend Haskings.

Shuddering from embarrassment, Lucien stared at Haskings for an instant before unlocking the door. Haskings was a man in his late thirties, an exceptionally well-kept and handsome person, who had all the poise of the Princeton Seminary graduate which he had been before coming to the Mountain View Church in the late 1950s. His theology -- the portion of it which had settled in Lucien's mind from Haskings' sermons, the ones to which he had paid some attention -- was as fair and smooth as his adolescent complexion. Haskings was forever talking about such cheery concepts as "concern" and "outreach" and "covenanting," a frothy brew made tart by a few such imponderables as "atonement" and "judgement." Like his personality, Haskings' theology had an immediate and pleasing impact which, nevertheless, did not last for long.

Haskings greeted him with an officious smile. "God day, Lucien, may I come in? I was informed about your father, and I wanted to come by to be of some assistance, if I could."

Hurriedly Lucien explained that he was "tied up" at that moment.

"I understand," Haskings said. "Perhaps a little later on, when you have the time. We need to talk about arrangements."

Lucien agreed to come by his office at the church later in the afternoon.

"Four thirty would be allright," Haskings said, checking his pocket secretary.

"If that would be most convenient ---"

Back in the bedroom Lille was still asleep. The light was fading from the room, and Lucien tenderly drew a sheet over her, and lay down beside her. His feelings and thoughts roamed impassively from present to past, from his contentment now to wisps of vexing memories. He thought about his mother and the injury she had caused him -- for so long. But now she was incidental, it seemed. She was just another woman that had slipped out of his life. Her presence had dispersed into the dusk, along with the silent ghosts of his father. The room, the bed, had once been where his parents had slept and made love, as he was doing that very day. Both his parents were gone. He was free of the guilt, the dread of having trespassed upon their sacred preserve. It was his house now, and it was his love which would sanctify their bed. By their death he had been made free.

In the dim room Lille stirred. With a graceful sigh she reached for his body, fondling his chest with sleepy gratification. Claspings the covers, she snuggled up to him and planted a lazy kiss on his shoulders. Then she rolled over, bringing his hand to rest on her soft buttocks.

He whispered, "I love you," and she sighed as softly as the rustle of leaves. He tried to tell her about Reverend Haskings coming to the door while she was asleep, and about the appointment he had made. Dreamily she nodded and said, "Go if you have to. I'll still be here."

The appointment was in forty-five minutes. For a while longer he lay beside her as she drifted back into slumber. Then he slowly drew away from her, put on his clothes, and went out. On the way to the church, a short distance from the house, along Oakland Avenue and down a steep embankment on the right, was a small park called The Rose Garden. As a boy he had played and idled many hours in that park. The park was crowded with plots of cultivated rose bushes in myriad hues and varieties -- yellow, white, crimson, and tea-colored. The roses bloomed the year round. As he passed he thought he might take Lille to the Rose Garden that evening.

The church was a modest, blonde-brick structure with a prised, white steeple rising atop the sanctuary and was sheltered by high poplars from the yards of the adjoining houses. It was set back from the street by a parking lot with almost as many reserved spaces for church staff as for visitors. The lawn in front of the church annex was clipped and green, so much so that the turf actually appeared artificial. Haskings' office was inside the annex, just behind the front door. The outer room of his office, used by the church secretary, was empty, as it was the close of the work day. Lucien noted by his watch that he was a few minutes late. He peeked into the next room, where Haskings was sitting in a battered, gray-leather easy chair and absorbed in the reading of a paperback book.

"Lucien, come in," Haskings bellowed, laying down the book, which had the peculiar title of *What in the World .*)

"I'm glad you could come this afternoon," he said, smiling benevolently.

Lucien sat down in a hard-back, metal chair at the front of Haskings' desk. Haskings did not stall for words, but started chatting right away, as though he had already prepared to the letter every point of the discussion. "Ted Domeshek told me about your father," Haskings said. "I was surprised and saddened, to say the least. We've known you and your father for quite some time in this congregation, and we want to be of comfort to you, as much as we can. Tell me, did you speak with him at all -- your father, that is -- before he passed away?"

Lucien replied that he had not. Haskings shook his head regretfully. "That makes it harder for you. When death comes unexpected like that, it makes the shock worse, and grieving more difficult. I suppose we can better cope when we're right there with our loved one. The final contact makes it easier on the survivors." He considered a moment. "But God is gracious, and He doesn't let us suffer alone. There are others who can give strength to those who've lost what's dearest to them."

It seemed to Lucien that Haskings talked with the impersonal delivery of a sermon. He wondered if Haskings could talk any other way.

"God does love us," Haskings continued. "He loves us greatly, living and dead, and He comes to us, even if we are unable to go to him. Lucien, you're a fine young man. Your father was always proud of you, and I know you'll keep his memory for us all. Karl Lastman was a strong man. He brought you through some difficult times, didn't he?"

"I take it you're referring to what happened with my mother."

"Yes. Of course, I didn't really know your mother. She didn't come to our church. She was of another faith."

"Yes."

"I know a bit about that. Your father gave you all the love he could, in spite of --"

"Yes, Lucien said shyly. Haskings' posture of fatherly concern annoyed him in some unexplained manner.

Haskings looked at Lucien directly. "I presume you want us to help with the funeral arrangements."

Lucien indicated that he had decided on cremation.

"Of course," Haskings said. "Of course. Whatever is proper in this case -- Then perhaps you should arrange for a memorial service."

Lucien did not know exactly what a memorial service would entail. Haskings assured him it would be a simple service, as that was what both Lucien and his father would find "the easiest." The service could be that Saturday afternoon. Invitations would go to a few close friends of the family. There would be no casket, only some floral displays in the sanctuary. Haskings would give a brief eulogy, and it would be finished.

Lucien was satisfied with those arrangements. It was best, he thought, to avoid formality and unseemly mourning, to the extent such was possible. To do the service entirely in the way Haskings described was tantamount to no ceremony at all. The service would begin at two-thirty.

"Good," Haskings chimed, "it can be arranged without much ado." Regarding Lucien a bit hesitantly, however, he asked, "how are we doing, otherwise?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry," Haskings replied, "what I mean is have you come to terms with your father's passing yet? I know that sometimes we want to deny it, put it all out of our minds. We don't even want to cry, and that's a natural reaction. But if we don't grieve properly, it comes back to haunt us later, if you know what I mean. I mean, if you don't mind being frank with me, I want to ask you -- what sorts of feelings are you having now?" he asked, taking on the air of a clinician.

"I don't know," Lucien said, concealing his resentment. Haskings' tone was cold, perfunctory, disingenuous.

Haskings smiled weakly. "That's the key -- when we say we don't know. We want to be as indifferent as we can -- I know -- so it won't hurt."

"I have very deep feelings about my father," Lucien snapped back. "I loved him very much. I was torn apart, yesterday evening, but you can't go on like that forever. Besides, I've come around now -- and -- something great has happened in the meantime."

Haskings gave him a curious look. Lucien realized he should not have alluded to the fact he was sleeping with Lille.

"Something great?"

"Yes, but it's personal."

"Of course," Haskings clucked, and he mused a second, giving the impression he knew perfectly what Lucien had implied. "Of course, I'm glad the Lord has found you in your very own spirit. You know, Lucien," he said with avuncular good cheer, "I'm always amazed how the Lord *does* manage to find us. We must keep praying."

By now Lucien was thoroughly put off by Haskings' manner. Haskings was supposed to be a physician of souls, but he, in truth, had no idea what was in Lucien's heart, even though he pretended to now, baptizing himself in a thick vapor of pleasantries, sympathy, and homely nostrums. Lucien looked away from Haskings. He got up and said he had to be going.

"I'm pleased we could work this out together," Haskings croaked as Lucien left.

At home Lille was up and browsing through an old, hardback novel, *The Running of the Tide*, which she had procured from the living room book shelf. She put the novel aside when Lucien walked in.

"Everything set?"

"Unfortunately."

"What's up with you?"

"Haskings is a pain in the ass."

"Aren't they all?"

"He talks like he was preaching to the multitudes. I didn't feel he had any real interest in me."

"Ted and his wife are that way too."

"Ted's different."

She bridled. "Hah. You've just got a thing with him and his wife."

"I wish I could bury Dad and leave the church out of it."

"You could, if you weren't so conventional."

"I've got to be for Dad's sake."

"Why? He's dead." The way in which she said that made an impression. Naturally, she was right. He was quite conventional, after all. She would have to help him overcome his conventionality. She was his liberator.

"Well, since it's done, you can go through with it. I'd like to get out of the house. Shall we have supper somewhere?"

But he remembered that, first, he wanted to show her the Rose Garden.

"Can we take a walk first?" he asked.

Her face lightened. "Sure," she said.

The air was extremely warm, even though the sun was going down. The humidity was high, despite the fact that summers in the Bay Area were invariably dry. The weather was, therefore, a little strange.

The evening rush hour sent traffic pouring all over the avenue, swarming up the hill from a nearby freeway offramp like ants from the hole of a tree trunk. Hand in hand, they dodged the cars, crossing the intersection to the beginning of the steps down into the Rose Garden. The steps were wooden planks that dropped down the hillside to an excavated level on which the rose bushes were planted. A grid of straight, dirt footpaths was laid out among the rose hedges. On the far side of the garden was a muddy, little fish pond with a handful of white ducks floating among the reeds, and beyond that stood a ramshackle and roofless solarium attached to another building that had been razed to its cement footings. They were the only ones in the garden.

"I used to come here all the time, to get lost among the roses," Lucien said. "I was always happy here."

"It's very pretty," Lille said, smiling. "You're lucky to have it in your neighborhood."

Lucien reminisced, about coming down to the Rose Garden, the year or so after his mother had gone away. Once he had snuck out at night and gone there. In the darkness he had imagined he was climbing down into the very bowels of the earth. He did not find burning lakes of sulphur, but only formless shadows. As he stood there in the garden, he heard footfalls coming toward him, and he ran away in terror, never to return again except in daylight. Aside from that strange experience, he had always been captivated by the spot. It was lonely, yet silent and beautiful.

Lille gaped at some pink roses. The blooms were enormous and packed on to delicate stems. A fuzzy bumblebee droned somberly among the petals.

"A rose is a rose is a rose," Lille recited, laughing. "That's my trite quote for today."

He took her hand.

"You have all the glory of nature, compressed right into this patch of ground," she said in a tone of whimsy.

The air seemed to be growing heavier. In the eastern sky a pall of low, nimbus clouds was massing, though they had not yet eclipsed the sun which lay to the west and which was still brightening the earth. Overhead a squadron of birds came squawking out of the treetops, wheeling and capering, then scattered like leaves in the wind.

Lille was rhapsodic. Craning at the sky, she waved her arms upward with a dancer's theatrical and haughty brandish. "Let this day make a mark on heaven," she cried out. And she spun around and made a saucy face at Lucien. "It's beautiful, love." That was the first time she had called him "love." It sounded a bit affected, but it was, he felt, sincere; she said it with such artless abandon that he quivered inside. More and more he loved her. Behind her smile and freckled face was an immeasurable mystery, a woman's mind and a woman's love, dark and stalked by closing shadows, like a woodlot at twilight. The mystery of woman had suggested itself to him before. There was his mother, with her haunting eyes, who, as the years wore on, had changed from the sentimental, sexless idol of his childhood to a being of the senses. It was true, indeed, that this sensuality had brought rushes of hatred on occasions for his mother. The feeling of hatred came when, paradoxically, he was thinking of her least of all. There would come to his mind the incident his father had told him, about his mother and the French guard, and he would, somewhat enjoyably, rehearse in his imagination her punishment and humiliation, for her whoring. Had it been her whoring which had begotten him? He was possessed, in a guilty way, by these strange thoughts, and he endeavored to suppress them as much as he could.

Time magazine said not too long ago that God is dead," Lille piped up. "Do you believe it?"

Lucien wondered what had provoked her suddenly to philosophize. "That's a lot of word games," he said. "God isn't either living or dead. It all depends on whether he's in your mind or not."

Dreamily, Lille surveyed the garden. "If I were God, and had all this beautiful place in which to spend my time, I wouldn't give a fig about people praying to me, or about sermons, or -- funerals."

Lucien said, "sometimes you can carry on in the most ridiculous way, but I love it."

"That's my license. Remember, I'm an artist. Lucien, remember when we talked last night about fate and all that?"

"Yes."

"Well, while I'm standing here, something tells me -- it's bigger than that."

"That what?"

"Than our simply going to bed together. Don't you get what I mean?"

He shook his head disconcertedly.

"Lucien, something is coming. I can tell, and whatever it is, we're in on it. You know I don't read the papers much, and sometimes I listen to the news on the radio, or watch it on TV, but I know -- well, it's a good year that's on its way. That's what I feel. My parents have this cabin up in Washington, near Mount Rainier, and when I was a kid, we'd spend summers there, and I met an old guy, who lived in the forest all year round, and who could forecast whether the winter was going to be mild or cold by the thickness of the wool on the caterpillars. Everybody laughed at him, but he was always accurate. They laughed, like the grasshopper laughed at the ants. Well, I listen to what people are saying, and I think I'm doing the

same thing as observing caterpillars. We're coming to a breaking point. The war, especially, is getting people up. It's making them mad, but they're mad at a lot more than the war. They're raging against the whole past tense of things. They want to tear down what's standing up. They want to turn the world over on its end, don't you see? Look, the Negroes are rioting in every American city, every summer now. Black is white, and white is black, and they're against each other. The walls are coming tumbling down. And we're in on it. Lucien, I can feel it. But here -- here, it's so peaceful."

In the hedges along the border of the garden he could hear the chirr of crickets welling up from the earth. He felt a droplet of rain on his neck, and the wind was rising.

"It never rains in summer in California," he said, laughing. "We'd better go."

They took off running, as the wind swirled with licks of rain. Scrambling up the steps, Lucien grabbed Lille's hand. They kept falling over each other as they mounted to the top. Suddenly he tripped, and he dragged her with him as they fell into some grass and brambles beside the stairs. She became hysterical with laughter. The wind was blowing all about now. Kissing him, she did a manic charade of tearing off his shirt, but just as he was about to comply, she jumped off him and burst into laughter again. He chased after her, as she disappeared nymphlike over the crest of the embankment. Stumbling twice, he clambered to the top. She was standing there, arms akimbo, smirking at him. He loved her so much.

They sauntered hand in hand back to the house. The threat of a rain shower had abated, and the sun was blazing with gold fire on the western horizon. They decided to go to Berkeley for dinner. Parking on a side street, they walked up Telegraph Avenue toward the University of California campus in search of an appropriate cafe. The avenue was overrun with dark and pressing human movement -- vagrants and panhandlers, young prostitutes, shoppers, students, fraternity boys in crewcuts with their demure dates. A long-haired girl in a peasant blouse and denims was hawking

political pamphlets. She gibed something about "exploitation of the workers" as they brushed past her.

A few yards further two black kids came bolting out of the crowd and bumped against Lucien, then without excusing themselves, dashed away. Lille urged Lucien to check his wallet, which turned out to be intact. They walked on. From a nearby building stereo music was blaring: "Hot time, summer in the city, back of my neck gettin' --"

They found a restuarant to their liking in the cellar of the same building. The restuarant was outfitted with unfinished knotty pine tables and benches. Sawdust coveredd the wood floors. Across the room, beside a cordoned area for dancing, a dais had been erected for use by a band. They ordered hamburgers and french fries in a basket. While they awaited their food, the band assembled and began to pound the place with rasping guitars and crashing drums. They gave up trying to talk because the music was desperately loud. Lille wagged to the beat, tapping her foot and clicking her fingers. Near the culmination of the band's second number, however, there was an incident which detracted from the music. A white woman with feral and matted hair in a dirty, floor-length dress leaped up from one of the tables and launched into a merry fandango around the floor. Her head rolling about, she finally froze to one spot and began writhing with her legs and hips like a snake shedding its skin. No one would have been overly concerned, had she not then started shrieking violently with high-pitched tremors. And she kept up the exhibition until a waiter subdued her and sought to show her back to the seat. The woman, nonetheless, would not be propitiated, and she wrestled with the waiter, all the time shrieking. At last the waiter settled her down and forced her to return to her seat.

Lille watched the woman's antics with a bemused expression. "It's acid, I bet," she shouted over the music, which was now finished. Lucien looked, uncomprehendingly, at her.

"Acid, LSD, the stuff that makes your mind go to pieces."

He had read a brief mention in a popular magazine about the drug, which was pushing its way into the Bohemian culture of San Francisco. But that was about all he knew.

"It makes you temporarily crazy," Lille exclaimed.

The rowdy woman was sitting down back on her bench, her eyes locked on the ceiling in a comatose state.

The hamburgers came, and they ate them lustily. During the meal, while the band took a break, they made small talk about sundry matters: the instability of the times, the details of family, names of college friends. Lille disclosed for the first time that she had a brother who had joined the marines the previous year and was about to be shipped off to Southeast Asia. She was extremely worried about his welfare. "I know they'll zap him with a bullet in his gut, I just know it," she lamented. "Why couldn't he have been smart, instead of brave, like Stephen." She explained that Stephen was a mutual friend of her and her brother, who had succeeded in ducking the draft, and was currently residing in Berkeley. Lille had been seeing Stephen routinely, but their relationship was strictly platonic, she insisted. "You and Stephen would hit it off right away, I'm sure of that," she said. "He's -- on top of things." Then their conversation swung to more philosophical concerns. "Lucien, do you ever mull what it takes to make something important with your life?"

He chuckled: "Don't people like us always struggle over that question when we're in college, and we go on doing it even when we're in college, and we go on doing it even when we get out? We never know what to choose, even if the choice is ours."

Suddenly she appeared somewhat troubled. "I've always had this notion of myself as an artist," she said, "but I'm no genius. That makes me doubt myself, because to succeed as an artist you've got to have a gripping vision

of something, like Delacroix. My ambitions are bigger than my talents. And when I really think about it, I get a little depressed."

"Do we all have to be geniuses?" It seemed to him that his remark was gratuitous.

"Maybe not, but we need a definite goal. I'm not doing what I want at all, sitting all day behind a desk. The fate of liberal arts graduates -- What are you going to do with your life, Lucien?"

He replied that he was not at all certain, that he had considered trying to get a job with a newspaper, and that perhaps now, with his father's death, he would have to make a prompt and expeditious effort toward that end.

"You sound wishy-washy," she complained mildly. "That doesn't go with my picture of you. If you're going to be a journalist, you've got to set your mind to stopping the presses every minute, and I know you can," she said, pressing his hand.

Up until now her gushy way of talking had tended to work on his nerves, but for some reason on this occasion he took delight in it. It relieved him of his own dark preoccupations. She was in love with him; she did not want to make him sad. She had so much love to give, and he was avid to lap it up in huge draughts.

The band reassembled and struck up a brawling beat. The steely clangor of the electric guitars blew out the silence like a thousand concussion bombs. The lunatic woman jerked in her seat and slammed her head involuntarily against the plaster wall. The drummer let out a violent flam, and the guitars brayed on. A few couples had slid out of the corners and were gyring and flapping their arms to the music. It occurred to Lucien that Lille might want to dance, though he was ashamed not to be very capable of the free, contemporary style of dancing. Over the din he shouted his question to her, but Lille shook her head curtly. He detected that something was not right with her. Her eyes seemed pinned on the lunatic woman.

Sensing that it might be wise to get out of there, Lucien hurriedly asked for the check. As they walked out, Lille instantly became herself again, or at least for a minute or so until they were approached on the street by a raffish peddler with a tray of handmade necklaces and bangles. Stepping out of a dark doorway with his wares, he captured their attention in the neon corona of a shuttered storefront. He was an ugly, old tramp with hurricane of hair whirled around an unshaven and pocked hermit's face. Three of his bottom teeth were fractured, and he spoke with a grunting delivery.

Picking out a glittery, silver wristlet, he dangled it in front of Lille with a sly smile and said: "It was made just for you, fair lady."

Lille bristled, then as if suddenly put under a charm, stared with bright eyes at the piece of jewelry. Lucien shrunk away from the peddler, murmuring indignation to himself. The peddler drew nearer, swishing the wristlet as thought it were a hypnotist's watch. "It's yours for the price, fair lady."

Lille brooded for a moment, then was about to open her mouth when Lucien butted in angrily: "It's cheap junk. Don't listen to him."

The peddler showed his broken-toothed grin. "Does the lady decide, or does the gentleman?"

"Lucien, it's very nice. I was only considering." She smiled back at the peddler.

"They are handmade by the best craftsmen."

"It's junk," Lucien snorted. "They sell that stuff on the street all the time, and bilk people like us, who don't have the sense to --"

"Oh, no," the peddler purred. "It's a price you can afford, and it's quite high quality." He beamed at Lucien. "Maybe you think, you're afraid --"

"No," Lucien snapped. "Besides, I haven't got any money."

"How much?" Lille asked eagerly.

"Two dollars only, fair lady."

Reaching into her purse, Lille produced a five-dollar bill, which the peddler changed for her. He nodded gratefully to her and crept back into the door way.

"Don't you think you got suckered?" Lucien twitted her.

"No."

"Well, I think you did."

"Dammit, Lucien." She flared with anger. "Sometimes you want to go too far."

Crestfallen, he realized he had set her off, without actually meaning to. It was impossible to anticipate her intentions or moods. She was willful, incalculable, and now she was sulking again. On the way home he made a witless remark about "sleeping until the funeral," to which she responded by leaving him floundering in a shivering silence. Yet, back at the house, she insisted that she was not at all upset. "Lucien, I'm tired, I want to go to bed." She expressed no interest in lovemaking. Instead, she offered him only one, pithless kiss and fell soundly asleep. The next morning, on waking, she leaned over and kissed him perfunctorily, rose, dressed, and readied herself for work. He would not see her all day, and the prospect of separation, even for nine hours, was a melancholy one. He assumed she would be coming back to the house, but she mentioned that she ought to be going back to her own apartment that evening, in order, as she put it, "to get my head straight again." Now the repercussions of the previous evening were plain and painful to him. She might not be coming back at all. How insane that a trivial incident, a fit of petulance on his part, or a silly whim on hers, could have dashed their romance.

She said she would walk down the hill to the hospital. She allowed him to kiss her once more as she left through the door, and he watched her disappear out the through the gate. A mood of sorrowful expectancy spread over

him. Was anything left of their fragile and beautiful love? It all seemed to be finished, as quickly and as mysteriously as it had begun. In a flash he became doignantly conscious that, in spite of his great love for her, he scarcely knew her. For only two evenings she had stayed in the house, and had given her body to him. But there was nothing else he could say about her.

Within an hour three different sprays of flowers arrived from sympathizers. Lucien recognized the names of people who had worked with his father at the plant, as well as that of a neighbor up the street. He made one more effort to telephone his aunt, who at last turned out to be home. Aunt Dorothy accepted the news stoically, pledged that her thoughts would be with him on Saturday, and hung up with a whimper.

Laying down the telephone, he came bitterly to face his own loneliness and sense of exile. The ticking clock -- the one that had ticked without remorse in the house through all the years he could recollect -- was a needlesome reminder of it all. His abdomen wrenched with pain, and he was seized with nausea. The ulcer was inflamed again. A weak feeling percolated up from his legs to his arms and chest. In a childish rage he slammed his fist against the wall, causing a picture to drop from its nail. There were tears in his eyes. Sinking onto the couch, he slowly, and despairingly, fell asleep. But all at once, in his sleep, he had a presentiment -- not an actual dream, but a vague and ill-defined interruption of the restless flow of images. He quickly awoke, and on impulse ran out into the yard, through the gate, and peered down the street. The street was empty. A short distance away he could see the sun blazing like a laser off the chrome grillwork of a large, parked car. Fugitive minutes whisked through his deadened brain. Then, at the bottom of the hill, a figure of a woman came around the corner and began trudging toward him. It was Lille. She had come back, and it had not even been a full hour.

She approached him with a friendly smile. "I'm unemployed," she said

with a game expression on her face.

"Why?"

"I quit." She spoke with strange indifference. "I just walked in there, smelled the death, and told myself -- I can't take it, not even another day." She walked past him into the house and sagged into one of the chairs. "Lucien, I think we're bound for glory together."

The circumstances were queer indeed. Her intentions baffled him. She had forced herself on him with relentless passion, only to withdraw on an untimely pretext, and now she had come back -- and she was as nonchalant about it all as ever.

"I'm sorry for the way I was last night," she said. Though her words had the form of an apology, the tone was without regrets.

"You had me worried."

"You really shouldn't have been. I never would have thought of leaving you. Not now. I've made a decision." She looked at him with searching eyes.

Her voice trembled. "I've decided I can't live without you. That's all there is to it. I'm not one to give much -- except love -- and it's all I've got, and I'm going to give it to you." She held out her arms toward him. "I couldn't go on working there -- not now. My life's been turned upside down. Lucien, you rescued me from my own death."

He was very happy to hear her say that. But it was she who had rescued him. She had come, miraculously, at the right time, when he was at his very end. But now he was not all so sure that, this time, she meant what she said. She had misled him before.

"Lucien, you must trust me," she said. "I can be a little fickle now and then, but I'll always keep coming back, I will. I was waiting to come to this house." She deliberated. "I'll have to get my things, and we'll have to find some way of making ends meet, but it won't be all that trying, will it?" Her expression was utterly guileless.

"No," he replied, "we can manage."

"I don't want to admit it, but I was a little frightened last night about what might be happening to us -- what we might be plunging into. Love is a beautiful thing, but it's also awesome. I've never been willing to give myself to anybody before, that is, give myself totally. But now I think I'm ready. Can you understand that, Lucien?"

He nodded.

"Love is all we have, when you get right down to it." There was a tear in her eye. He took her hand and kissed her.

"We ought to get away," he said, "after the funeral. We can take a little trip down the coast. Big Sur is beautiful this time of year."

"I'd like that," she said.

"Well, come on. We have to get ready." He was so glad it had really worked out this way.

He called up Ted Domeshek and obtained the name of a lawyer. An appointment was made for Wednesday, after they would get back from Big Sur. He checked his father's bank account. There was enough funds to tide them awhile. He thought about the trip. They could camp on the beach. He dreamed about the quiet and carefree hours they might spend on the beach, lying on the sand in the warm, June sun, wading in the surf, relaxing evenings beside a fire beneath a boundless, star-ribboned sky.

That evening he drove her to her apartment to pick up some clothes and personal possessions. They would wait until the end of the month, when the rent was due, to fetch the remainder of her things, including the meager quantity of furniture she owned. Her apartment was a tiny and spare one-room flat, for which she paid \$95 per month, in a two-story, brick building that was part of a seedy neighborhood about a mile away at the edge of the Oakland ghetto. The landlady, a fat Polish woman with her hair in curlers, gave them a suspicious eye when Lille knocked at the apartment office, Lucien at her side. When Lille

announced she would be vacating, the landlady object that she still had two months left on her lease. But Lille insisted she was leaving anyway. The landlady shrugged and snarled, "that's your business," then slammed the door in their faces.

The next day was the funeral. More flowers had been brought by courier in the meantime, and when they arrived at the church, several more bouquets had been sent, including a nosegay of blue-dyed carnations F.T.D. from Aunt Dorothy. No more than a dozen persons were present at the service. They were the only ones Lucien had seen fit to invite. The church sanctuary was otherwise deserted. In the second row sat Ted and Liz Domeshek all by themselves, and among the other walnut pews was a sprinkling of undistinguished, but familiar middle-aged faces -- family friends. He and Lille took their seats toward the front, across the aisle from the Domesheks. Liz gave them both a warm smile as they settled into their places.

The church organist, concealed behind a partition, was pumping out sedate and toiling hymns, none of which Lucien knew. The music droned on for fifteen minutes or more, then ceased abruptly in the midst of a piece. Lille stared up at the ceiling. Through a side door the Reverend Haskings emerged in his black clerical gown. Strutting up to the pulpit with Bible in hand, he turned and faced his audience. He spread his arms outward, lifting his black robe like a great bird of prey combing its wings, then closed his eyes and intoned and prayer: "Our Heavenly Father, we have come together today in Thy presence and for Thy grace, to speak of the dead, but also to give strength to the living, so that we may do Thy will, in spite of the sorry visited on a beloved family, who is part of Thy congregation. We have born many affliction, we have doubted and strayed from Thee, and for this we ask Thy forgiveness. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen."

The organist played another short hymn. Then Haskings opened his Bible and began to read. "It is written in the forty-fifth Book of Ezekiel, the prophet,

sixteenth verse: 'Thus says the Lord God: If the prince makes a gift to any of his sons out of his inheritance, it shall belong to his sons, it is their property by inheritance.. But if he makes a gift out of his inheritance to one of his servants, it shall be his to the year of liberty; then it shall revert to the prince; only his sons may keep a gift from his inheritance. The prince shall not take any of the inheritance of the people, thrusting them out of their property; he shall give his sons their inheritance out of his own property, that none of my people shall be dispossessed of his property.' Thus came the Word of the Lord to the prophet Ezekiel." Haskings smiled solemnly and fastened his attention on Lucien. "We are all called to be sons of the living God, who is righteous and merciful. He has seen our afflictions and promises to comfort us as he would His children. He awards us as a portion of his inheritance the most precious possession -- life eternal with Him, the life promised to us through the death of His own begotten son on the Cross.

"To His other sons -- those who because of their faith He has adopted -- He holds out the heart of his estate. We can accept his estate, or we can reject it. We are all His servants, but we have the choice of becoming His sons. If we remain mere servants, we have His inheritance for awhile; but when the year of liberty -- the time of squandering and reveling in our own selfish wishes -- when that year is over, we will have nothing more to call our own. Thus we must make ourselves worthy to be adopted by Him, so that we may be called sons of the living God. We shall live with Him, die with Him, and be raised up with Him -- as Jesus Christ was raised -- into eternal life. One of our own in the family of God, Karl Lastman, has been called by Him, and our prayers go out for him, for we have the assurance that he has now shared in the inheritance. He has been struck down, but he has also been raised up, and for this we are truly thankful, thankful to the living God who rules over creation and who, in spite of death, has given him a new, spiritual body for ages everlasting.

"Our own age, it has been said, is an age of anxiety. It is a time of troubles

as well. The secure days have gone away. There is a great deal of distress in our society nowadays. The old values are rent in two and brought severely into question. Sons turn against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, as it was in Ezekiel's day. And the fathers have lost their power, in turn, to love their sons. The bond between father and son has been snapped, but not irreparably. Even if we as fathers lose our sons, or as sons become estranged from their fathers, who give them love and purpose, we ourselves are not lost. For we have a Heavenly Father who loves us more than we can ever love. We sometimes do not understand His love, and that is why we turn away from it. We rage against God, we spite Him, we deny His name, and the name of His son, who demonstrated the truth and power of that love by the sacrifice on the Cross. Yet He will not turn away from us. He will continue to call us out of love, even if we refuse to hear, and He will continue to promise us life with Him if only we turn. His inheritance is kept safely for us, despite ourselves.

"The finality of death inevitably will cause us anguish. Our anguish is to be expected, since it is very difficult for us to put our absolute trust in God. We want not God, but our own happiness. And we despise God, because He seems to deny us the happiness we crave. It has been said that those who have experienced a death in the family ususally grive, not for the beloved, but for themselves, because God has abandoned them in the world. It seems to them that God has abandoned them by denying them their immediate happiness, which is what they expect from His estate. Instead of happiness, they are allotted grief and suffering. It seems, therefore, to them a strange and cruel paradox. They may imagine the will to be a forgery. But that is because they have not heard the Truth, they have not harkened to the real promise in the last will and testament of God. Our Father has for them an inheritance which they have not yet, with their mortal eyes, seen. Their anguish is to be overcome, their suffering redeemed, for the Cross of Christ is the genuine emblem of suffering, but it is not the final word. Through grief, affliction, and suffering we crucify our false desire, our narrow conceptions of happiness. By taking up the Cross we are

following Him, and Him alone, and in this way we shall be raised up with Him. This God has promised us. His way is severe, but His love is certain. We must go the way of the Cross in this life, so that another life shall be ours. Recently, many have said that God is dead, but God has only died for those who have themselves been made prisoners of death. In death God is -- and this is the miracle, the promise, the hope -- made alive. And we, too, shall be made alive through death, first through the death of our loved ones, then through our own faith even unto death.

"In short, that is why we must grive only for a time, but soon we must end with rejoicing. We must rejoice not only for those whom God has in his own mysterious wisdom taken away, but also for those who have been left behind in the world. We must all know that we are not abandoned. For we have an inheritance that will never die. And for this we must praise God. Let us pray, as Christ prayed for us: 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed would be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'"

The organ burst into a tune Lucien now recognized -- The Old Rugged Cross. Haskings' face was immobile. Glancing about the sanctuary, he closed his Bible, and strode away from the pulpit with a stiff and triumphal gait. Lucien had found himself muttering the Lord's prayer along with Haskings' and the others in attendance, but his heart was not in it. Haskings' message had failed to comfort him, even though he had listened carefully and apprehended every word spoken. The message seemed alien, metallic; it was as if he had heard the same oratory before, with only a few adverbs switched here and there. The words were like the red, blue, and yellow sticks of a child's tinkertoy set, which could be fitted together in countless gimcrack combinations, then yanked apart and reassembled. His father's death -- the one death that mattered -- seemed to have nothing to do with the "death" upon which Haskings so fluently descanted. Haskings had been talking not about the real death

of a flesh and blood being, but about some pallid abstraction -- "death" itself, and the Cross. The Cross? His eyes were turned toward an enormous, shellacked wooden cross welded to a gilt fretwork at the right of the pulpit. The cross filled nearly all the space between the boards of the platform and the beams of the vaulted ceiling. As he looked at the cross, there stirred in him a strange sensation, not the sensation of the "life" which Haskings had glorified, but the scurvy emptiness and finality of death. It was also a sensation of anger, anger toward all morbid abstractions. He thought of his mother, his father, Arlene; he was tired of crucifixions.

There arose a low, burring sound in the church, like cicadas in the dry grass of a field. Liz Domeshek was whispering something to her husband. Lille was still sitting in her pew, her hands folded in her lap. She was gazing vacantly toward the windows. Liz looked over and lumbered up to where he and Lille were situated. She had come to the funeral dressed in a loose, pleated miniskirt, revealing her fat legs. Ted followed along behind her.

Liz placed her hand on Lucien's shoulder. "I don't know really what to say," she said. "Reverend Haskings had much for us to think about. We're surely going to miss Karl from now on."

Ted nodded after her. "Remember to call us, Lucien, if there's anything more we can do," he said in his familiar, fatherly voice.

"Please do call," Liz added.

Haskings was waiting outside. The smell of ozone cloyed in the afternoon air, which was seared by the hot sun. Haskings' robe drooped about his frame, like a wilted tulip, and his forehead was pearly with perspiration. He wiped his face with a handkerchief as he greeted Lucien.

"I want you to know, Lucien, we here in the Mountain View Church are with you at all times," Haskings said. "We'll certainly be missing your father here," and he looked slightly askance at Lille, who was holding Lucien's arm. "I don't believe I've met your lady friend," he said.

hilarity was infecting him. He was not the type to laugh much at all, let alone on this solemn occasion. But the laughter felt strangely good, even though he had little idea what he was laughing about. The laughter was a release -- it winnowed all the doubt, guilt, and tension.

Lille pointed her finger at him with laughter. "Lucien, you're laughing, aren't you?" she cried. "I've never seen you laugh, you know. You can laugh. Oh God." And she ran to one of the vases of flowers that had been delivered before the funeral. In the vase were a half-dozen wire-stemmed, dark-red roses. With a broad smirk she picked out one of the roses and hurled it like a dart directly at Lucien. It missed him and fell flaccid on the rug.

"What are you doing?" he asked, incredulously, regarding the fallen rose. "You're crazy."

But she kept laughing and threw another rose at him. This time the rose bounced off his cheek, its thorns stabbing his flesh. He winced, but instead of being annoyed, he was thoroughly amused.

"How about a flower fight?" she taunted him, and clapped her hands with infantile delight.

The proposition was utterly outrageous, but he accepted the challenge. Once more the wooden cross, without premeditation, flashed among his thoughts.

Soon they had seized all the flowers in view and were showering each other with the crumpled pieces, like two kids disporting in a sawdust pile. Within minutes they had savaged every flower -- not just the roses, but carnations hyacinths, and even the big yellow mums that had come from an unknown donor. The floor was littered with a fragrant confetti of mutilated leaves and petals. He chased her about the room, tickling her rump with the stem of a decapitated tiger lily.

"We've committed a sacrilege, you know that," he said with a facetious pride.

"Naturally," she said, "but it's finished now. What are these flowers worth anyway? Dust to dust, beauty into the ashcan."

Ashes. He remembered he had not yet picked up his father's ashes. It was good they were going to Big Sur. He could take the ashes there and cast them to the wind. He suggested they leave on their trip right away. All they had to do first was drive by the mortuary and claim the remains.

Laughing and puffing, she nodded her agreement, then embraced him with all her strength. The ceremony of death had been consummated. They were free of sombrous churches and wooden crosses and solicitous pastors. They were truly free.

In a happy frenzy they loaded everything -- sleeping bags, folding cots, thermos, canned Spam, potato chips, a party-colored beachball -- into the Plymouth. Lucien left food for the cat, and they were off. At the mortuary Lucien was directed to the caretaker of the crematorium, a hobbled old man with a tincture of alcohol on his breath. The old man shuffled into the back and brought with him a ceramic urn containing the ashes. Blase and red-eyed, the old man mumbled something nonsensical about "cracks in the dike," saluted, and disappeared. Lucien clenched the ashes. They seemed much heavier than he had anticipated. It was the last time he would hold his father in any form. Something inside pressed him not to let go of the ashes, but something else in the same breath urged him to put them out of mind. Wrapping the urn in a cotton rage which he took from under the seat of his car, he stashed his treasure beneath one of the sleeping bags.

The sun was floating, a big red candy ball above the ocean, when they arrived at the palisades of Big Sur. The coast road trickled along the cliffs toward the south into darkening mists, and far below the sea was spitting and foaming in white eruptions about the craggy coastline. A high wind was blowing against the car, causing it to sway and lurch about the curves in the narrow highway. By the time they found a place to camp, the sun had gone down, and they were alone in the deep twilight on a triangular plat of sand of an inlet beneath a soaring rock escarpment which was fractured by several dry rillets.

Lille pulled off her shoes and headed down the beach, scavenging for firewood,

while Lucien unpacked the car. At one point Lucien looked up and watched her standing off in the distance, a gossamer shadow vaporizing in the dying sun's rays. He felt the wind at his face, and he gazed out over the infinite black expanse of ocean. There was too much space even for God, he thought. And he fetched the urn with his father's ashes.

Slowly, he walked toward the spot where Lille was. She was cradling a long, gnarled stump of driftwood, which sprawled out on either side of her body. She stood against the sun, watching him approach, her form motionless, the frail carcass of some prehistoric insect fossilized in ageless amber. With dumb veneration she looked back at him, like an acolyte at a sacramental meal. She knew what he was about to do. Putting down the driftwood, she set her face to the wind, her hair flying and streaming.

He opened the urn with trembling fingers. A wild and unearthly feeling rose up in him. Suddenly the urn was as light as a handful of mown grass. He felt as though he was not releasing the vestiges of his father's body, but a ~~transmuted~~ spiritual substance of some kind. And even though the wind was chilly, his skin was aflame and soaked with sweat. The ocean was bellowing very loudly too. The wind slashed at his face. He cried out "Father," and flung the ashes into the barrens of space. It was too dark to observe where the ashes ~~blew~~ ^{blew}, for they surged into the vortex of wind and night, disappearing without a trace. He listened as the waves smashed in thunderous ovations. And for a second, just before a breaker hit, he heard a strange sound from the deep, like a little child whimpering.

He took Lille by the hand, and in silence they wandered back toward the car, treading over their own footprints which had been partially rubbed out in the running sand. On the way they collected several strands of driftwood, and Lucien built a fire on which they roasted slices of Spam. Shortly, however, the fire burned down, and as there was no wood to replenish it, they retired to the sleeping bags, which Lille zipped together so that they could lie next to each other. During the past hour they had spoken little to each other. For Lucien, all words seemed

counterfeit. Together they nestled: he laid his hand tenderly on her breast, and he peeked upward at the limpid and shimmering palladium of stars. Far out over the ocean he could see the winking red and green running lights of an airplane.

He wondered about the future. Though his joy was brimming over now, he knew that the pressure of time was building, and that nothing would remain the same from now on, even should he so desire. Soon, he realized, he would have to make a decision about what to do with his young life, about getting a job to support himself and, perhaps, Lille. While for the time being he could not imagine life without her -- and in some half-conscious and adolescent way he assumed that their love was rooted and anchored, like a tremendous tree, for a private eternity -- he feared in the same breath that their happiness was fleet, impermanent. He recalled their footprints on the beach, fainting away in the restless sand. And he remembered that, as a boy, he had never dreamed of his mother leaving him, nor his father dying, nor growing up, nor starting life on his own. The sounds of the sea turned in the all-consuming darkness. The sea never ceased its churning and groaning and thrashing, even when the wind seemed still. High above the stars were glacially compassing the heavens. When glimpsed only in an instant of wistful deliberation, they seemed magically frozen, adamant, and immutable. In college he had learned that the people of the Middle Ages believed the universe was never changing. Comets, for example, were never observed, because they satisfied neither the people's beliefs nor perceptions. It was impossible for the people of that epoch to comprehend any deviation from the normal.

Silently, he yearned for some guarantee that Lille would be as

constant for him as the stars were for his ancestors long ago. Hitherto he had not seriously regarded the thought of marriage -- the idea seemed premature. Always it had been his belief that a man and a woman should not discuss marriage before they have somehow become transparent to each other. Yet circumstances had snared them, as two, in a web of intimacy which was entirely new to him. He needed her assurance, her deepest confirmation of him. He did not know just how to begin, but the words spluttered out: "I'm wondering if it's right yet to talk about the years ahead, but Lille, I want to marry you."

She did not answer. He could hear her snoring gently.

"Lille."

And she gave a sleepy start. "I must have dozed off," she sighed. "It's so pleasant out here."

"I want to talk with you about our future."

"Silly, we always have the future. It's the present we let slip by."

He sensed that she was aware of what was going on in his mind, and that she was coyly evading the subject. Possibly that evasiveness was her reply.

"Dammit, I want to know. Can you consider marrying me?"

"Yes, I can" she said softly and with sweet insouciance. "I have been considering it myself. Haven't you?"

"Yes, but not really that much until now. And now I want to know."

"I really haven't considered it enough," she said. "Really, Lucien, we've just gotten to know each other. We need more time. It's not wise to rush into these sorts of things, is it?"

"I don't mean to rush," he whined. "I just want -- well -- a

commitment."

"You're silly," she said. "Lucien, we don't need to get all torn up right now over something as serious as that. If it comes, it'll come in time."

Now he was at ferocious odds with himself. He was embarrassed with himself for being so impulsive and demanding, especially about something which did, as she said, require more time and consideration. Still, he had the bitter sensation that the more time allowed, the easier it would be for him to wind up betrayed. Like all women, she had the capacity for unfaithfulness. She was not all that constant, for he had an inkling of that unhappy truth when on Friday she had walked away from the house. But, at the same time, she had come back, which was at least a partial assurance. She could be as the great sea and tide, that floods and ebbs, yet always washes back to level where it had been once before. It was an assurance, of sorts, but not a promise. Then again, promises could be broken. His mother had promised him of her return years before.

Lille was awake and sitting up in the sleeping bag. She was staring out at the sea. The fire had nearly gone out, except for a large glowing brand which appeared a dim, red diadem in the ashes.

"Lucien, I brought you something we can both enjoy," she said, squirming from the sleeping bag and rummaging in her purse. In the starlight he could see her kneading something with her fingers, then licking a white scrap of paper with her tongue. She stooped over the fire to light whatever it was. A fragrant and woody scent drifted to his nostrils. Lille was inhaling what looked like a cigarette. Then he realized it was marijuana that she had. He had never smoked a joint before, nor had he ever been in the company of people who did.

But he had a vague conception of what it was like to smoke the stuff, and he was aware that lately the use of marijuana had been burgeoning within the secret conventicles of the young, even though possession of the substance was illegal, and he had been taught in school it could cause insanity or other sorts of gruesome complications.

Lucien felt nervous. Suddenly his image of Lille as an unspotted innocent was scarred. As he observed her moving catlike in the dark, he had a sense of foreboding. She crawled back to where he lay and offered the cigarette to him.

"I can't," he complained. He felt sick.

She drew another puff herself. "Silly, you are uptight this evening. Look, it can't hurt you. It's food for the gods."

"Where did you get that junk?" he asked carpingly.

"Stephen -- my friend -- remember?"

Her mention of Stephen made him stiffen with righteous anger. Previously, he had not been much concerned with this Stephen, whoever he might be. Stephen had just been a casual name. But now he bulked in Lucien's mind as some pale fiend, a slimy seducer. Lucien wondered whether marijuana was all Stephen had given to her. He was jealous, and he felt slightly guilty about it.

Lille made a hissing sound with her teeth at him. "Alright," she said. "I'll get stoned all by myself." And she got up and glided on her feet toward the ocean.

Lucien was thoroughly chagrined. He wanted to stand up to her on this score, but at the same time he did not want to anger her. He would do anything to prevent her from being angry toward him, from failing to love him, even sacrifice his own immediate scruples, for he craved love more than anything on this desolate earth. She

was right; he was "silly." Instead, she was offering to be his tutor in many unwonted and untried subjects. Already she had brought him further than he could have ever envisioned, and the experience had not been all that unpleasant. In fact, it had been thrilling. He was the stolid, irresilient shore; she was the white, heaving waves which scourged his brittle flanks and nipped at his uneasy conscience until all the grains of his former self were swept one by one into a boiling vastness. He was still, despite his renunciations, haunted by a faint allegiance to a sober divinity, one who kept him manacled to his old obsessions and anxieties. Yet he was not a comfortable bondsman. He had a passion to be free as she already was. Like her, he would burst his chains, and it was time he did so, completely.

He scrambled after her in the dark. She turned, and faced him with warm, dark, and seraphic eyes that glittered even more than the stars.

"Here," she said, passing him the joint. "I knew you'd want it. I was waiting for you."

He took a draught and let it out quickly, for his lungs were on fire.

"Silly," she laughed, "it won't work unless you take it in deeper than that."

He tried again. His lungs were scorched, and he coughed the smoke back up violently. But he persisted, and silently they passed the burning stub back and forth between them. As the minutes elapsed, he knew his mind was changing. The change came suddenly. His arms seemed lighter, floating upwards as a stick buoys to the surface of water. He was only partly aware of the world around him. Shutting his eyes, he sensed a flickering radiance inside his own head. It

was like the afterglow of a bright lamp that had been snuffed out. In the darkness his brain and body were both pirouetting slowly. He felt his arms waving with the indomitable urge to dance. And as he danced, the light blazed and became resplendent. It poured like a torrent into the last, vacant clefts of his consciousness. It engulfed all his thoughts. Then he opened his eyes and was struck by a contrast. The external world was black and bizarre. Lille was standing in a rodlike pose against the sea, which, even though he could still make out the thudding of the surf, seemed invariable and serene. The stars seemed to be shriveling away, as if swaddled with a ghostly fog. And he heard the strange cry of the child from the waters again, this time shrill and sustained as though it were trying to lure him out there.

He lunged toward Lille, whose back was toward him and who did not turn, even when he dug his fingers into the threads of her hair. Instead, she twitched and bolted away from him. She ran toward the fire, from which she plucked the glowing brand and lifted it, flaunting it as a torch, back to the water's edge. She was dancing now, gracefully and delightfully, just as he himself had wanted to dance. The brand twirled in the darkness, and she became in his sight a creature with myriad arms of fire, spinning and snaking through the darkness in a dance that seemed to burn up every particle of the night. He looked up at the sky. The brilliance of the stars had come back, but now they were wheeling too, as he staggered and fell down. He picked himself up and ran after her, at last catching up.

"Lille."

But she did not turn to him. She raced into the sea and extinguished the brand. He watched it fizzing in a wave which broke, snatched it,

and hurled it up on the sand.

She staggered back from the water and collapsed on the sand. He threw himself down beside her, pressing the calves of his legs with the ~~west~~ soles of her feet. She was laboring and gasping in the fashion of some great fish, cast up and stranded in a storm.

"Lille, I love you," he cried exultantly.

But she only flopped about deliriously and helplessly. For an instant he was utterly frightened of her. He was arrested by an intimation of some primeval demon in control of her. She was no longer a person, only a body, a lifeless female effigy that dangled as a shredded membrane over a mind of darkness. His own fingers were clawing in the sand, as if he were searching desperately for the trickster spirit which had now fled from her. Then he shook himself and with rapture he saw that she was smiling. She rose up out of the sand with outstretched hands, tearing at his clothes. But it was he who was the master of her. Grasping her loins, he pulled himself up over her and penetrated her. She did not stir. He sank deeper and deeper into the warm and milky sanctum of her thighs, and he felt her coming to life, not tranquilly, but with a savagery which made him insane with anticipation.

The ocean boomed in his ears. His head was ~~fr~~renching, and in the darkness she shrieked "Come!" with a stridency that stunned every noise in the atmosphere. She tightened her legs about his body with a might and fury which caused him pain. Though he himself was finished, he pressed on, ecstatically, until he could manage no more, and he could feel that even she had spent all she owned.

Hoisting himself off from her, he knelt beside her, like a votary bowing to kiss her. But suddenly he heard a sound that he had ~~not~~

never heard from her. She was sobbing. Why she was sobbing he did not know. He was not lucid enough to speculate. Yet he had the clarity to see. And what he saw in her was both grotesque and marvelous. She had an old woman's face, drawn and haggard, in the starglow. His own mind was conjuring mischief. He blinked and shuddered, but the face was still there. He stroked her hand; it was weak and clammy. And in fright he recoiled from what seemed the touch of carrion. But then he sprung to his senses again. She was not dead. She had merely cried herself to sleep. Determined now to stay with her, he drifted asleep, peacefully, by her side.

In the weeks that followed everything about their relationship seemed to unravel. And it was like the winding out of a ball of string oddments that had been knotted together once in haste. For a short while the course of things would go smoothly, but soon a snarl would appear, and he would struggle to untangle the matted strands until a single piece could be found again. Each time he hoped he could stop the unravelling, or at least lay his fingers on a continuous and durable thread. But he only met with disappointment. Lille grew ever more distant toward him. Still they would make love, but each episode had the humdrum texture of the endless years of a loveless marriage. She no longer talked about being "in love" with him. Yet she continued to sleep in his bed and idle about the house. As it happened, she was unable to secure another job for herself, and he had little money to spend on her, which might have cheered her a little. They frequently bickered about petty expenditures, about whether to splurge on steak for supper or to go out for an occasional movie. Some days she would go without eating entirely.

and he would tarry along through his meager supper, while she read in the bedroom, or ventured out for a walk. In fact, she took many long and solitary walks now, on which he was never invited. One night he woke up and discovered she was gone from the house. It was three in the morning. He waited up for her until nearly five, when he heard her key at the latch, and he rushed to the door, where she appeared in her slippers and nightgown. She looked at him with mistrust. She explained she had been sitting in the Rose Garden. He could see she was holding a fresh, white bloom in her left hand. Tossing the rose on the floor, she went back, saying nothing, into the bedroom and quietly shut the door behind her.

The next evening she had vanished again. This time she had taken care to dress, and she did not return until dawn. He confronted her with exasperation.

She stared at him with studied indifference and headed once more back to bed, but he seized her by the arm and cried: "For God's sake, what's going on? I think you hate me."

"Where the hell have you been going at night?"

"For a walk. I told you that."

"What on earth is the matter with you?" Petulantly, he paced about the room. "Dammit, I can't take it any longer. Your silence, your indifference. It's torture for me. Do you want to get out of this affair? Please let me know, if you do. I want to know. I love you so much."

He felt guilty for saying that, however. He was beginning to experience real hatred toward her, not so much because of what she was, but because of the way she was treating him. He thought himself a fool for putting up with her caprices.

"No, I'm alright," she said with a sigh.

"You must hate me."

"Oh Lucien, don't be absurd! I couldn't hate you."

"Then what's the matter?"

"Please let me go to bed."

"Dammit, no," and he gazed into her eyes with a probing and longing fire. But she turned away. She would not look at him, and he became infuriated.

In a tired drawl, she said, "It's not you. It's me, Lucien." She mused for a moment, then spun around at him. "It's me, can't you see that?" she cried. "I'm nothing. You're everything."

"I don't understand."

"God, Lucien, you're dense. You don't know what a wretch I am on the inside. I'm phony. It's all clear to me now."

"You're not phony. Why on earth would you feel that way about yourself? You gave me love! You brought my life out of the ruins. You said you loved me. I said I loved you. Were you lying to me? Were we both --?"

"No," she confessed with a sigh. "But, you see, Lucien, I can't love you as I want to love you, and that's the terror of it. I wanted to be an artist. I've failed at that. I want much too much out of myself, and love is what everybody wants most. That's why I've failed. I dreamed more than what was in my power to dream."

"I don't understand you. You can't really feel this way."

"I don't know how I really feel," she said. "I'm exhausted, and I have trouble sleeping. It's all a nightmare for me."

"Why don't you leave me then?"

"God, you don't understand, do you? There's nowhere --"

That evening she brought out easel, canvas, and palette and started to paint. She told him he could not peek until her work was done, as it was going to be a surprise. She said she was painting a scene from memory -- the cliffs at Big Sur, the sunset, the sand. But soon she laid aside her implements and vanished in the bedroom. He heard her weeping. Quietly he stepped over to the easel. The painting was only a crude, charcoal sketch with a skeltering of smudged lines.

Every element in the scene was skewed, tortured, out of perspective.

The following afternoon he went out to hunt seriously for employment. He had devised some resumes, and he drove all over the Bay Area, calling on editors of small newspapers who might be willing to hire him in some capacity. Also, he had brought along some album clippings from his work as an editorial writer on his college newspaper. All the editors, except one, did not have time for an interview, so he merely left the resumes. It was late afternoon when he arrived home. Lille was not there. He dropped onto the sofa and dozed off. But soon he was roused by a commotion at the door. He heard Lille laughing. Her being in good spirits made him exceptionally glad. She had not laughed in front of him for such a long time, it seemed.

The door flew open, and he was astonished to see she had a man with her. He was a round-shouldered, barrel-chested squab of a fellow in brown dungarees and a soiled, leather shirt unbuttoned halfway down his hairy chest. His face was pitted and wrinkled. He had an aquiline nose and was mostly bald, notwithstanding a fringe of long, graying hair that encircled the top of his head like a monk's tonsure.

"Lucien, I want you to meet Stephen Silvers," Lille said.

At once there occurred to Lucien the image of Stephen, the Christian martyr, which he remembered from a Sunday school story -- the man of God who awaited stoning with eyes fixed on the risen Christ astraddle his celestial throne. But this Stephen, in brute contrast, evinced no marks of saintliness. Instantaneously, Lucien found Stephen repulsive, even malignant. Stephen's right eye quivered half-shut, as though it were suffering some infection, and out of the left eye he seemed to leer at Lucien.

"Lucien, I thought you and Stephen ought to get to know each other, so I brought him home," Lille chirped.

Lucien was curious whether she had, indeed, been with Stephen all day.

Stephen gave Lucien a condescending glance and turned to Lille. He spoke with a frigid sophistication. "Am I right that this is your man, whom you've mentioned?" he asked in a maundering manner.

"Yes, Lille lives here with me," Lucien replied acidly.

"Well, that's cool."

"Sit down, please," Lille said to Stephen, who immediately sprawled in a chair which he had picked out already. "Lucien, Stephen gave me this present." She had been hiding something behind her back. She presented it to Lucien with the same mute glee as a cat shows a bird it has captured in its teeth. She showed him a little, lacquered statue about six inches in height, which consisted of two, stylized nude figures engaged face to face in coitus. "It's Indian," she explained. "I mean, Indian Indian, not American Indian. Stephen picked it up in Delhi."

"You must travel a lot," Lucien said to Stephen.

"I get around," Stephen said. It was obvious he disdained having to talk with Lucien.

"Stephen's been a lot of places," Lille said. "He's the type who can't sit still."

Lucien examined the statue. Some of the coating had chipped off, and the statue impressed him as very old.

Stephen gave a casual nod to the statue and smirked. "I lifted it off an old beggar. He wanted a lot of rupees, but I only gave him a few. He was so hungry he would have taken anything I'd given him."

Lucien tried to be polite now, saying: "So you're the famous Stephen. Lille's told me --"

"I imagine she has. I imagine she has."

At that point Lille informed Lucien that she had invited Stephen for supper. "I suppose -- well, we can fix something."

While Lille busied herself in the kitchen, Lucien was left to entertain his unfortunate guest. He was irked that Lille had brought Stephen home without first conferring with him. She had acted thoughtlessly, but then again it fitted with her behavior these days. Ever since Lille had first mentioned Stephen, Lucien had felt a profound animosity toward him, and he took a certain spiteful satisfaction in having his feelings confirmed now by the manner of his guest. He had the suspicion Stephen was Jewish.

Poking her head in from the kitchen,

Lille said: "Stephen was studying awhile for the Rabbinate -- the Rabbinate, isn't that how you say it?"

"Yes, the Rabbinate." Stephen's arms flounced out of their recumbent position. Then he raised himself from his haunches and dug out a pouch from his pants pocket. Lucien knew it was more marijuana.

Stephen rolled a joint, ignited it with a shiny, tapered lighter, and pasted it to his curled lip.

"Ah yes, the Rabbinate," Stephen said, taking in a hefty drag. "I was keen on that once." With relaxed protocol he put forth the marijuana cigarette for Lucien to accept. The tip of the cigarette was squashed from Stephen's mouth and wet with spittle; the thought of sticking it in his mouth revolted Lucien. Lucien shook his head cordially.

"No?" Stephen shrugged querulously. "Well," he said with his voice aimed not at Lucien, but toward Lille in the kitchen, "your man doesn't hold much for the good stuff."

Lucien found Lille's friend so contemptible, so rude, that he began not to be vexed by him anymore. It was apparent that Stephen was not scorning him personally: he was just naturally bluff and arrogant without any concern save himself, all of which made him seem a bit comical, if not pathetic. Lucien decided he should at least attempt to converse with Stephen, as there was nothing to lose. Stephen seemed to have the airs of a self-styled pundit, and as they talked it became clear that Stephen had opinions on many issues, even if such opinions were for the most part cynical and gratuitous. As he discoursed and smoked, Stephen railed against a legion of devils in modern society. "It's high time that things came apart," he declared. "The old order is vicious. Vicious! Violent, sick -- it doesn't have anything left to enforce. It's nailed itself up on its own cross, and it's waiting for the earth to shake."

Stephen's eyes bulged with a cool venom. "They do everything they've been told to do by their fathers. But their fathers are weak, sick, crying for death. They can't enforce, you see, and they leave

us to make our own choices." His lips wound into a sneering smile. "That's how we come to destroy them, you see -- they give us choice, and we love our liberty to choose. We love it so much, we want to blast them off the face of the earth. They send their sons to kill and be killed for a cause they hatched in their own blind folly; but the sons will come back to kill them dead." He glared at Lucien. "We won't kill their bodies, because they've already killed their bodies themselves -- with their stupid striving for glory, what they've called 'work,' you see, with their anxiety and their uptight self-righteousness. They enslave their women, so their women will do all the work for them, but the women are going to lay down and fuck, not work. They're going to fuck the dead bodies of their tired, old men, and they're going to win. They're going to help us win. You see?"

Lucien managed a disinterested smile.

"Oh, of course," Stephen went on, "there'll be some resistance. The war will take a long time. But it's a holy war on our part, and we mean to win. We'll lay them all low; we'll raze their palaces to the ground. A jacquerie, that's what they call it. The walls of their palaces will come tumbling down, and they'll scrape among the ashes and beat their breasts, and they'll want revenge -- but the revenge will be ours. In revenge we'll have peace at least." He drew in the last of the joint and lifted his arms with a victorious signal. "Their world is on fire. But it's not just a little fire any more -- it's a holocaust. They sacrifice everything to the fire; they burn more and more up in the fire, hoping that their sniveling little god will grant them some last favors. Well, they'll get to the end, and they'll find they have no fire even. They've just destroyed everything. What's left over will be ours, our inheritance, putrid as it may be.

For them it'll be nothing, nothing at all. For us it'll be everything. They've scorched the ground, but it's on that ground we'll build our cities. No, we won't want to live in those cities. They'll be cities of death, but still they'll be cities where we can be free. We'll be free, as free as the firestorm that burned our father's cities to the ground. We will have our freedom, we will have our bodies, and with our bodies we'll love and fuck 'till hell sinks back into the ground."

Lucien noticed Lille loitering by the door, listening to Stephen rhapsodize in his maniacal, poet's manner. Her attention seemed glued on Stephen, who was glaring into space, like a spiritist steeped in a vision. Lucien wondered who was this strange Stephen, in reality. There was the weird knell of prophecy in his speech, even though it sounded quite mad. How did Lille come to know him? Why had she represented him so casually? She had said he and Stephen had much in common. But he had nothing in common with this raving fool, this rancorous pretender. It was as though Lille had brought him there as a cruel ruse, to embarrass Lucien somehow. It was as if she had done it for some impish sport, like a child letting loose a pig in a cathedral. She was punishing him, and he refused to tolerate it much longer.

Stephen rubbed his eyes and said confusedly: "Oh well, it's nothing. The Rabbinate, yes -- the Rabbinate," and he let out a gust of flatulent laughter. "The Rabbinate, Lille -- the Rabbinate."

Lucien stared at him with puzzlement.

"The Jews are dead too," Stephen crowed. "Viva Judah! Judah muerte! Judah verrecke! We've burned ourselves too -- we've burned little Isaac and Jacob and their damnable God. The fire -- don't you see? Nobody went laughing into that fire! What a pity. They would

uld have laughed in the end. We deserved the fire with that damnable God of ours. Our fathers were too sober, and such fools. We are the next born who will light the fire again, to consume what hasn't been consumed yet. No Jew can understand me, I'm sure. They all say, 'Stephen, you're a lunatic, you're a crazy.' Every Jew, like every man -- and what are Jews but men? -- wants to preserve himself. He preserves himself by preserving the past. But what past is there to preserve? The holy names of the past, what I learned in study, but that's all. That's why we Jews are sick. We survive by keeping the names, even though we haven't anything left but our Jewishness, the name 'Jew' in a world gone mad. Stephen pounded the cushions of the sofa with hard blows of his fists. "No Jew can understnd me. I am the last Jew, don't you see, the last real, honest Jew. I was burned, I was burned, while the others only clucked and wrung their hands and cursed mankind. But the others didn't have the guts to go far enough. They didn't dare go far enough to curse their God, no, even to burn him. Because he had to be burned, don't you see? The fire over, and a wind rising up from the charred litter -- it will blow us all away, Jews, Jews -- Christians -- and all. They're nothing but the shit of dead Jews. They're more terrible, more despicable than the Jews they've killed. They've lit the fire for the Jews, and they've incinerated themselves in the process. They'll die an even worse and greater death than the Jews. Jews and Christians -- promised the appearance of their God -- but the fire sweeps them away instead. They can't bear the fire: they look away, but it keeps on burning. The Jews, too, they --"

Lucien could bear no more. In a blast of rage he shouted at Stephen, "Get out! Get out of this house! Damn you! You're a beast,

a crazy man!" First glowering at Lille, he then yelled at Stephen! "You want to destroy my house, and my life, and my love! Goddammit, you think you have a license to talk like some Nazi pimp or something! You don't know who you're talking to? I have it in me too! I was born of a Jew, yes I was." Lucien ran to the bedroom and dug from the closet the photograph of his mother and flung it in Stephen's lap. "There! I was born of a Jew! She could have died, but she refused to. She had the will to live, which is more than you --. She lives now! You were lucky to be born at all, you scum. You never felt the real fire! You were privileged enough to escape it! Or maybe some devil kept you from being your mother's abortion."

Stephen winced at the picture, then unleashed a rabid laugh. Tossing the picture down, he ejaculated, "Whimerping brat!"

"Fucking Pharisee!" Lucien roared, unable to control himself. And he began to pummel Stephen with dull blows to the chest. He had never struck an adult man before. He had never had the audacity, but this time he did. Lille shrieked.

"Get out, out, you monster!"

Stephen did not fight back, but withstood each thrust with lofty defiance, as a big boy might parry the outraged, but feckless fists of a smaller one. "Alright," Stephen said to Lille caustically, "you're man wants me out; that's clear." And he picked himself up off the couch and hurried out. As he closed the door he shot back, "I've got what I want, anyway."

Lille dashed out the door after Stephen. Lucien buried his face in his hands and wept. Rather than vanquishing Stephen, he had in truth only humiliated himself. He had never suspected he possessed the capacity for such violence. He had outdone his most extreme fears

about himself, and to his own dismay he realized he had probably lost Lille for good. It would be impossible for things to go on as before. Disgusted with himself, he staggered forward and keeled onto the couch. His head was a maelstrom. In his mind he saw all the incidents of the past weeks pitching and frothing like flotsam in a gale, and he trembled before the great, swelling, ink-black oblivion which threatened to swamp his thoughts.

Then his eye caught the little statue which Lille had showed to him. The statue reposed on the coffee table, gracious and golden and timeless. For a second it reminded him of the quaint and hand-painted porcelain miniatures -- the Hummel figures -- displayed in gift shop windows. But the statue was not that of a prim and sexless German maid in pinafore, nor a chamois hunter with gun and lederhosen; it was stark and sensual, the eternal union of a god and goddess. Lucien peered at the figures. They seemed almost alive, writhing, caressing each other in their lacquered immutability. As deities, they would always love each other, and he felt a stab of terrible sadness. They were beings not of this world, weighted down with its universal loneliness and misery.

He waited for Lille until after midnight, when he gave way to his own weariness. In the early hours of the morning he awoke in fear from a strange, crushing sensation on his brain. Opening his eyes, he thought for a second he saw what looked like colossal dark wings folding over him, and his breath was momentarily strangled. In a sweat he sat up; his heart was pattering feverishly. As his eyes focused, he realized it had been all the phantasm of a dream. But there was yet another perception eminently real. From outside the window in the dawn light pulsed birdsong, the marvelous oratorio

of a solitary bird whose call he could not distinguish. The call was as clear as the high register of a clarinet, as tuneful as a piccolo; it was the only sound in a universe of stillness. The song was guileless, joyous, harking to day with the dutifulness of some celestial watchkeeper; and it beckoned him.

Swiftly he arose, dressed himself, and slipped out of the house into the cool morning. Once outside he could no longer hear the bird, whose sweet voice had perished amid the foliage, sopping with the morning damp. The sky was iridescent with tints of magenta and blue. A spirit within coaxed him to remain, perhaps forever, in that enchanted world. He wandered about the yard, mooning over the delicate fibers of honeysuckle and fingering its wet, supple, leaves. But soon he had the urge to go further, away from the house and yard. He climbed into his car and drove far out across the city and over the San Rafael Bridge that traverses the north portion of the Bay into Marin County, where the houses were scattered among lush wooded hills, rolling up to the airy summit of Mount Tamalpais. He followed a straight strip of highway through several sleeping, suburban villages to a place where the hills reared up steeply on both sides; and to the west, warmed with the flaxen light of the rising sun, he saw what appeared a small, stone castle sitting on an empty knoll. A redwood signboard pointed the entrance to a theological seminary. He did not turn into the lane to the seminary, but continued up a narrow, winding drive into a forest above the castle he had observed. There he stopped the car and got out. A breeze was whiffling through a meadow of high, withered grass, ringed by gnarled live oaks and cedars. At the edge of the meadow he spied a dusty trail that curled around the hillside and dropped down toward the seminary.

He followed the path. The woods were humming with all the sounds of nature. After many strides he came to a broken, rail fence and paused. He stood just above the flat roofs of some houses clustered in a glade below. Sitting down, he looked up at the sky, bright and vast before him. Then, unexpectedly, he heard the plod of feet on the path below. Standing up, he saw a dark, stiff figure mounting the hillside. An old man with a walking staff was shambling up the path in his direction. The old man was of slender build and carried himself with rigid, jerking movements. His hair was snow-white, and he had a square, slack jaw that trembled slightly. The old man stood before Lucien, staring at him with searing, motionless eyes which had a blankness to them, as though the old man might have been partially blind. Then the old man screwed up his face and squinted curiously. Lucien stared back. The old man seemed quite surprised at their encounter, and he finally made an acknowledging nod.

"I was just out for a walk, like you," Lucien said, somewhat nervously.

The old man hastened with an agitated gait right up to him and creakily extended his hand.

"My name is Lucien," Lucien said.

The old man refused to introduce himself, however, and stood there in the sun, speechless and deliberative, like an old patriarch holding court with his sons. Lucien did not know what to make of the old man. Perhaps the old man was hard of hearing as well.

But at last the old man gave a stern smile and barked, "So who are you, young fellow?"

"I said, my name is Lucien. I come from across the Bay, and I was just wandering about in these beautiful woods."

"I hardly ever meet anyone on my walks," the old man said.
"I'd thought I always had the privilege of solitude."

"I'm sorry," Lucien said.

"Don't you know this is holy ground?" the old man snapped.
Lucien was very uneasy now, but he detected a hint of drollery in the old man's voice, which tended to crack as he pronounced his words. The old man glared at Lucien with a warm, but deadpan sincerity, and suddenly Lucien understood that the stranger had accepted him.

"This is as far as I was going," Lucien said, pointing to the dilapidated rail fence, which stood as the boundary not just between two tracts of land, but between their two personages as well. The old man sniffed, glanced at the fence, and crossed over the boundary.

"Nobody should have fences," the old man said. "This one is falling apart anyway. These seminarians think they can fence themselves off from the world."

It was Lucien's suspicion that ^{he} might be a professor at the seminary.

"I take these walks for two reasons," the old man said. "First to be alone with my thoughts, second to get away for a time from students. They want to be ministers, but they don't really listen to me. They have no sense for tradition, if you know what I mean."

Lucien was puzzled by what the old man was alluding to.

"Ah, so you must think that filling your head with the techniques of ministering makes you holy," the old man said gruffly. "Their curriculum is a sacrilege these days." And he fished from his pocket a package of chewing gum and offered a stick to Lucien, who declined. "Tell me, do you know the Bible, young fellow?" the old man asked as he stuffed some gum into his mouth.

Lucien replied that he did not know the Bible very well. The old man muttered to himself, chomping on the gum, then winked facetiously at Lucien. "Are you a Christian?" he asked.

Lucien did not know what to say exactly. "I used to attend church, but I quit."

"It's good then you've broken the habit," the old man said.

The old man looked up at the sun, flinching. His jaw was chopping at the gum. "Good, good," he stuttered. "I wish I could convince those trained monkeys of mine to read instead of chattering on all the time as they do." Then the old man explained who he was, without giving his name. He said he was a professor of Old Testament, who was on the verge of retirement, and that he was somewhat weary of teaching Scripture to his seminary students, who "read the Word of God as if it were instructions on a soup can. Nobody has the ears to listen to anything important any more," he sighed, "but that's the age we live in. They'd rather swell their heads with what is modish, not profound." Then he cocked his head and asked Lucien another question: "Do you read the newspapers?"

"Sometimes."

"Ah, well that's where we should begin. Afterwards, you should read the Bible."

Lucien told him that he was searching for a job as a newspaperman.

"Ah," the old man said with a cheerful expression, "then you will write to us about events. If you know events, you will know the Word, even though so much is reported badly these days. And when people read the reports, they never catch what is between the lines."

Lucien was still uncertain. The old man seemed to be speaking

in riddles, but Lucien had a mild intuition of what he was suggesting. When he got home, he would read the Bible, if only out of curiosity.

"You must read from the beginning," the old man insisted, as if he had glimpsed Lucien's thoughts. "And you must not read just what it says."

The old man winked at him again and started to walk on. "You must come back to see me," he said with a smile.

Lucien watched the old man limp up the path and disappear over the top of the hill. It had been a queer encounter. During his religious years, he had read the Bible, and he had learned the familiar narratives -- how God had divided the darkness, how Samuel had hewn Agag in pieces, how Jeremiah had been thrown in a cistern for delivering God's Word, how Jesus had come and promised the Kingdom of God to his followers, how Christ had suffered, died, and been resurrected, and how he had said he would return some day. He had stopped reading the Bible, however, as it was nothing but a collection of stories which had outlived their historical meaning. Time and time again he had ministers and street evangelists entreat their audiences to read the Bible, but the Bible was only words, after all. The ministers "reported badly," he thought. They had failed to craft the words so that he in his very being was addressed. On the face of it, the old man he had just met seemed merely like another one of them. Yet there was a unique and tantalizing honesty in the way the old man had spoken. The old man was different from them. Though Lucien did not know really who he was, Lucien had the odd feeling that he knew the old man from somewhere. The old man was gone from view by now. Lucien hurried up the path toward the car in hopes that he might ask the old man one more question -- his name. But when Lucien came to

the end of the path, the old man had melted away without a trace.

Back in his car, he returned to the house. The cat greeted him at the door. Lucien stroked its fur and set it down. Inside he went to a ragged, black cowhide Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which was lying in a drawer. The Bible had been given to him by Arlene as a present upon his high school graduation. The fly page of the Bible had been torn out by him, years before, when he and Arlene had broken up. The page had contained a little, sentimental message which Arlene had composed herself: "Have faith in your dreams, for with God nothing shall be impossible." Lucien had always wondered about the gift of the Bible and the verse. They were strange gestures from a girl who did not consider herself religious and who had twitted him for taking the matter seriously.

Opening the Bible, he read the first chapter of Genesis -- the creation story -- which concerned God's conquest through speaking of the watery chaos, the fixing of the lights in the firmament, the bringing forth of the "swarms of living creatures," the creation of man in God's image. Lucien kept on reading, though no genie of striking insight stirred. He mused for a second over the last paragraph on the first page. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Lucien was alerted to the shift in pronouns in the last sentence. "Male and female he created them." He began to think of Lille, at first only a shadow in the crypt of his consciousness. She was the mysterious other being -- "female" -- whom God had fashioned for man in the story. She was woman, the other face of the split image. In his mind flashed a picture of the little statue Lille had brought him -- the man and woman lying together, separate, yet fired clay fused into one integral body.

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His eye captured again the line about the "swarms of living creatures." Then he turned the page and read about the garden, the tree of life, the serpent, the fall of man. His ideas were not clear, but he continued to read and ruminate. More than ideas, he had feelings, unusual and powerful feelings which left him queasy. Finally, he could read no more, for his understanding had reached its limits. But before he put the Bible down, he flipped to the last book, the Revelation to John. He read down the page of the first chapter to where it said: "I am the Alpha and the Omega...who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." Now his imagination ran back to the meeting with the old man on the path in the wood. It seemed, after all, not to have been a fortuitous meeting. But still, he was unable to comprehend the immensity of his own inklings. He ceased troubling himself with the Biblical passages for the time being. He wanted Lille back. That was all he wanted. He could not hold back the tears.

Several days elapsed, and Lille did not come. Sadly he picked through the paraphernalia she had left behind -- her clothes, stationery, combs, and artist's equipment. He did not attempt to store any of it away, or throw it away, for there was nonetheless a chance he would not need to. What if she did come back, though? What would he say to her? Regretably, she was probably now in the company of Stephen -- the wretch -- and she might even have slept with him. No, for her to do that would have been inhuman. But, even so, he could forgive her; he could forgive her for most transgressions and infidelities, if only she would allow him one more opportunity to confront her face to face.

One afternoon the telephone rang. It was the lawyer Lucien had hired. The lawyer called to inform Lucien that he had arranged for settlement of the estate, and that he wanted to drop over that

evening. Then there came a second call from Ted Domeshek, who asked too if he could pay a brief visit. Domeshek said he would be coming in less than an hour. Just as Lucien hung up, he heard the cat mewling loudly on the front steps, and he heard a muted, female voice saying "Kitty, lovely kitty." It was Lille! He flew to the door. She was holding Emery in the crook of her arm, petting him. She looked up at Lucien with big, shameful eyes. Her hair was dirty and her face pale. She wore the same outfit as when she had gone, now almost a week ago. With the cat in arm, she stepped inside and murmured to Lucien: "Will you let me come back?"

"Let you? God, I was the one who should ask you. I was terrible, doing what I did. I went berserk. I didn't mean to do it -- I could have killed him, if I was stronger or meaner. I did it -- well -- Lille, I've been insanely jealous, that's all, like a little boy, and I shouldn't have been. You saw the absolute worst in me."

"No, I didn't," she said mournfully. "You were right in what you did. Stephen's a beast. I don't know why I let him befriend me. He treated you horribly. Lucien, oh --" She wrung her hands. "I've been a wandering spirit of late. I've gone down into hell. See --" She pointed to her own eyes, which were bloodshot. "Stephen had evil intentions for me. He wanted to destroy my mind. I was a miserable fool, and I let him mislead me."

"Did you go to bed with him?"

"No, I couldn't have. Physically, he's a hideous man, you could see that. But what he did was worse."

She caught herself, her face reddening, and he could see that she was harboring some unpleasant secret.

"What?"

"No, I can't tell you," she wailed, rising to tears. "You'd hate me. Lucien, I'm back for good. I want to marry you."

"I don't understand." He wondered why in heaven she was willing to say that now. Could he trust her? What had happened during those absent days. She looked utterly distraught. She seemed to have lost weight and was skinnier than he had ever seen her. It was as though she were some sort of survivor, from a party who had been lost in the wilderness, and who had managed after a harrowing ordeal to find her way out.

"I'm serious," she pleaded. "I'm serious, Lucien. I'm a different woman. I've been through hell, it's true."

"Did he beat you up?"

"No."

"What happened? Christ, I want to know."

With shaking hands she lowered the cat to the ground. "I've, I've," she stammered, "been in a different world. Stephen tricked me. He made me drop acid, and my mind was blasted for God knows how many days. He should have taken me to the hospital. I thought I never would come to my senses. Oh, it was wretched. I'm still seeing phantoms. I thirsted for paradise, for knowledge, but I got perdition instead. I'm aware of things now I was never aware of before."

Sobbing, she edged up to him and parked her head against his shoulder.

"I want you to get me out of this," she cried. "I'm bound to you."

"I can't get you out myself," he said. "That's not what marriage for me is all about."

"Whatever," she blurted. "Whatever? Oh Lucien, I don't know what I can say, what I can do, for you to do that one thing -- forgive me --

He added, "Do we need to set a day yet?"

"Soon," she said. "Lucien, I don't want a big wedding. I don't want ever to tell my family. They would say, 'have you really considered?' My brother, especially, and my mother -- I couldn't explain to her. We won't tell them until we've done it, and then they'll have to be happy for us, won't they?"

"I'd like to meet your mother at least, maybe before we go through with it."

"She'd have to come down here. We can't afford to go up there. Maybe she would. No, it's better to have it be a total surprise. We have to surprise her."

"You've never said much about your mother."

"No, it's because we don't communicate much, since my father --"

"Well, whatever is best."

"Shall we just find a J.P.?"

"Yes, I think -- no, we need some ceremony. I know -- we could have a wedding by the sea, and we could invite a few friends. I have a few friends -- you have a few. There would be only a small number at our wedding. And we could get a preacher, not that dreadful Haskings, but someone who was sensitive, you know, someone who would do it our way, and he could recite beautiful things, and we could turn our faces out to the waves, and it would be beautiful. That's all. It'd be very simple. I could make my own dress, and --"

Suddenly she blanched. He could see that she was trembling, and she looked away. Tightening her fists, she said, "Lucien, it's not fair; I've got to tell you. I can't deceive you again." And she swung around with a long face and doleful eyes. "I'm pretty sure that I'm pregnant. No, it's by you, that's for certain. It couldn't

be anybody else. I guess when I learned about it I came to realize, more than because of what Stephen did to me. I didn't mean for it to happen. I don't really know how. It was some night when I shouldn't have, but I so desired you. Or it might have been a night I've forgotten completely."

Lucien recalled the night on the beach when he had forced his way into her, when she was not conscious enough to resist. It was he who was at fault. It was as though he had raped her, and he felt terrible.

"That wasn't the only reason I decided to marry you," she said. "You have to understand that. It was only what made me realize --"

"Lille, Lille!" he exclaimed. "It doesn't matter." Indeed, he now truly felt that it was of no great consequence. While the child might prove a burden, it might also secure their love once and for all more than mere testimonies of affection could accomplish. The days ahead would be difficult, but they would endure. They had so much of their lives left.

"Lucien, the whole thing is very frightening to me. I never believed I was cut out for marriage, let alone this, and all so quick! But it has to be that way. We're responsible for what we've done. I need to grow up. I need to be accountable for something. Sometimes life has to press you into doing things you think you don't want, because it's hell if you just follow your own selfish whims."

"Well," he said, "we'll have to make it, won't we? We'll take each step --"

A knock sounded at the door. Lucien had forgotten that Domeshek was coming, and he cringed. Cocking her head, Lille glanced at him inquisitively.

"Damn," he whispered. "It's Domeshek. Before you came, he called, and I told him -- I can't tell him to go away."

"No," she said, "don't do that. Those people don't annoy me anymore. I've gotten over being so childish."

There was a second knock. Domeshek presented himself without his wife this time. He peered, unsmiling, at Lucien through his glasses. "Lucien," he said, "I'm happy to see you again," and noting Lille, he said, "and you too."

Lucien offered Domeshek a glass of ice tea, but Domeshek politely declined. "No, I can't stay long. There's a matter I thought I'd better discuss with you." He adjusted his glasses around his ear, his brow rumped, and he coughed to clear his throat, as an elderly schoolteacher does before commencing with his lecture. Folding his hands meticulously, Domeshek said, "Lucien, I've waited a long while to talk over this with you --" Again, he cleared his throat, making a faint, gargling noise. "It's a little difficult for me, knowing as I have both you and your father." He cast an eye at Lille. "I suppose it's alright if the young lady hears this. Anyway, I've said before how Liz and I think of you as one of ours. Your father -- your father confided something to me once which he wanted you to know about, if he should ever die, you know, unexpectedly. He may even have mentioned it to you -- I really don't know about that -- but in case he didn't, I thought I ought to let you know, just in case -- it was about your mother. I never really knew your mother, as you're probably aware. Liz and I had met her, and we knew something about what did happen before you were born, and about her leaving. Karl kept pretty quiet about that business, but he did say a few things. We were talking one day, here, at the house, and he told me some things. Maybe he didn't really want

to tell me, but he must have felt he had to. Anyway, Lucien, this is going to be hard for me to say, because I imagine you still have a real love for your mother, but -- Karl felt it was not right what she had done. I guess he was as startled as you when she left. I'll get to the point. Karl didn't have all that much to leave behind, and -- well - he wanted it to all go to you. He wanted you to be his one heir, and he didn't want her claiming any of it. I don't know if you've talked to the lawyer, but I think the lawyer knows. He was afraid she might come back because there was money and, of course, you'd believe what she told you, because she's your mother. But he wanted it all to go to you, so you could make your life with it. I don't know what he really thought of your mother. I imagine he'd gotten over it somewhat, maybe more than you. He didn't want you to be bothered by her. I don't know myself why these things happen. I knew a little about your father's and mother's marriage and well -- it was unfortunate -- you know, when people who are really so different get married like that. Maybe he felt sorry for her, but he didn't when I talked to him. He didn't hate her -- you need to realize that -- but she was, well, different, very different, and that was a shame. There are some people in this world who can never belong among us, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Lucien replied coolly, "and I really don't like that implication, if you don't mind my being honest."

"Of course," Domeshek said, his nose twitching. "But that's understandable. She was your mother, after all."

"Well, I'm glad you let me know," Lucien said with a sigh.

"I'm sure the lawyer will have it in writing."

"I really don't know," Domeshek said. "Well, that's all I had to say. I put it off for a few weeks until things settled down a bit. I should be going now."

Lucien looked at his father's friend intensely and with anguish. Was Domeshek actually telling the truth? Had his father really guarded such feelings toward his mother? It was true that his father, kindly and quietly, had sought to erase every remnant of his mother's memory within the household, but Lucien had thought his father had done so in order to ease his son's suffering. Lucien had thought his father must have still loved somehow the woman who had lived and slept with him all those years, and that he must have nursed some kind of private grief, just as Lucien had done. Perhaps he had mistaken his own childish feelings for his father's actual intentions; he had been wrong about his father for years. It was quite painful for him to acknowledge what Domeshek had told him, and Domeshek could very well be incorrect. Domeshek was a busybody who always managed to hurt by trying to help. Too far removed from the situation, Domeshek was probably all too prejudiced and old to have a proper understanding of what had been the case. Domeshek was not malicious, but neither was he to be tolerated. It was time he pulled away from all pretense. He wanted to be nice to his father's friend, but he also felt the compulsion to outrage him.

"Before you go," Lucien said to Domeshek, "I want to tell you something. You see, I'm very glad what you've told me, and you should know everything, especially since my father is gone now." Nodding to Lille, who had seated herself quietly, Lucien slapped his hands against his side and said, "Well, you see, my father would have wanted me to be happy in any case, but there was one thing he couldn't do to guarantee it. He couldn't bring back my mother, and he couldn't -- you've met

Lille. She's a wonderful person. Dad would have thought so too. She came to me at the right time. We fell in love. Yes, she's been living her with me. That's what love leads to, and is all about. Dad wouldn't have minded. He would have been quite happy for me."

Domeshek scowled with uneasy astonishment.

"Yes," Lucien went on, "but she's done more than just get me over the hump. We're going to be married. It's a pity Dad couldn't be here to see it."

Domeshek glanced at Lucien, then at Lille with wounded befuddlement. His hands were fidgeting with the car keys he had yanked from his pocket. And Lucien was pleased that Domeshek was upset, though he was bent on convincing Domeshek that there was nothing at all improper about what he had divulged.

"Well," Domeshek stuttered, "well." Lucien saw that Domeshek was struggling to find within himself a reason to express approval. "That's good, but Lucien --"

"Don't say anything more, please," Lucien interrupted. "It's a very good thing. Dad would have rejoiced with us. That's what Haskings aid at the service. We must find cause for rejoicing."

Domeshek shook his head, refusing to look at Lille any more. "We ought to talk about this some time, and you ought to discuss it with Reverend Haskings before -- well, before you go through with it. There are matters you should think about. I've said what I had to say. Excuse me." He exited through the door without turning around to say goodbye.

"Yahoo," Lucien shouted when Domeshek was beyond earshot. "Lille, he's off my back. It's too bad. He had the best intentions. Lille, we've got to get things ready. We need to plan. When?"

Soon, I suppose."

Lille smiled meekly. "Lucien, you have to take over now. I'm ready as soon as you are."

Lucien was indeed ready. This time he would not let fortune betray him. He would make sure that the pact was sealed as soon as possible, in case she might have second thoughts. He was single-minded now. It didn't matter what might lie in the days, and even years, ahead. He was possessed with the opportunity of the moment. He had been a victim of incalculable circumstances -- woman's whims, broken confidences -- long enough. Now he would not wait. He would wrest his own happiness, and Lille's too, from the deeds of time and disappointment. Marriage to Lille was all that counted. He was at war with the inconstancy of human will, which seemed the very essence of time and fate. It was the last week in July. He suggested to Lille that they go, that very week, and find a justice of the peace. Afterwards, they could have a public ceremony to make it respectable. Tomorrow was Sunday. They could get married the following day. Lille reminded him they needed a blood test first, and they would have to wait for the results, perhaps several days. "Alright," he said. They could deal with that problem on Monday, but it was unfortunate, because he hoped no "complications" would develop. He realized he was being a bit overbearing with her. But she appeared utterly calm and compliant. She was almost servile toward him, which was not at all like her. Yet her stance lend him a strange conviction for the first time that he was on top of things.

The lawyer came and detailed the estate as his father's will had dictated and in accordance with state probate laws. In the will Lucien's mother was, as Domeshek had reported, never mentioned. Lucien, oddly, found himself in cold agreement with the specifics of the settlement.

The estate amounted to little more than the death expenses and some sundry savings and securities, which could be used to support them until he had a job. The matter of a job was resolved on Monday. When he and Lille returned from the hospital for their blood tests, Lucien received a telephone call from a newspaper editor of a small daily across the Bay in Marin County. The editor was the only one who had granted him an interview, and he had a job. He would start work the eleventh of August. What luck, he thought. Marin would be a pleasant area in which to live. They could sell the house in Oakland and buy a little bungalow in the woods, far away from the city. "It's all falling together," Lucien squealed happily to Lille. He began to think about the baby as well. He had not anticipated fatherhood so early in his life, but now that it was inevitable, he would have to regard the good features of it. Marriage and family would give his life some substance at last. Certainly, he and Lille would gradually sink into an uneventful routine, but stability had its virtues. Their life would not be glamorous, but they would no longer be lonely, and they would have a direction for their days together, an aim other than simply growing old. They would slowly grow in their knowledge of each other. Their love would ripen, and they would no longer be flecks in the swirling torrent of the generations.

All through the week Lille was wonderful with him. She made love gracefully with him in bed; she always let him lead her, telling him all the while how adept he had become in the sexual art. She chattered on about married life, for the most part whimsically, even though she rarely made reference to her pregnancy. Lucien wondered why her pregnancy did not seem to be more on her mind, as it seemed to him such an important prospect for any woman.

Lille explained, "It's too early to get excited. I have to think about getting married first." She never left the house without him. Everything in the house she kept as tidy as a saint's altar. She cooked all the meals. She was already a superb, little housewife, and he looked forward to her learning more domestic amenities. On Friday the results of the blood test came. All was in order, and they made plans to travel to Marin County on Monday to have the marriage vows performed.

Friday night, toward ten o'clock, someone rang Lille on the telephone. Lucien was reading on the sofa, and Lille answered it. Lucien heard her say "hello," and then she was silent for about a minute. Then he heard her mumble imploringly, "no, that can't be." And there was another interval of silence before she shrieked under her breath: "That isn't going to happen. I won't. I've worked it out. Please don't call back," and she hung up.

"Who was that?" Lucien asked, curiously.

Lille's eyes were glassy. "I'm not really syre," she said coolly. "Some crank."

"Come on. I heard you talking."

"It wasn't anything or anybody," she protested. "Now --"

The telephone jingled once again. Lucien went to answer it, but there was a click on the other line as soon as he had finished his greeting.

"Lille," he said suspiciously. "I want to know what's going on." He thought it might be Stephen, and he asked her if it was.

"It might have been," she said curtly, "but I'm done with him. Can't you understand that?"

She went to bed before he did, while he continued reading. He

was reading a magazine article entitled "The New Morality," which was all about the effects of the pill on the sexual attitudes of young women. Oblivious to the time, Lucien drifted off sleep. Then, sometime in the course of the early morning, his sleep was shattered by a loud rapping. Springing up, he saw by the clock that it was one-forty. The rapping, which turned out to be at the front door, was persistent. Lucien tiptoed to the door, opened it a crack, and in the darkness caught sight of two men. One of them was the hated Stephen. The other man looked unfamiliar.

"What do you want?" Lucien snorted.

Stephen spoke: "It's OK, we just want to talk a little bit."

"With Lille? Or me?"

"With you," Stephen said casually.

Lucien was fearful. He knew Stephen had a score to settle, for which reason he was not about to let him in, especially since Stephen had brought along one of his hangers-on. Lucien feared that to allow them inside was to invite mayhem. Perhaps Stephen even had a weapon. Stephen was the type who was vicious and crazy enough to do just about anything.

"You're out of your mind," Lucien whispered. "Come back when it's daylight."

Stephen had lit a cigarette, which glowed red in the dark. "We have to talk with you," Stephen said with firmness. "I've got somebody here you might want to meet."

"Who?"

The other man now spoke up in a hoarse and somewhat effeminate voice. "I'm Brian, Lille's brother," the other man said. "I want to talk to you about her."

Lucien was scared. Though he was ready to open the door, his common sense urged him otherwise. "How do I know you're who you say you are?" Lucien demanded.

"That I'm her brother?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can tell you anything, and what I want to tell, man, you ought to know." The other man's voice sounded too earnest to be a deliberate pretense.

Nervously, Lucien let the pair come in. Stephen looked at him and smiled, but not with the sneering condescension of their last encounter. Stephen was wearing the same leather shirt he had worn a week before. The man who claimed to be Lille's brother was clad in blue jeans and a lime-green T-shirt. He had a light, stubbly beard and a tremendous head of strawberry, wire curls. Lucien thought he had a very mousy appearance for somebody allegedly in the Marines.

"Glad you saw to reason," Stephen said. "This here is Brian, Lille's brother, as I said. He's got some words for you."

Brian stared at Lucien in an extremely timid and self-conscious manner. He had the look of a boy, no more than eighteen or so, small-waisted, and showed arms as thin as tendons. His face was bloodless and gaunt. He was entirely different than Lucien had imagined. There was a distracted flutter in his eyes. He said to Lucien: "Can you get her out of it?"

"I don't get what you're driving at," Lucien replied.

Brian coughed with a somewhat asthmatic wheeze. Cupping his hand over his mouth, he brought the spasm to an end, then peered with a vacant innocence which seemed to hint almost at embarrassment. He said: "I was sayin' she needs to get out of whatever she's doin'

right now. Look, man, she's my sister, and she can do just about anything."

Lucien couldn't quite fathom what the boy was trying to say. Stephen looked at Brian, then silently at Lucien with a knowing and squint-eyed grin. Brian went on: "She's a little crazy, man. Maybe you know that. Stephen's been tryin' to help her out a bit, but she's --"

Lucien interrupted: "She's crazy like hell. What are you trying to pull over me?" He glared at Stephen. "You helped her alright. She told me about your giving her that acid, or whatever it was? You almost made her mind a dead husk."

"Now you know something you didn't know before, maybe," Stephen said unctuously. "You've heard her first lie. I didn't give her the stuff. She ripped it off me, you know. I admit, I keep the stuff in my cupboard for the right clients, but she wasn't one of them. Brian here's asked me to protect her and I did it, like an old mother hen protects one of her brood."

"God, that's a lie," Lucien objected. "You're the father of lies."

"There's nobody better at lying than Lille," Stephen said. "You know a good lie when you can't believe it's a lie." And he winked at Brian.

Brian said, "Look, you -- Lucien, isn't that your name? -- you don't know who she is. She's my sister, man. I've known her longer than any of you dudes. I know all about her. I don't want her to get in any trouble, or to cause you the same. But her head just isn't screwed on right. Stephen, well -- Mom couldn't afford a shrink, and Stephen was a good friend, so I asked him to look

after her. We were afraid she couldn't hold a job. She latched onto you at the right time, because we thought she might be goin' to flip out. She's heavy into drugs, man."

"That's wrong," Lucien snapped. "She's lived with me over a month, and I haven't seen her using any of that stuff."

"She comes here," Stephen said, "because she wants to come out of it. It's a good place for her, and who knows, maybe you're the one to straighten her out. Friends of the family, like me, can't do it."

Lucien was enraged with Stephen at that point. "To hell with you," he burst out, "you sound like some pious physician, but you don't have any idea how to do good. You sat here in this living room, and you were spouting the most goddam, obnoxious and insane crap. I sat and listened to you. You said you were going to burn the world down, and us along with it."

Stephen responded with a sour laugh. "You took me all too seriously, didn't you? That's why you flew off the handle, like a little Jew boy who hears the word 'kike.' I make a profession of outrage. I was fiddling, but the city wasn't really burning, now was it? Sometimes I get carried away, but I try not to get worked up by it."

"You're a fake as well, " Lucien cried.

"I might as well tell you that Lille came here after she left you, and we decided to get married. We're going to do it, and, well, there's more. She's going to have my baby."

At that Stephen laughed uproariously, so much so that his face turned scarlet, and his eyes glistened. Finally, Stephen took hold of himself and said, "God, what'd she tell you? You didn't know?

She hoodwinked you. Isn't that incredible? Hell, she's always got babies on the brain. Every guy she fucks she comes around and says, 'Darling, I'm knocked up now,' and she blows their minds. She's fucked so many guys the past six months I bet it wouldn't surprise me if she were pregnant now. But most likely she's been so afraid of getting knocked up she's come to believe she actually was, and you're the one this time. Consider yourself the celebrity of the month."

"Goddam you," Lucien bawled. He knew Lille must have woken up by now, for he heard a faint rustle in the bedroom. "You're the greatest pig I ever knew. You want to destroy her, more than me."

"It's just what's so," Stephen said coolly. "She's hooked you with the latest of her lies. No, not her lies, her fantasies. But what does it matter? She believes them all. What'd she tell you about herself, that she's a proper Mills graduate, or Swarthmore? She doesn't even have a degree. She dropped out of Cal two years ago. She's smart, polished, and she speaks well, that I admit. But her head is somewhere else. She can always act in the way she fancies herself at the moment."

Lucien turned to Brian, who looked back at him sheepishly. "It's right, man," he said, "she never got a degree."

"And her father?" Lucien asked. "He's dead, she told me."

Brian shook his head. "She won't own up to it. He's not dead. He walked out of the family some years back. He's a skid row bum now, drunk all the time, in Portland, where we come from."

"And she said --" Lucien was sick at heart, even though he was fighting with every fiber of will not to believe what he was hearing. "She told me you were in the Marines, but it doesn't look --"

Brian shook his head. He shrugged, pointing to his clothes.

"It's not true."

Lucien's head was pitching. The nausea was seeping through his abdomen. She had perpetrated the most cruel hoax on him, unless -- unless, of course -- Stephen had staged the entire affair to gull and humiliate him. It was possible, but it seemed less and less plausible. He would have to get Lille's version of the story right away, even if it might be agonizing. As he headed for the bedroom, Lucien overheard Brian saying: "We got to see her. Mom wants her back, so she can the right help."

Lille was sitting up in bed with the light on. She had stripped herself totally naked and drawn up her body in a serpentine, cross-legged posture. She held her hand daintily over one of her breasts, and she stared at Lucien with trancelike wonder. Without engaging Lucien's eyes, she said stiffly: "So you've come for me too. You couldn't let me be, could you? You had to violate the inmost part of me. You couldn't stand to take things as they seemed, only as they had to be. I've heard the lies they've been saying about me. They're lies, lies, the most hateful lies. Who's going to point out a lie? Not them."

In a frenzy Lucien flung himself against her naked body, clutched her head against his chest, and cried, "I believe you. For sure, I believe you." But Lille was as languid and cold as a brick of cheese. He dug his fingers, desperately, into her shoulder, and tried to kiss her, but she sprung back limply. He planted a kiss on her breast, but she made no response. "Lille, please, I love you. I'll make them go away. They're impostors. Stephen's a fool. I'll throw him out, as I did the other day."

"No," she said, it won't help. Tell them to come in."

As it happened, Stephen and Brian were already standing in the doorway. Stephen was shaking his head, and he smiled at Lille.

"Well," she said to Stephen, "so you couldn't leave well enough alone. It's too bad. You tried to snatch the last morsel of freedom from me, but this time I've done it all myself."

"You what?" Stephen exploded. He was like the dwarf in the fairy tale who had heard his magic name uttered. "You're a bitch, a goddam bitch. You're damned forever." He looked at Lucien, now helplessly, pitifully. "You didn't stop her?"

Lucien shrunk back in bewilderment. Lille raised her arm in a sweeping arc above her head, thrusting in relief the black nipples of her breasts, and with a titter she said, "I've done it all myself this time."

"What?" Lucien asked nervously.

"You fool," Stephen raved, "she's swallowed another one of those things she ripped off me. She's going to sail out of sight in a little while. You didn't know, did you? She's going to burn up her mind."

Lille cackled loudly. "Nobody has me now, only God has me."

"God and hell," Stephen shouted, and he turned and raced for the door with Lille's brother close behind him. "I won't be here anymore to watch it," he screeched, ramming the door against its hinges.

Lucien shut the door, switched off the light in the bedroom, disrobed, and lay beside Lille, who was breathing softly. He did not know precisely what to expect from here. Perhaps, if he was vigilant, he could help her through the tribulation which was about to begin. He would stay by her until dawn, and then there might be

one last chance for healing. Wrapping his arm about her, he felt her breasts rising and falling like gentle waves over water. At length he heard the dull, irregular patter of what sounded like rain on the shingles of the roof, but he thought he might be mistaken, for it never rained in summer. The sound ebbed away, and he grew exceedingly tired. He was determined, nevertheless, not to fall asleep. His head ached from the strain. He started to see strange and straggling scenes before his eyes, which did not make much sense. Then he was asleep. But suddenly he seemed to awake, and he opened his eyes to behold in the corner of the room an apparition. He could not gauge whether it was a dream, for the vision was brilliant and alluring. His heart was palpitating with astonishment and terror. He saw the image of his mother, her eyes black and lustrous and obsidian, her arms flapping like a tattered gown in a strong wind. She seemed to float toward him. He cried out, and he discovered that it was only the froth of a nightmare. But now he was seized by a more immediate and alarming realization. Lille, without his knowing, had disappeared from the bed. Tossing on his clothes, he ran out into the living room. He witness there her naked form, as ghostly as a dream, hovering near the door. He called to her, but the door swiftly opened, and she evaporated into the night.

He ran after her. He believed he would catch up with her soon, for she was not as fleet as he. But once in the darkness he lost sight of her. The night was choked with a feathery mist, and the ground was unusually wet. He sprinted into the street where he caught sight of her again, in her nakedness, dashing along the sidewalk with such speed she seemed to be skimming through the air. The damp cold seeped into his muscles, but he mustered sufficient strength to pursue her. He did not worry whether someone might come

along and notice them. She ran ahead of him, always at an insuperable pace. The street lights blinked at the perimeter of his vision, as if they were stars flickering out. To the Rose Garden he followed her, and he looked down to see her leaping from step to step into the darkness below.

"Lille," he yelled. His voice was crisp and resonant in the heavy air. He rushed down the stairs. At the bottom he lost her once more, but he heard her footsteps across the garden, where the ruined solarium lay. He zigzagged among the rose bushes to where she seemed to have paused. He ran up, encountering her face to face at long last.

"Lille, dammit, come back to the house." A fluorescent streamer from the streetlamp above struck her eyes, which glinted faintly. She stared at him, almost as if she had no idea who he was. Her eyes were in an immobile ecstasy.

"I'm gone," she said. "I've come to where I am -- now -- forever."

"Lille, you're mad." But he felt for an instant that by chance it was he, not she, who was the mad one. She seemed so much at peace with herself.

Her lips rolled into a prissy smile, and she twittered, like the birds he heard each morning. "No," she said. "I'm gone. I'm gone far away, come again some other day. Ha, ha. You can't have me, whoever you are. No one can have me. I'm truly God." And she darted off again.

He was beside himself with horror and grief. She had changed in a way of which he could take no account. He ~~sensed~~^{felt} he had come to the very end with her. But, yet, there still seemed to be time,

time for the very last reconciliation, if only he could persuade her to step out of her madness, to return to bed with him. With determination he could make it so that everything in the morning would be the same as it was.

Lille was nowhere in view. The darkness was everywhere. He stumbled back against a rose hedge. Its sharp thorns tore through the fabric of his shirt. He wanted to call for her again, but it seemed rather futile. The mist was thickening, and he could hear the hiss of raindrops all through the leaves and bushes. The darkness overwhelmed him. He felt as though he were very young again, but this time without the loneliness and ~~hurt~~ he had undergone before. A gush of warmth filled his limbs. The darkness seemed, magically, to be receding, and the light from the street lamp was intensifying, perhaps to usher in the sunrise. He was not angry at Lille. No, he loved her passionately. He loved her, in spite of the madness in which they both were in danger of drowning. He loved her more than he had ever imagined himself capable of loving. She was gone, but in her absence he loved her more fiercely. She was the one who had taught him how to love, not as a child loves, but as a man loves a woman. And he felt as light as she was. He would pursue her into her madness, even if he never touched her naked body again.

He hurled himself into the dark space of the ruined solarium. He did not know if he would find her ~~there~~. At first he thought he glimpsed her face about five steps away beside a large, shadowy object that could have been a chunk from the foundation. "Lille," he implored tenderly, but there was no reply. He stumbled and fell on his face, crashing in pain against the muddy and rock-littered ground. He felt

weightless, blissful. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the space was lightening. Perhaps dawn had arrived. Eagerly, he pulled himself up from the ground.

But where he had seen her face before, he was suddenly dazzled with a fantastic spectacle. He was struck dumb by what he saw. The space was filled with a weird and radiant light, and in the midst of the light he beheld a fiery face, bright as a million suns. It was the face of his mother and Lille together. The face seemed to be smiling and weeping at the same time. The face was both young and old, beautiful and hideous. It had no arms or body, and it raged and detonated with sparks, like flaming matter from an exploding nebula. He himself was being consumed in the fire, the fire he knew in deepest awe was the face of God. He could not move; he was petrified like the bones of all his human ancestors who had lived and died before him. Slowly he watched the fire go out. The darkness returned, his body relaxed, and he began to cry, though he was crying in exultation. He fell to his knees and threw his hands over his eyes in dread. He heard himself sobbing, though it was hard to distinguish what he heard from the sound of the falling rain, which dripped down over his face and ran to the ground in little puddles and rivulets trickling away into the gigantic darkness that was now out of mind.

For Lucien, everything that morning seemed haunted and unreal. On return to the house, he discovered that all the lights were burning, even though he remembered having left them off. The cat had disappeared again, and did not show up as it usually did around breakfast time. He dared not go back into the bedroom, as he was afraid of what he might see, or feel there. So he lay down and finished sleeping on the living room sofa. He was frightened that he might experience the vision again, but nothing so prodigious occurred. He did not even dream. Instead he floated into a state of suspended consciousness in which his eyes remained open, but he could see nothing, except the rarefied light of the morning that drooped over his weary senses like a veil of celluloid. About ten o'clock he awoke, untroubled and refreshed, yet with an odd transformation of his quality of awareness. Each sensation was elegant and vibrant. The twittering of the birds outdoors was amplified and sonorous, even more so than the morning he had gone to meet the old man. His perceptions were a bit scrambled. At times he would think he heard a sound, but surprisingly would see colors instead -- the entire spectrum from red to violet as is visible through a refracting glass. He turned on the radio and listened to music, which turned out to be more intense than he had ever heard. Gradually the anguish of losing Lille burned away with the morning sun.

Nonetheless, he was reminded unavoidably of her. Toward noon a policeman visited the house. Lille had been apprehended earlier that morning, as he expected she would. The authorities had found her lying naked on a path in the Rose Garden. The policeman asked Lucien some routine questions. In what manner did he know Lille?

What were the precise circumstances of their relationship? Had any drugs been kept in the house? The policeman grew ruder as the questioning dragged on, but Lucien insisted that so far as he was aware, he had not been any kind of accomplice to criminal actions, and he did not consider himself responsible for Lille's behavior. After an hour the policeman left, but in the early afternoon he saw a large, white car drive up, and two detectives with a search warrant barged in to ransack the house. One detective kept shouting angrily at Lucien, as the two rifled through closets, emptied drawers, and ended up confiscating Lille's clothes and other personal belongings. Lucien retained his equanimity throughout the proceedings, and he made a deliberate effort to be as helpful as he could, even if the detectives did not seem persuaded of his innocence. At last the two detectives left without saying more.

Toward sundown Lucien had another visitor. To his surprise it was Stephen, alone on this occasion, and well-dressed. Stephen looked deeply embarrassed.

"I guess you know all about it," Stephen said.

"Yes, I chased her as far as I could; then I lost her."

"You couldn't do a damn thing about it, could you?"

"No. She was too far gone."

"I guess neither of us could do much," he said with a sigh.

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and hesitantly offered Lucien one.

"I don't smoke, sorry."

Stephen lit a cigarette for himself. As he blew out a long stream of smoke, he said, "You probably think I'm the one who did her in, don't you?"

But Lucien did not blame Stephen. In fact, though it seemed

downright queer, Lucien did not even feel any enmity now toward Stephen. Stephen was just a plain, bad-tempered, and uncomely little man with no pronounced capacity for evil, only for thoughtlessness. Stephen, likewise, no longer appeared to bear a grudge toward Lucien, if he ever had in the first place. Stephen now, in some strange way, seemed to want Lucien's confidence, and Lucien was willing to grant it.

"No, I don't think you're the one," Lucien said. "You couldn't figure her out any better than me."

"Maybe that was the hitch," Stephen said. "We men -- we make plaster icons of our women, and we expect them to behave that way. We can't deal with it when they go off the deep end."

"I think you know Lille better than me," Lucien said, trying to be as amiable as possible, because he wanted some information at this point. "Can you tell me? Why on earth did she lie like that to me?"

Wrinkling up his nose, Stephen answered: "Aren't we all given to lies?" He posed the question with the detachment of a professor testing his class.

"Yes, I guess so."

"She was just worst than most of us, that's all. Listen, my friend, I was never that tight with her. She came to me, like she came to you. I didn't go to her. It was obvious she wanted something out of me. I'm a lot older than your crowd. I've lived through things you or she haven't. I've been drifting through the times on the far side of things, since '55, when I got sick of my family and my religion and all that middle class death trip, so I came out

~~_____~~

here to Baghdad by the Bay, and resolved to be a free man. I've been on the inside of things, but I haven't come up with all that much -- wisdom -- to offer. Living like that, with the chicks and the dope, it hasn't taken me anywhere. Lille wanted to be an artist, she told me, but she couldn't even draw a face in the right proportions. She was fucked up, literally. She was trapped in herself. Her old man was a wino, as you found out. He's obviously some kind of decadent, a real one, and she must have wanted to be a decadent herself. She couldn't tell I was a phony too. She must have admired me like her old man, because she thought I had something real to offer. But look what she took from me. I don't give candy to children, so she stole it from me. I guess that was all she wanted when you really look at it. She wanted an easy rhapsody. She wanted to go out of her fucking mind."

"Did she sleep around so much, as you said? I can take her going crazy, but when I think of that, I get mad."

"Seems she did. Look how she duped you so quickly."

"And did she get laid by you?" Lucien feared having to ask that particular question, but he truly wanted to know.

Stephen looked at him with a smirk. "Hell," he said, "I'm an old man who's got a dick like a wet breadstick. I was just her sugar daddy. She knows better where to go when she wants a cock."

"But damnit, she said she loved me."

"Im' sure she did. She wanted love from somebody, but not from me. She wanted somebody who was, well, stable. And maybe she thought you were the stable type. She probably thought you had money."

"She knew I didn't."

"Well, shit, maybe she believed you did. She believed what

she wanted to believe."

Lucien felt sad now, a kind of serene sadness, the sadness of knowing the truth for the first time, along with the painful death of illusions. So she had not loved him in a way that ultimately counted, regardless of his having loved her, for which he was thankful. But he was still bothered by the vision. He did not intend to tell Stephen about the vision, at least not straightforwardly. He asked Stephen: "Do you think she could have slipped me some of the same stuff she took? I mean, last night, well -- I saw something -- I don't know what it was. It scared the hell out of me."

Stephen raised his eyebrows. "What scared the hell out of you?"

"I don't know. I was going after her, in the darkness. I wanted to tell her something, I guess, but I never got to say it."

"Look," Stephen said, "anything's possible, But if she'd given you some of that junk, you'd have been flying to the stars and back by now. Then again, if you were so into her mind, you might have -- no, that doesn't happen."

"I don't think I was crazy," Lucien said. "It was very quick, and now -- well, forget it." Unfortunately, he could not so easily forget it.

"Listen, Stephen said, "you ought to get the hell out of this house and do some things with me tonight. You don't want to stay in this looney bin anymore." Lucien agreed without telling Stephen. "Shit, you want a chick after this, don't you? A chick will make any man feel good when he's coming out of --. I know a damn good one."

Lucien shook his head. "Not tonight. I don't need to get out of the house, but I'd rather be alone, maybe put it all back together. " The truth was that he just did not want to go out with Stephen. But,

to be polite, he said, "I might want to take you up on it sometime, however."

"Well," Stephen said with a shrug, "I'll give you a ring one of these days. Can't give you my own number, because I don't have one. I'm in and out all the time, but there'll be time." He nodded confidently. "I'm sorry we didn't hit it off at first. I've got to admit, I'm usually a bastard, and I thought anybody Lille was sleeping with had to be a bastard, like myself. I thought she only went for pricks, little Jew boys, and I did my best to provoke you. Hell, the world's fucked up as it is, and it's getting even more fucked up by the day. I meant what I said about the fire and all that, but I wouldn't have put on such a show for you if I thought -- well, hell, I thought you weren't who you were. Lucien, you're straight. You've got good things to do, even if you get crucified by all those fuckers out there." As he was going out the door, Stephen said, "Oh yes, and one thing I forgot, the cops are gonna be around here I bet."

"They've already been here."

"They didn't do anything?"

"They turned the place inside out."

"But they didn't find anything?"

"No."

"Well, be a sport and keep my name out of it, supposing they come back, OK?" He spoke with uneasiness.

"OK," Lucien said.

"Good."

Lucien tarried with his own thoughts in the darkening house. He did not turn on a light, but stood, gazing out the bay window in the back out over the tiny yard with its overrunning foliage which caught the sinking sun in its black, funicular net and wrang out the

the last ochre gleams. Suddenly he had the peculiar prescience that Lille might be coming back, once again, to the house, for a reconciliation. After all, she had come back several times before. It was not impossible. Perhaps a miracle was about to happen. Perhaps she had finally come to her senses. But something else told him that he would never lay eyes on her ever again. In the vision he had beheld the flaming last of her. The house itself had a strange and melancholy ambience. It was not his father's house any longer, nor even his own house. He would have to see about selling the house. Stepping back from the window, he switched on a lamp.

That evening there came one more person, Lille's brother Brian. Obsequious toward Lucien, he apologized profusely for the trouble he believed "she" had caused. Wearily, Lucien explained that nobody could really be held accountable for the incident, and that what had happened could scarcely be called "trouble."

"I think Mom is especially going to thank you, 'cause you still kept her from doing something even crazier than she did," Brian said nonchalantly. He spent about twenty minutes gathering up the rest of Lille's possessions, stashed them into his car, and went away.

Now Lucien was anxious to get out of the house, as Stephen had suggested. So he drove to Berkeley and hunted up the same cafe where he and Lille had eaten. Business at that cafe was slow. It was Monday night, and the band was not playing. Lucien wandered down Telegraph Avenue to another restaurant that bore the sign Hofbrau Haus. It was quite dark inside, save for the dim, red-orange heat lamps that warmed the serving trays and racks of meat along the buffet.

~~Lucien was~~

Candles encased in dark green glass were set at the center of each table in the dining area, glinting with corpuscles of gray-green light, like so many cat's eyes. The tables were crowded with young couples, their staid and distracted faces irradiated in the flickering glow. Lucien spotted an empty table for himself. Then he realized the restaurant was self-service, and went over to stand in line at the buffet. A glass of beer in hand, he was about to pay the cashier when he heard a woman's high-pitched laugh and two male voices in counterpoint. A group of about six people pressed through the door, conversing very loudly. In front of the group was a young woman, who managed to catch Lucien's eye. She was strikingly dark and good-looking; she had short hair which curled evenly in a flip just above her shoulders, and she exhibited a strong, rather masculine, round face with plump cheeks. Her hips were heavy and sturdy, and her breasts poked out from her blouse. She was talking to a short man next to her, who Lucien noticed to his astonishment was Stephen.

Lucien did not know at first whether he should hail Stephen. His immediate impulse was not to be discovered. But, before Lucien could finish paying for his beer, Stephen recognized him and called out in a hospitable tone: "Well, Lucien, we couldn't get rid of each other tonight, could we?"

Stephen beckoned the young woman to follow him as he made his way to where Lucien was standing. Stephen grinned wryly, and the young woman's eyes brushed by Lucien with a half-interested flourish.

"Lucien. We have the same haunts. You really didn't want to turn down my invitation, did you? Meet some friends here. You should join us. I have somebody special you need to me." Stephen

hooked his arm firmly about the young woman, as he introduced her. "This is Elaine, my advisor, if you want to call her that. Or should I say my confessor?"

Elaine smiled politely and nodded to Lucien. Lucien was decidedly taken by her. She must have been the woman Stephen had mentioned earlier in the evening. Though he had no interest in sitting down with Stephen and his friends, his infatuation with Elaine at that moment kept him from excusing himself, as he would have otherwise done. She fascinated him. It was not merely her physical attractiveness, but the outcropping of a deep-thinking, intelligent mind which he discovered in her eyes -- dark, quartz-like, and intense. She had a seriousness and self-restraint about her, offsetting the cynical and volatile Stephen. Lucien doubted she had much in common with Stephen, and he wondered why she consented to his company.

Stephen was acting differently that evening, carrying on in jolly spirits about trifling matters. The young men, whose names Lucien had not bothered to remember, blandished and bantered along with Stephen, while the two young women kept silent, though on occasions smiling and batting their eyelashes at a good-humored remark or two by their male companions. Elaine, however, did not smile much. Dutifully, she attended with her eyes and ears to the conversation; but she did not participate, and at times, whenever Stephen spoke, she would hunch her shoulders in idle disapproval and glance off. Lucien took heed of her various facial expressions with curiosity. She appeared the kind of woman who has deliberately cast off any pretext of conventional feminine charm; and she seemed to burn with an inner righteousness which Stephen, in his wily manner, found a ready target for his provocations.

"Ho, ho," Stephen roared, "it's a pity the people in this world have their heads screwed on so straight. Nobody has vision anymore -- that's the crux of it. Their minds are little thumbscrews that keep squeezing out their guilt. These chicks who've got chastity belts around their heads. It even affects their politics." Stephen poured for himself two frothy pitchers of beer at the table. "Now, that's right. Even their politics. Politics are the thing nowadays. Politics and acid, but nobody's doing acid politics. It's too strong a business. Hell, acid would be salvation for politics. The assholes make war on us, on our minds and bodies. Well, we slip them acid, and they run away mad, they run away from this fucking war and they tune into where it really is, right down in their crotches." He laughed. But then he noticed that no one else had joined him. All at once the conviviality disappeared, and Stephen looked around, nonplussed. He banged his beer glass on the table. "Hell, you all know what I mean!"

"C'mon," one of the men objected, "Stephen, don't start gettin' heavy on us like you do sometimes. It goes nowhere."

"Ah, shit," Stephen snorted, "you won't let me tell you like it is, will you?"

"No, you don't need to anyway," Elaine said, speaking up finally. Her tone was sharp, carefully computed, with a peremptoriness designed to put Stephen in his place. "You just make a fool out of yourself, and you'd do better if you really had something to say."

The group fell into an embarrassed silence. Visibly irritated, Stephen turned to the others and said sulkily, "alright, well I'll shut up if you people have anything better to talk about."

"That's not the point," Elaine said, "and you know it isn't. You were knocking my politics, ridiculing me right here in front of

your friends, and you thought you could get away with it, because I was just another one of your chicks, and you could lay it on all you wanted. Stephen, you're a fool sometimes, a pompous fool."

Stephen shrugged in mild contempt. He looked to the others for their support. "Shit," Stephen said, "I don't go it for much when some chick assassinates my honor. Do you understand, friends, what she's done? She's assassinated my honor."

"Stephen, you're not just a fool, you're a big and noisy pretender," Elaine said sourly. "Assassinate your honor? You sound like some fat, cigar-chomping general. Really Stephen, you're nothing more than a pusher and a pimp. That's your honor, friend. You knock the things I'm committed to. I can take that, but when you go making fun of them right here in front of other people, I can't take it. You're smooth, Stephen, but you're blown up with so much self-importance it makes me croak, and I get sick."

"Now wait a minute," Stephen said with a sly, conciliating simper on his face. "Baby, I'm --"

"Damn it," she exclaimed with tearful exasperation, "don't call me that! You're humiliating Stephen. I don't know why I let you do this, or why I even stick around you."

It was obvious Stephen had gotten the best of her. Ogling her with mock pity, he reached for her hand and said, "because I've got something you don't have. Me." He winked comically and waggled his eyebrows. "Me! Me! You've got me. Baby, we don't need to bore these good people with our family spats. Now I won't talk politics, if you don't want me to."

"Damn," Elaine shrieked, clenching her fists and springing up from the table. "You spout off all you want to. I'm taking a walk."

She pushed back her chair and marched toward the door. Stephen followed her calmly with his eyes as she went. "Thin-skinned, she is," Stephen remarked indifferently. "She can put on such a quiet front until -- well, you saw the results."

Lucien was tempted to chase after her. He felt Stephen was somehow being exceedingly rude with Elaine, but no one else in the group, let alone Stephen, seemed to care that she had gone, as they immediately resumed the conversation. Stephen started to tell a joke about a fat man in the zoo. Without a word Lucien eased away from the table toward the door. He overheard Stephen call from behind in an admonishing voice: "See if you can do better with her."

Lucien looked up and down the street for Elaine. Telegraph Avenue was crowded, as it normally was on summer evenings. Lucien ran down to the next corner, then hustled back up toward the university campus and Sather Gate. In his haste he almost collided with a blind pan-handler, strumming a banjo and jingling a hat full of coins. Lucien stepped around the beggar and hurried on. It was twilight. At the last street before the campus, he made out the form of a woman, who looked like Elaine, crossing with the traffic light to the other side. He loped after her as the light changed red. Just in front of Sather Gate he caught up with her. She did not appear to notice him, but kept on walking. Finally, he said, panting, "Elaine," but she glared at him and did not stop. "Elaine, I'm not one of Stephen's friends. He's just pushed himself on me, that's all. I saw nobody in the group was concerned about you, so I thought I'd better go find you and let you know -- I think Stephen's a jerk the way he treats you."

Elaine came to a halt and gazed with surprise and perplexity at him. She was quite beautiful, he thought. Her dark eyes were liquid,

immaterial, like those of a pythia, glossed with outrage and wounded conviction.

"You're very considerate," she said.

"It was just an impulse," he admitted. "I don't really know what's going on between you two."

"Too many things," she said frostily. "Stephen and I play cat and mouse with each other, and I end up being the mouse, even if I try to play it cool, you know what I mean. I try to pretend, but it's pretty hopeless. He's such a difficult man."

"Why do you go out with him?"

She stared at Lucien for a moment. "I guess it's because he's so outlandish most of the time. I've know him a long time, and I see him off and on, when he drops some other woman and picks me up again. There's no real romance between us. Stephen couldn't be romantic, if he tried. I hate romance myself, anyway. It's so bourgeois. Why do I go out with him? Why does a middle-aged lady go to a stock car race? I need relief, and he doesn't bear grudges against you. How do you know Stephen?"

"I met him about ^{a week} ~~weeks~~ ago. But I knew a little of him before then?"

"You did?"

"Yes, you see, I was going out with one of his other women, that's how. He likes me better than I like him, which is weird. You see, the first time I met him, he got me so mad, I took a swing at him. It was that bad. But it didn't seem to bother him."

Examining him with strained amusement, Elaine worked her mouth into a skewed grin, then let out a snigger which sounded slightly vengeful. "You did?" she asked incredulously. "You hit him? Good for you."

"I felt terrible about it," Lucien said. "I'd never done that before, but I really thought he was diabolical."

"Oh, Stephen isn't diabolical," Elaine said, laughing. "He's too much a fool to be evil, but he does drive you to extremes. He does me, especially, and I feel horrid about it afterwards. He got my goat this evening. I shouldn't --"

"I really didn't want to get in the way of you two."

"No," she said, "you didn't. I'm very glad you hit him, that's all. It makes me feel better. I couldn't do it myself. Anyway, he's not worth too much anger."

"I'm curious. What was it he said exactly that got your goat? Something about politics?"

"Oh, yes. If you're interested I'll tell you. Stephen's one of these arty phonies who thinks he's into new things every day, you know, making loud noises about how hip he is and all that, revolutionizing as he calls it, when all he does is sell coke and acid to the little girls he plays with. He's a fool, and he's not a bit dangerous, except to those who get hooked on him. He thinks people like me, who still have ideals, are the phonies, because he doesn't have anything left to believe in. He's just a disappointed old man. Laying little girls is his revolutionary act."

Elaine spoke now with the cool defiance she had shown earlier during the evening's conversation. "But he's got it all figured wrong," she went on. "He doesn't know me, if he thinks he can bully me the way he's done with some of the rest. Who was she, by the way, I mean, the one you knew?"

Lucien smiled. "She wasn't like you at all," he said. "She didn't seem to have the will to stand up to him, and I guess that's

what did it. It's something I don't have time to go into."

"I see," she said, more relaxed. "I guess it's your business, but I hope you got her away from him."

"I almost did."

"Anyway, that's your business."

"Are you going back?" he asked.

"In a few minutes," she said. "You can tell Stephen I'll be back. I've got myself together now. I think I can handle him there on in."

Lucien felt he ought to go. "I'm glad I got to talk with you. I learned something about Stephen."

"Just be careful," she said, "and Lucien, let's not make this the only time we talk. You can call me up. My last name's Frey. I'm in the phone book." He had not expected her to make that offer.

"I would like to see you some time," he said, and he hurried away. Lucien told Stephen he had smoothed things over with Elaine. Stephen groused: "Well, I'm glad there's another old man who she'll pay attention to." Lucien excused himself, saying that he was tired and need to go home. "And Lucien," Stephen said, somewhat imploringly, "we ought to talk about this some time. You need to hear about what's going on."

"OK," Lucien said, admitting to himself, however, that he had grown weary of Stephen, whose only remaining value was that he still might help him understand better what had been the problem with Lille.

On the way home Lucien had Lille more on his mind than ever. Only a series of diversions had spared him from coming to grips with the meaning of the incident in the garden. Now that he was alone with

himself, he could reflect once more. It all seemed highly improbable, an exotic fancy. He still loved Lille, but there was something, nevertheless, which left him unable to sorrow for her. He loved her, yet he suspected his love had all along remained abstract. He had not been so much in love with her as with love itself. That was why he had let himself be so readily deceived by her, why he had swallowed virtually everything she said about love. Never had he given her the chance to be altogether honest with him, and he had unwittingly driven her at last to bare the lie, because she could not have said what she truly felt at any event. Then there was the vision -- the strange, intrusive, haunting vision. Had it really been Lille he had glimpsed in the vision? No, her temporal and individual embodiment had been melted down, and in her place had crystallized a form of something infinitely more powerful and mysterious. Out of the spiraling tracers of unformed energy had emerged a living force. It was God's face he had seen. He had no other name but "God" for it. But in the name resided, he surmised, the yet undeciphered code of his own history, destiny. It was not merely an hallucination. But, in an almost paradoxical sense, the event seemed utterly inconsequential, at least up until this point. The impact of the vision remained to be felt, and for the time being seemed only a barely detected augury. It was not unlike the sorts of circumstances one reads about, just prior to the onset of an earthquake, circumstances of which human beings with their limited sensory capacities are virtually unaware -- the restless howling of dogs, the fluttering of a canary in its cage, fish leaping from the water. His crippled senses were perhaps the reason why he had failed to gather in the genuine import of the vision, and why he preferred his familiar routines.

Back at the house, he found himself afraid to go in. He feared the vision might materialize again. He began to think about Elaine. He could easily fall in love with her, if she would let him. To cultivate a relationship with Elaine would take time. He did not go back into the house. Curling up in the front seat of the car under the steady, mellow street light, he fell asleep for the night, and for the meantime at least found his peace.

For the next several nights thereafter he slept in the car; he entered the house as infrequently as possible, eating a few spare meals out, and wandering about the city and hills throughout the day. Soon the time came for him to start at his job. On the morning of the eleventh he drove out across the San Rafael Bridge to Marin County. The sun was low, and the sky was pellucid. A silvery bank of fog had settled in across the foothills of Marin, and by the time he had arrived at the newspaper office -- a square, glass-walled, weather-smirched mustard building -- the sun had been sponged out by a gray overcast. The editor of the paper, a Mr. Barney Schroeder, had stepped out for a few minutes. In the meantime Lucien was introduced by a secretary to one of the senior reporters, Jim Loomis. Loomis was a short, impertinent fellow with a bristly mustache that bent about his mouth like a scythe, highlighting a persistently facetious smile. A native Nebraskan, Loomis had a dry, sarcastic and unlettered manner, as one would expect from a former prairie farm boy; he seemed to regard Lucien initially with the utmost condescension. But at length he warmed and became more friendly. "Maybe you can handle the nitwits and boobs you have to deal with around here," he said spryly.

Lucien asked Loomis what he was talking about. Loomis was evidently not very happy in his job, as he immediately began berating

everybody he dealt with, especially the local city officials. "Hell," he growled, "these boobs won't give you the time of day, because they think they're so goddamned important. There's no scandal around here -- I wish there were -- but they think they've got to cover up whatever they've got to show anyway, like some broad with three tits, and it makes the work pretty boring, unless -- unless you've got some imagination." He studied Lucien with circumspection. "Maybe you've got imagination -- I don't know -- but if you don't, you'll have to grab it pretty fast. You work on a three-bit sheet like this one, and you've got to produce news. Those guys who snip up the AP roll every day, they think they're the hottest shit that ever stank in creation, because they put up the stuff with the big headlines. Here, you look at it." He thrust Lucien a copy of the morning edition with bold headlines: YANKS KILL 380 CONG. "Flummery. Body counts. They think that's what people want to read about. How many gooks did we zap today? The more we zap, the more the hair on our chests grows. You're our new boy. Well, we're counting on you to get us some real news." And he sighed. "Well, there's your desk and you're typewriter. Barney wants you to start by getting the dope on this one." He sifted through a pile of notes he had on his desk. "Yea, this one." He snickered and shook his head. "A Mrs. Pfinster, yea, 46 Hazel Drive, she's got a parakeet that's supposed to be twenty-two years old, and it whistles the Hallelujah Chorus or something. We probably run it every five years. Yea, that's it. Get the scoop and write it up, see?" He handed the note to Lucien, who took it gingerly. "Yea, you can do it."

"That's what I'm supposed to do first?" Lucien asked, bewildered.

"Yea," he said, "and grease up your imagination."

Lucien smiled at the secretary on the way out. She was a sweet, young girl in a mauve, spaghetti-strap dress, who looked no more than twenty. She waved furtively at him from behind her desk.

Lucien felt let down with his first assignment, which it almost seemed Loomis had invented as some kind of hazing prank. But he had no great expectations about his work. He foresaw little glamor and quite a lot of drudgery. He could write the straight news or human interest features demanded by a small, suburban newspaper without taking it all too seriously.

Consulting a street map of the area, which had been furnished to him, Lucien found the house of Mrs. Pfinster. Mrs. Pfinster turned out to be a Miss Karen Pfinster, a bashful seventeen-year-old with braces on her teeth, whose bird could indeed replicate an assortment of classical and popular melodies almost as well as a music box. "I know this is all so silly, but my mother --" she kept pleading. Lucien made notes and went back to the office, where he composed the story: "Many contemporary people would say that Beethoven is for the birds, but Miss Karen Pfinster has a parakeet --" Loomis studied the draft that Lucien had typed on his roll of coarse, buff newsprint. "Yea, that's got razzmatazz," he said winking. Lucien showed it to Barney, the editor, who had meanwhile come back to greet him officially. Barney was a tall and willowy man with a baby face and back-combed, pomaded hair. He made a few precipitous corrections with his pencil, nodded in blasé fashion, and laid the copy flopping in his out-basket. The rest of the day Lucien was handed rewrites of a stack of local club and social notices. Loomis did not seem to be working very strenuously, and frequently he would stare over at Lucien and ask him some personal questions.

"You're pretty damn young, aren't you?" Loomis asked at one point.

"I guess. I'm twenty-two."

"Well, you won't last long."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind," he said curtly. "You come from around here?"

"Oakland."

"What do you think of the Raiders?"

"I don't follow football much."

"God, some kind of queer maybe." He laughed. "No, I don't mean that. You were lucky to get this job. Everybody wants to work on newspapers, even with a five-cent outfit like this one. I guess Barney liked you."

"I don't know."

"Barney's always looking for what he calls 'thoughtful young men,'" Loomis remarked in a sarcastic tone. "I guess he reckoned you were one among them. You don't laugh much, do you? So you must do a lot of thinking to balance it off."

Lucien smiled and said that he did ponder about many things, but very little of it had to do with the newspaper business. A glint appeared in Loomis' eye. "Oh, so you're one of those guys who thinks deeply," he said. "Well, I hope you can find a pearl or two in Mrs. Gromowitz's bedpan. That's what it means to go deep around here. Tell me, you like chicks?"

Lucien was taken aback. "Why, I don't think I'd be normal if I didn't."

Loomis raised his eyebrows, leaned over toward Lucien, and puckishly whispered: "Well, that's what you really do around here. Listen, you

met Janie, the secretary, out there! She's a live one now. Easy to get inside her pants. That's a little secret with the boys around here, see. That's where you get the inside bit, right?" He slapped his side and chuckled. "OK, you know where we're going in this business?"

Later Janie came by Lucien's desk to deliver some employment forms. Her mouth twitching, she gave Lucien a little coquettish smile and then passed out of the room. Lucien saw she had a gold band on her finger, and he wondered if Loomis had merely been blustering. At any event, it made little difference to him. At four-thirty he was allowed to go home. Outside the weather had turned quite pleasant. An impulse diverted him from going home immediately. He went to find the spot on the hill by the seminary where he had met the old man. He got out of the car and strolled down the path to the broken fence. The sun was glancing off the roofs of the seminary buildings, and the grounds were curtained by a luminous haze. Down below he could see some indistinct figures straggling about, but he did not see the old man. Then, at home, he was surprised to discover Stephen waiting for him.

Lucien was curious what Stephen wanted from him this time. Stephen seemed downcast and a bit on edge. "Lucien," he said, "I need you right now, tonight. They're going to crucify me, and I think you can step in. It has to do with --"

"With Elaine?"

"It's not just her. It's the others too. They have it in for me. I don't tramp to their drumbeat exactly, you see. It's really hard to explain, but they, well, they're Elaine's little circle of politicos -- that's what they are. And they don't like me. I don't

think Elaine has the guts to tell them off, but I know they're going to give me a hard time tonight, and well -- you get to know her, and she respects you, and to make a long story short, I got you invited. Can you make it?"

"Where, for God's sake?" Lucien asked.

"Her friends, they're having a little get-together not far from here. I know they're going to crucify me, but if you could --" Lucien could see Stephen was definitely frightened about something."

"OK," Lucien said, "but I'm not sure what it's all about." He was uneasy about going, but he did too look forward to being with Elaine once more.

They drove to a small, red-shuttered Spanish-style house with a cracked stone facade in a black, East Oakland neighborhood. The dusky street teemed with dark children in play, who shouted and squealed at one another. A swarm of them came around the car, like mosquitoes in the twilight, as he and Stephen climbed out, and one of the black children taunted: "Mistuh Whitey's here. Mistuh Whitey's here." Then they scurried off down the street. Stephen rapped at the door of the house. A burly black man in jeans and a velveteen shirt came to the door, looked Lucien and Stephen over captiously, then bade them enter without a word. The living room was bare except for a scuffed, brown leath divan beside a fireplace, a redwood folding chair, and a bright, olive and red damask draped over some steel pegs on the wall. On the brick hearth of the fireplace were seated a man and a woman, both white, who appeared about Lucien's age, or perhaps slightly older. They were also dressed casually. The man had a sandy thatch of curls with a queue at the back and a somewhat tubular nose. The woman was very petite and sloe-eyed with long, fawn-colored

hair. The black man gestured fiercely to Stephen and Lucien to take a seat along with them. Just as they squatted down on the floor, Elaine appeared in the room. She gave the black man a nod, then spied Lucien, whose presence seemed to stagger her. She glanced uncomfortably at Stephen, who grinned. "I hope you don't mind I brought a friend," Stephen said to the group with an air of brazen apology. "Elaine knows him too. This here is Lucien Lastman, who I thought would give us a fresh view of things, if you know what I mean." The group stared in cold unison at Stephen, but the young woman by the fireside gave Lucien a restrained smile. "Lucien," Elaine said in stark and formal fashion, "let me introduce you to Guy and Helen," and beckoning to the black man, she said, "and Forest."

"We didn't count on nobody else," Forest said rudely.

"That's alright," Elaine said. "I know him. Stephen's right."

They all sat down together on the floor. Lucien was wondering why no one occupied the couch or the chair; Forest was twirling a beaded keyring in his bony fingers. The group began to talk about some private business that did not have much meaning for Lucien. They acted as though he were not there. On this occasion Elaine was quite garrulous, and she seemed to be moderating the session, as if it were some kind of committee meeting. The white man, Guy, also asserted himself loudly, and as the conversation progressed he started to sound very academic and stilted in advancing his ideas. The meeting, it turned out, had been called to consider certain political strategies. Lucien could tell that they were an organized body of activists. The object of their strategy was what Guy termed "the war machine," which he said blandly was an element in "the system that is riddled with contradictions."

He also railed on about "our black brothers and sisters" in the same breath and "the oppressed working classes who depend on our resolution and valor in smashing the bosses of the system." Elaine did not offer too many concrete notions of her own, but she nodded sanguinely whenever Guy would speak, and when there was a mention of "war and racism," she would look searchingly at Forest, who would glance at Stephen and Lucien with a flickering suspicion, then whirl his keyring, and nod with a cocky grin. Stephen himself said nothing, but sat there mutely, fumbling with his hands impatiently. Finally, Guy turned to Stephen and with a raspy and fitful voice that betrayed sudden consternation, he said, "But Stephen, you're not really with us, are you?"

Stephen smiled weakly, cracked his knuckles, and shoved his fist against the palm of his hand as a kind of nervous fanfare to the response he was about to make. Stephen said softly, "no, not entirely. I wish I could get that through to you."

Suddenly Forest jumped up and started pacing about the room. Guy peered angrily at Stephen, his shoulders huddled together, reflected for an instant, then said again, "but I'm not against you. Can't you see that? Look, I don't think it's going to have any effect, all this you're planning to do." Lucien wondered what the group was planning which seemed so controversial. Stephen went on: "so you're going to lie down, and let the fuckers run you over. They've already done that. What do you think you'll accomplish? Shit, the war machine is a Moloch that eats babies, even though the little fuckers scream and pound their fists against it."

Guy replied coolly, "Stephen, it's got to be done. Maybe it won't work right away, but it's the kind of thing those of us who don't have the power of the guns can do. We can stop them, or else we have to

wipe their asses."

"Stop them? Hah," Stephen said derisively. "You won't stop them. The bastards are too powerful, can't you see that? They've got tanks and all that. Let's not be children with our omnipotent fantasies. A bee can sting a man, but it can't kill him. Even twenty bees can only be a nuisance. So you're going to lie down with all the rest of them, and they'll roll right over you, like Goerge Wallace said he was going to. If you've got a crucifixion complex, well, that's your business, but, shit, look where it got him and all the others who've tried it."

With scorn Guy retored: "We're not about to be crucified. Our method isn't for wimps. We're after control of the situation, don't you see? It's inevitable. The contradictions in society will support us; they're too real now for us not to act. We've got to keep pushing on them, the contradictions, until the seams crack, and we can do it if we have the determination." He glanced around at the others for agreement.

"Stephen," Elaine said, "Guy is correct. Nobody has any intention of being crucified. If we have to, we fall back on the power of the working classes, who are becoming conscious enough to support us in the long run. But right now we have to show them we have the power -- we have the guts. That's all. History is with us. We can agree on that."

Stephen became quite animated. "Shit, history! There isn't any history in the whole business. You're fools if you think you've got history on your side. History will run over you like the tanks and trucks."

"No," Elaine protested. "Stephen, you're a sniveling cynic, that's

all."

Guy leaped up in a flurry of anger. "You're a damn coward," he said, raising his voice at Stephen, "and a bourgeois coward. We'll win this fucking battle, because we've got history on our side. The oppressed are history, and we're their servants. We can stop the war machine, even if we have to die for it. Stephen, I don't think you're ready to die, are you?"

Smirking, Stephen said "no," and he pulled out a joint from his pocket, which he had already rolled. He held out the joint with teasing defiance to the group. "Anybody care to get your mind clear before you reason this strategy out some more? It's fine inspiration."

"Dammit," Elaine shouted and grabbed the joint away from him, "you're insidious. You don't have any values, do you Stephen?"

Stephen shrugged, then paused for a moment while a shivering calm spread over his face; his eyes seemed to whiten, and the veins in his cheeks swelled with red violence, as he shifted on the floor. He had something of the demented look Lucien had witnessed with Lille in his own house some weeks before. He looked away and blurted, "no values! That's a hypocritical lie." And wheeling back to face the group, he said, "ah, but I'm the one who has values, don't you see? I have the value of life. I don't lie down for trucks, only for women, don't you see? I don't shout slogans, I fuck, don't you see? And that's what keeps my sanity."

Elaine's head wagged with anger, and drumming on her shanks fretfully with her flat palms, she said, "Oh Stephen, crazy Stephen, your life is justified by your fantasies of women. The only thing you ever fuck is their minds." She went over to the mantle above the fireplace, where she had laid a purse, reached in it, and obtained some cigarettes.

She offered one to Stephen, who seized it like a starving snatching a slice of bread, and then she began smoking herself, with quick, sclerotic motions. "Now Stephen," she continued with a reasonable lull to her voice, "tell us, why won't you go along? You know we let you, or I let you, in on all this because we thought -- we thought you had a cool grasp of things. Are you going to disappoint us?"

But Stephen did not answer her question directly. He refused to listen to her; he stuck the cigarette stiffly in his lips, as one inserts a dowel in a slot, and stared dumbly at the others. "She says I have no values, did you hear that? Can a cat call a bird predatory? I wouldn't honor such a defamation of my character. She thinks she's an honest woman, because she's especially honest with herself, she believes. She thinks she's honest because she doesn't fuck -- that's what her values are. But she lies to herself in the most despicable way. She has her ideals, but they're nothing but little plaster idols. She's a woman who hates, my friends, and so do you. Those are your values, and you think you can stop a war with hate, a hate you call "noble." No, my friends, that's what makes you hypocrites and fools."

Guy took a cigarette from Elaine and looked at Stephen with disgust. To Stephen he said contemptuously, "why don't you just shut up. We don't need to hear that crap."

"Ho, ho," Stephen burst out now, "you assassinate my words. You won't listen to me, because you're bewitched by your own, glittering idols. You fools, you want to light the fire, and you think you won't get burned, that you'll walk out of it like the three men in Daniel. You rage with your high-minded manias, and you want to suck me into it. I won't be burned, no, I have too much honor, that's it. I'll fiddle and make love why you all run screeching from the flames. I will, you see.

I will, you see. No, I'm not too old a man to get sucked into the madness. I've got only my wretched body left." At that point Stephen threw back his head, reared up like some enraged bear, and shouted, "it's only my body, my near-dead body, you see!" And then he collapsed in a twisted heap on the floor, scowling and panting, his eyes sapped of all their fury. Suddenly he looked very old.

"Enough of this," Guy said, and signalling to Forest, he grabbed Stephen by the shoulder. Forest came over and put his heavy arm about Stephen's chest. "OK," Guy said, "let's have him go," and they hauled the now docile Stephen out the door. Lucien did not know what to do. He could hear the children shrieking in the street, and a dog barking loudly close by. Lucien got up to follow Stephen, but Elaine said abruptly, "Wait, Lucien."

Immediately Guy began storming. "Let' both the sons-of-bitches go."

"No," Elaine replied nervously, "Lucien is different."

Guy looked with devastation at Elaine. "That son of a bitch, you had the gall to get him involved with us. You were crazy. He didn't have anything to contribute. He was a crazy and a loud mouth. I don't want to see him here again. If you dig him and you see him on your own, that's your business, but not here, see? And he can take whatever else he drags in with him," Guy said, referring with a sneer to Lucien.

"I don't know what Lucien is doing here," Elaine said gently, "but he's not like Stephen, I know. He can stay."

"Is he with us?" Guy snapped.

"Yes, I think so," Elaine said.

Just then Lucien heard a car start up and drive off. He realized

Stephen was leaving him, and he gave a start toward the door.

"It's alright, I'll drive you home," Elaine said. Forest went to the door, peeped out, then shut it again. "The dude's split," Forest mumbled.

"Well, let's finish our business," Guy said in a matter-of-fact tone. Peering at Elaine, he said, "it's time we got everything straight now. Elaine, are you sure we can trust him?"

"Yes, I'm sure," Elaine said with a knowing look which made Lucien feel at ease.

"To get matters straight," Guy said. "Wednesday we're going out to Port Chicago with the people which the movement's been mobilizing. Look, I know we can't be sure we'll get everybody together on this one. They're bound to be some crazies, but I think our marshalls can handle them. Right?" Elaine and the others nodded. "We're gonna move in about three o'clock, and we're gonna lay down. They're gonna hit us, that's for sure, and you all know how to act, right? Limp and easy. But we've got to make an impression, we've got to make a lot of noise first, and we've got to stop those trucks. If anybody gets roughed up, it'll be in the papers and, and that'll make people conscious of what's going on. The more we can make them conscious, the more we can move toward stopping this fucking war. But we'll be ready. If it gets too bad, well, we've got other means."

"What other means?" Elaine asked, puzzled. "Are you thinking of--- no, Guy, that's stupid."

"Don't sweat it," Guy said blandly. "We know where the power really lies, and only if we have to do it, we will..."

"You're not talking about what I think you---" Elaine objected.

"Yea," Guy said, "don't sweat it."

"No," Elaine exclaimed. "That's not what we're after. We'd be fools. You don't mean. Maybe, Stephen---"

"Fuck Stephen," Guy said with a snarl. He strode into the kitchen and came back with the evidence of which Elaine was fearful. Brandishing a polished 22-caliber pistol, he said, jeeringly, "I don't think it'll come to that, but they've got to know we've got the power."

Elaine was excitedly pacing around and spit out the last smoke of her cigarette. "Oh Guy, that's not what we're for."

"It's not what we're for, but we've got to have the last say, if it comes to that, so let's not get uptight at this point. OK?"

On the way home Elaine was very expansive, and Lucien sensed she was trying to hide her jitters. "You see," she explained impassively, "Guy gets a wild thing or two in his head, like Stephen, but he's not a jerk like Stephen. He's single-minded, to a fault, and he's got good intentions. He's a leader. He wants the best for the people."

Lucien noted the way in which she said the "people." There was a quiver of reverence in her speech, as when one utters the word "God."

"He's absorbed in what he's doing, and he thinks--- well, I think too, we have history on our side. Lucien, will you be there on Wednesday?"

Her query took Lucien suddenly aback. He had not considered himself as an agent in their little conspiracy, and besides, rabble-rousing was not something that concerned him much. He did hate the war, but he was not impassioned enough to do anything about it. Still, he was enamoured with Elaine. He liked her beauty, her toughness, her dedication to what seemed intelligent and admirable ends. He would come if she really wanted him to, but, no. "I have to work," he apologized.

"Can't you call in sick?" she asked, pleading with him.

"Lucien, I'd be very happy if you would come. You know, I think I admire you. I have to tell you that. You were the only one to get up from the table with Stephen the other night and show some concern with me, and I liked you a lot for that. You're quiet, but you're strong. That's the way I look at you. You can help us out, really you can. We need numbers for one thing, but you could do more than that."

Lucien had an idea. He would ask Barney if he could cover the demonstration for the paper. Barney probably would not give anyone else the assignment, for Port Chicago was not in their region, but it was still local news, and the big city dailies would be covering the demonstration. After all, it would be more interesting than Karen Pfinster's parakeet. "I can be there," he said.

"Good," she said.

Lucien instructed her how to get to his house. Elaine stopped the car in front of the house, which was dark, and said, "well, Lucien, I'm really glad you could come tonight. I didn't know Stephen had invited you. Maybe he thought you'd pimp for him or something, but he's got you wrong. You've got a lot to contribute," and she leaned over and gave him a quick, firm little kiss on the lips. "Thank you," she said, and she smiled.

Lucien stood by the gate and watched the taillights of her car glide off down the hill into the darkness. He was stunned by her having kissed him. Of course, the kiss meant little, but it did indicate she had her own sort of admiration for him. It would probably lead nowhere, but he hoped nevertheless that it might. She was truly beautiful. Lille was nothing to him now.

The next day Lucien asked Barney if he would let him cover the demonstration in Port Chicago. Barney glowered at him. "What demonstration?" There had been no reports of an intended demonstration in the other papers. Lucien explained that the demonstration would be an attempt to halt the shipment of war materiele to Vietnam. Barney asked him the source of his information. Lucien said that he had stumbled upon the news through a "contact." Barney's face livened, and he stroked his sleek hair with smug consideration. "Well, Lucien, you've got your first hot one," he said. "Write it up, and we'll run it."

Lucien, however, stiffened. Elaine would be angry if such a story appeared with his name on it. He would have broken her confidence. "I'm not sure of my facts," Lucien said, "but if I can be out there next Wednesday, I can get what goes on first hand."

"It's better to have an advance," Barney said. "But if you're not sure--- well, alright, if there's nothing else going on that day. But remember, get it differently than they're going to get it at the Tribune or the Chronicle."

When Lucien had finished with Barney, Loomis, who had overheard the exchange, asked him what was going on. "You've got a hot one on, I heard," Loomis said cavalierly.

"Forget it," Lucien said. "I just got this report they're going to have a demonstration in Port Chicago."

Loomis sniffed, "probably the whole lot of them again. Busty broads and their jigos carrying placards and huffing about everything." And he went back to his work.

The day of the demonstration Lucien was at the site early. Elaine had phoned him the night before and passed him instructions as to where and when he should appear, how he should dress, and what he should be prepared for. "They're up to us," she said with a tone of foreboding. The demonstration was to take place at the entrance gate to the depot, where a handful of soldiers in work fatigues with rifles slung across their chests were standing guard. Soon a truck freighted with more troops drove up from behind the gate. About nine o'clock a car pulled

up with Elaine and Guy and three other people, whom he did not recognize. Immediately more cars pulled up, and by ten there were at least a hundred demonstrators, mostly young, some even respectably dressed, milling about on the shoulder of the road.

The entrance to the depot lay near a wide, flat field of rye grass. Off in the distance Lucien could see the azure gleam of the Sacramento River and a cluster of oil tanks for a nearby refinery. The day was hot. Some of the male demonstrators had slipped off their shirts and were naked to the waist. Lucien saw Guy darting about the crowd, conferring with certain individuals in the demonstration. Elaine wandered over and started chatting with Lucien. She had on a starched, white blouse with the top button loosened revealing the fringe of her bra. For the first time he discussed flippant things with her: the Beatles, mod fashions, his own college days. He told her about his initial experiences with newspaper reporting, about the follies to which he sometimes had to submit, as in the case of the tuneful parakeet, and she laughed even though he could tell her mind was really on the graver matters at hand. Offhandedly, he asked her what she did for a living, and she told him she was a schoolteacher who had been recently fired from her job for "my politics" and that she was currently drawing unemployment insurance. "But I don't care what they did to me," she said with a shrug. "I didn't have enough time for what I wanted to do, anyhow."

Just as she said that, Lucien observed a motorcade of blue and white police cars coming slowly up the road. The police cars stopped and unloaded about twenty sheriff's deputies

in bright blue uniforms with visored riot helmets and clubs. The crowd stirred wildly, and Guy scampered among the demonstrators, barking orders to mobilize. The deputies lined up across the road, their faces masked by monstrous, black goggles which gave them the frightful appearance of giant insects. Without a word Elaine broke away from Lucien and ran into the crowd, shouting things which were impossible to decipher in the growing melee. Lucien watched the crowd surge and coalesce into a mass of motion toward the gate. The soldiers snapped to attention, raised their rifles in erect formation toward the sky. Suddenly a hush swept over the demonstrators, and Lucien could hear the staccato stridor of a police radio. The demonstrators pressed together in a frayed column, then swept like a cadre of army ants forwards, and finally came to a halt. Guy was screaming at them. All at once they harkened to his command and fell to the ground in a precise drill, their bodies supine across the pavement like hummocks grass in a marsh basin. Everything was strangely still. Lucien looked up and saw several dark birds circling lazily overhead. Then he realized the danger of the situation. Nervous and alarmed, he shrunk back to the side of the road, away from the crowd. Elaine was out of sight, lying down somewhere. He felt awkward, cowardly, but he thought it was not his business to be involved in what was going on. He hoped Elaine did not notice he was not participating. A long time passed. The sun seemed to be very hot, and he fanned his face somewhat futilely with his hand. At last he heard a great sound. One of the deputies was bellowing at the crowd through a megaphone demanding that they disperse. The command was issued three times in succession, but the mass of bodies remained inert.

Far away Lucien could hear an automobile honking somewhere off on the highway. The sound seemed to serve as some kind of random signal. The crowd began to chant, "No, no, no, no." The deputy with the megaphone squawked his injunction once more. Lucien stepped back against the fence; then he caught a glimpse of a young girl, her face ashen, her yellow hair flopping in the sun, who had sat up and was staring at him. Her eyes were glazed with marvel and terror, as if she could not comprehend who he was or what he was doing there. Now the line of deputies began to move. No more commands came from the megaphone. The deputies marched slowly up the road toward the demonstrators who kept on chanting. Lucien clenched his fists and shut his eyes. Suddenly the chanting stopped and a loud din arose. He saw the deputies grab and drag away many wriggling bodies with finical execution, as a beach scavenger would gather in grunion. Lucien noticed that several large vans had been brought up behind the police cars and the arrested demonstrators were being hauled toward them. The demonstrators did not, at first, appear to make any resistance. Then he heard Guy yelling again, and some of the demonstrators began to curse and women squeal. A deputy seized Guy, who struggled and flailed, and began to pummel him with his stick. Now there was a great commotion. Several demonstrators at the front leaped up and began to run with a pack of deputies in pursuit, their clubs waving. He saw an older man being drubbed about the arms and head until blood oozed from his temple. Having turned vicious, the deputies were beating even those in the crowd who did not fight back. The young girl he had seen just minutes before was lying face down, her hair matted with blood, and crying hysterically.

Lucien looked out across the open field and had the urge to flee. He saw some other men with cameras, hugging the fence across the road, whom he suspected were newspeople. They were avidly snapping pictures. Suddenly he felt a terrible pain in his back; he was knocked into some tall grass and when he looked up, he saw a fat, sunburnt deputy with his goggles off glaring malevolently at him. The deputy lunged at him, and he shouted "press, press, I'm not part of this." He felt like Peter who had denied Christ. The deputy studied him for an instant, spit on the ground disdainfully, and lumbered back into the crowd.

Lucien was hot and nauseated. He sat in the grass observing the grisly spectacle. Wet swatches of blood glistened here and there on the macadam, and he watched, for the most part paralyzed, as the police cleared the demonstration tidily away. Still a few defenders remained near the gate. All were on their feet, among them Elaine. She was not peering in his direction. The back of her blouse was slashed, and she had faced off a somewhat timid deputy, who stood motionless with his club poised. Then he saw, about ten feet from her on the pavement, a large chunk of metal glinting in the sunlight. It was Guy's pistol. A queasy sensation sliced through him, and he had the dreadful feeling that Elaine had her eyes on the gun. Suddenly she lurched toward it, and he yelled "no, don't, please," but before she could get that far, she seemed to trip on her own feet, and the deputy threw himself at her, tackling her to the ground, her face hurtling into the dust by the side of the road. She remained silent and passive now, like a dove winged with an arrow, as the deputy lifted her onto her feet and hauled her off with the others. She never turned her face toward Lucien.

In the aftermath he jotted down a passel of disconnected notes on his reporter's pad, while the deputies mopped up the area and the vans rumbled away. The other reporters were wandering around the wasted site, trying to interview a few of the deputies who brushed them aside roughly. Lucien saw one of the deputies stoop down to retrieve the revolver, examine it, and then summon one of his superiors. Lucien was afraid for Elaine; he wanted to be with her. That was the least he could have done to atone for his fainthearted actions. He learned from the reporters that the demonstrators would be taken to the county jail in Martinez. Once there, however, he was informed by a guard at the gate that he could not see any of the prisoners. Sadly he drove back to work.

It was the lunch hour, and only Loomis was in the office. Loomis was munching on a sandwich from a paper bag. His mouth plugged with food, he gave Lucien a savey smile.

"How did the hot one come out?" Loomis asked.

"The cops broke it up."

"That's be expected. Any pictures?"

"I didn't take a camera. Besides, it would have been too awful anyway."

"You've gotta have pictures for something like that," Loomis said with his cheek stuffed with sandwich. "Any heads knocked?"

"A lot."

"Well, Barney would've wanted pictures. The Chronicle will have them. Any good-looking chicks?"

"Yea," Lucien said. He thought about Elaine and the young girl whose head had been bloodied. "Yea, and the cops knocked them around like badmitton birdies," he said.

"Too bad," Loomis said casually, "I mean it's too bad there were chicks who got messed up in this."

Lucien went ahead and wrote up his story, endeavoring to be objective. He wrote:

Contra Costa County sheriff's deputies broke up an anti-war demonstration yesterday morning in front of the Port Chicago army depot. The demonstrators, who numbered close to a hundred, staged a lie-in and were promptly carted off by the deputies, who came armed for riot control. All the demonstrators were arrested.

The demonstration began about nine-thirty. The protesters massed before the gate to the depot and, on signal, lay down in the middle of the road. Sheriff's deputies removed them.

At first, the demonstration was peaceful, but some of the protesters stood up and resisted, and the deputies responded violently. Many of the demonstrators, women included, were beaten with clubs and their heads bloodied. The number of injuries were undetermined.

The demonstrators were all rounded up and taken away to the county jail at Martinez. No one was allowed to see the arrested.

The potential for violence at the demonstration was revealed when a twenty-two caliber pistol was discovered on the ground after the skirmish. The owner of the gun is unknown at this time.

Lucien could not think of anything more to write, and handed the copy to Barney. Barney scanned the story and frowned. "You didn't follow up on it," he said. "How can we use this? What happened? Who's been charged? What are the charges? Any information on the background of the demonstration?"

Lucien said all he had was the eye-witness account, as he had been refused any information about the detention.

"So get it," Barney said brusquely. "And anyway, we

can't run it like that. You make it sound like the police were at fault. We know that wasn't the case." He set aside the copy and went back to some other work.

Lucien got in his car and drove back to the jail. Having already staked out their positions, the other reporters undoubtedly had collected more facts than he. It turned out that lawyers for the imprisoned demonstrators had shown up about an hour ago and were engaged in acquiring releases. Finally he was able to obtain the information that all the demonstrators, except four, had been let go on their own recognizance. Three had been detained without bail pending a further hearing. He feared Elaine was still among those who remained in jail, but just as he was preparing to leave, he saw her striding down the corridor flanked by an older man, apparently her lawyer. She had changed into other clothes, and looked rather grim. He wanted to duck away down an adjacent hallway, but he worried that she might have seen him, so he stepped out in front of her nonchalantly and flashed her a smile. He was embarrassed, having to confront her at this moment.

But Elaine acknowledged him with happy surprise. "Lucien, they didn't get you, did they? Or did you manage to get free, like the rest of us?"

Lucien could not admit having deserted the demonstration, so he lied. He was not used to lying. "I had my bail posted," he said.

"I didn't see you when you got here. They must have stuck you in another cell with the others."

"Yes," he said. He hated himself for deceiving her.

"I hope this isn't going to cost you your job. I really didn't mean for it to come out like this, and it was so sudden. My lawyer can explain to your boss, if you want. We can tell him you were just watching, and the cops -- God those bastards, just rounded everybody up."

"I can take care of it," Lucien said.

"The bastards, they really beat some of us up," Elaine said, gritting her teeth with anger. "Guy got it bad. Listen, Lucien, it's not over yet, but I need to do some talking with you. Oh, by the way...." She introduced her lawyer, Mr. Kingsbury, a middle-aged and red-haired man with horn-rimmed glasses, who nodded politely. "Anyhow," she said, when the introduction was over, "we need to talk. Can you come over to my place tonight?" Asking Kingsbury for a pen, she scribbled down her address. "I'll be there after eight-thirty," she said and hurried on with Kingsbury.

Lucien returned to the newspaper office again. It was close to five o'clock, and Barney was still there. Lucien tapped out the remaining details of the story and gave them to Barney, who perused them, grunted, and said "OK," and sent Lucien home for the day.

Lucien made it promptly to Elaine's by eight-thirty. She lived in a third-floor apartment in Berkeley, a prosaic white concrete and glass construction with a plank staircase wedged between each tier. Loud, discordant instrumental rock music was pulling out of a window next door to Elaine's apartment, number 311. Elaine greeted him garbed in clean, pin-striped work overalls and a long sleeved sweatshirt with "University of California" stencilled

on the front. She smiled wanly at Lucien as he entered.

"I got here," Lucien said.

"I was hoping you'd come," Elaine said.

"So this is where you live?"

"Yes. I have a roommate, but she's out. "

Elaine asked Lucien if he would like some herb tea, which she was brewing on the stove. She poured him a mug of the tea, scalding Lucien's mouth as he attempted to drink. Seeing him wince from the hot tea, she said, slightly flustered, "Just wait a minute, and it'll cool."

Elaine seemed uncharacteristically pliant and retiring that evening. She brought him the tea like a little homebody, then got up to fetch him some macaroons which she had baked.

Elaine broached the events of the day. She asked Lucien forgiveness for embroiling him in the fray. "I knew the cops would be there," she said, her voice tremulous, "but I had no idea they'd act so fast and they'd be so brutal. I hope your work isn't jeopardized."

Lucien shook his head and said that it had all been worked out.

"Well, I'm glad of that," she said, "that was the main reason I wanted to see you. Lucien, I felt bad about it for you, even though I was upset about everything in general. What happened to me, of course, didn't make much difference. I was ready for that. They roughed me up pretty bad." She rolled up her sleeve to exhibit several scrapes and lesions on her arm. "Guy's still in

jail, you know. They tagged him as the ringleader. I pleaded that I wanted to be counted along with him, but they wouldn't listen for some reason. I guess because I'm a woman." She paused, and a plaintive, but proud look came across her face. "But today was only a start. There's so much more to be done. I think of all the people who are ready to get in with us and continue the struggle. Time is with us, just like it is with the people of Vietnam. There'll be other times." She put her teacup down on its saucer and stared at Lucien. "You know," she said, "I've been meaning to tell you this. I don't know how to say it, but--- I've felt more confident about these things since we met. There's something about you Lucien which gives me confidence. Oh, I put up a tough front, but I have real doubts about myself from time to time. I get the badassed treatment from guys like Stephen, and I doubt myself, but you--- you came to me, and you seemed to have confidence in me."

Lucien stared back at her. His eyes met hers in a glance of mutual recognition. She was physically beautiful, but there was much more to her, behind those dark eyes, which attracted him. It was as though she were reaching out to him, seeking to escape the lonely pinfold of fears and suspicions which she had built around herself. He supposed she did not often give herself to men, not only her body, but her deepest feelings as well, which she had managed to confine behind her dogged commitment to her "ideals." He mused idly over going to bed with her, even if he did not consider it a real possibility. But, intuitively, he caught a glimpse of something which made her outward beauty seem incidental, something inner and unfathomable. She seemed to make offering of

of it to him, as she would for no other man; yet at the same time she seemed to clutch it jealously in the manner of a child who, having first proposed to share a toy with a playmate with innocent largesse, now retracts after realizing the gift is in the hands of another. With a shiver he recalled the gun gleaming on the ground. She had reached for it.

"I saw they found Guy's pistol," Lucien said with hesitation.

Elaine gazed at him with an expression that chided him for knowing something he should not have. "I was afraid of that," she said, "he was a fool for taking it, I told him..."

"The cops picked it up. I don't know if they can trace the owner."

"Probably not, at least not by the registration," she said, "but I'm sure it had his fingerprints."

"I hope that doesn't get out."

"It would be terrible," she said, "it would discredit our intentions. That damn fool."

"I couldn't figure Guy out," Lucien said.

"Oh, I've told you about him. He's too hot-headed sometimes, and he breaks down under his own discipline. I hope they never know."

"They may use it as evidence," Lucien said.

"I'm afraid of that," Elaine said. "And they may use it to frame some of the others."

"Did you---?" Lucien began, afraid to ask about her, what he had seen.

"Did I what?"

"Oh, no, it wasn't anything. Did you see the gun on the

ground?"

Elaine gave him a curious glance. She puzzled for a minute and then said firmly, "No, I didn't see it. Did you?"

"Yes. It was right near you when the cop was apprehending you, and I thought--- well, I thought, he might have figured it was yours."

"Oh no," Elaine said in a horrified tone. "But they didn't. That didn't happen, I'm sure."

Lucien promptly moved to switch subjects. "Well, it's over," he said. "Are you going to have to stand trial?"

"Yes, I guess," she said. "In a few weeks, a month, who knows?"

During the next hour, however, they talked about a variety of things other than the demonstration. He learned much about Elaine's personal life, which he had not known before. He learned that she was twenty-four years old, that she had lived in Berkeley for the past seven years, having completed her undergraduate studies and a master's degree at the University of California. Her parents were from New Jersey, but but they seldom communicated with her any more, principally because of her political allegiances. She had been involved in the civil rights movement of the early Sixties and had marched to the bridge with other white and black activists at Selma. Since the escalation of the Vietnam conflict, she had joined up with the anti-war crusade. She considered herself a pacifist, who also had once held strong Christian beliefs. Her religious convictions, nevertheless, had gone stale. "It was the whips in Selma," she explained. "I couldn't see the point of God's justice anymore, even though there were many who still had

faith in some way." In consequence, she had traded her religion for a secular humanism, which could be just as politically compelling, she insisted, and was not "made heavy with old men who lay down guilt from the sky." Christianity loaded a person with too much personal guilt to be "effective," as she put it. She was determined anyway to serve her fellow human beings, with or without religion. The difficulty with Christianity was that it didn't allow her to be serious enough about changing the world. And that was what she wanted to do more than anything else.

They talked on into the late hours of the night. He observed her voice gradually cracking; she yawned repeatedly, and her countenance grew weary. Yet she continued to lead him on. Twice he implied he should be leaving, but each time she remanded him gently, "no, you musn't go." He could see that she felt very comfortable with him, perhaps too comfortable. For some odd reason she needed him there that evening. He was her rampart against forces inside her besieging her sense of confidence, dragging her toward succumbing to secret fears and untoward desires she struggled to conceal from herself. "Lucien", she said finally in a drowsy monotone, "I want you to know you've helped me. Helped me from what, I can't say. That sounds queer, doesn't it? But, you know, I'm not all together sometimes. That's a side of me I try not to let onto. but it's there. Oh, it's so late, and I'm not talking sense, but--- it's what I feel sometimes. There's an energy in me that can rip me apart if... if I don't hang on to something, if I don't fortify myself, if you understand." Staring at him ruefully, she blinked her eyes with weary, wavering little bursts, and was wrestling to keep her sleepy eyelids from clamping

shut. "Oh, but Lucien," she added now in a slouching drawl, "I know it's hard for you to understand."

Suddenly he had a strange and powerful intimation. The conversation reached a lull. For a second it appeared as if she had fallen asleep, but her eyes all at once popped wide open, and she scanned the ceiling fitfully. He felt that she wanted him to take her in his arms. The thought boggled him, as he was not perfectly certain that was what she wanted. Perhaps it was his own wishful fantasy -- for he was as tired and as unclear in the head as she was. She turned her attention to him with a silent, unflinching, and imperious look, the pupils of her eyes as two black pebbles in white sand. She raised her hands slowly toward him, a woman entreating for alms. He went up to her and kissed her delicately on the lips. It was almost as though she were commanding him. He kissed her again, and she slung her arms around his neck and let him kiss her some more, her mouth remaining stiff and inelastic like buckram. He fell on his knees beside her and he kissed her passionately. She started to respond, first leisurely, then with more feeling, until she was probing his mouth strongly and expectantly. He felt rather awkward on his knees, but he was determined to have her now, in whatever way she permitted him. He put his hand to her cheek, brushed it tenderly with a kiss, then let his fingers sink across her neck gingerly toward her breast. He felt the mushy flesh, and he pressed his lips more impetuously against hers; but it became evident that he had been too forward. Her head was thrashing away from his, and rather disconcertedly removed his hand. "No, not yet," she moaned. Kissing his hand in compensation, she reiterated "not now, not now."

The fact was, though, he was falling in love again. He did not really want to be in love again so soon, but his emotions were out of control. She was different from Lille, entirely different. She held him back, so much that it pained him. He did not know if she genuinely loved him. She had never spoken the word "love." Perhaps the word was too precious for her to bandy, until she was absolutely sure of herself. A cautious young woman with strong values, she would never commit herself to anything unless persuaded of its worth. She would not prostitute herself, cheapening either her body or sense of commitment; she had said "not now", which did not mean the same as "never," but indicated her own desire to search her soul thoroughly so that she might understand how she felt and what she actually would choose. She seemed rather old-fashioned in this respect, but he prized that sort of moderation. It suggested to him that in the end she would choose to love him and be faithful to him. He would not let himself be duped, as had happened with Lille. And so he did not mind her hardness, her reticence. Fervently he hoped she would soon come round. Her unwillingness to yield her body to him did not trouble him unduly; it curbed his lust, but not his deeper love for her. It made her seem more mysterious than ever.

Besides, she was preoccupied with other affairs. The court had arraigned her, and she was preparing with her lawyer for the trial. She also had her politics. She constantly harped on what

she called her "vocation," her passion for setting right all the wrongs she perceived in society. He wondered whether he should be upset by her obsession with politics, since it seemed to be more important than love, so far as she was concerned. But he felt she would eventually say what was in her heart even if the terms of their relationship were not yet secure. Thus he waited. He saw her whenever he could. She was not available as often as he liked, but remained quite eager for his companionship.

Every weekend they would take long strolls in the Berkeley hills where they would talk about everything that came to mind. Actually she did most of the talking, always having more to say than he did, and he would listen. Rarely did she reveal any feelings about their relationship, and when she did she spoke only of their "honesty" and "friendship." It was now early October. The weather had turned cooler, and the days were shorter. One Sunday afternoon they hiked off on a deserted trail in Tilden Park to find a quiet spot for a picnic. They came to a grove of towering eucalyptus trees and spread their blanket and sandwiches. The sandy earth was bedded with the dry, crescent leaves of the eucalyptus, which crinkled softly wherever they stepped. The air was pervaded with the faint whirring of yellow wasps, which alighted now and then on the food, even as they put it to their mouths. Elaine brushed the wasps away with disdain. "They don't sting," she said. "They're beggars. They only want their bellies full." Then she told about a snare for the wasps. "You take a piece of raw liver," she said,

"and tie it to a string above a bucket of water. When the wasps are finished eating, they're too fat to fly, and they fall off into the water and drown. It's a parable about greed, don't you think?"

Lucien chuckled and, chewing the last of his sandwich, lay back onto the blanket. "I don't believe it," he said. "It sounds like a tale to me."

"It's true. I've seen it," she said with cavalier assurance.

"You'll have to show me," he said.

She laughed. "I will, if I get the chance."

Lucien gazed upwards at the black pendant of eucalyptus branches. He could see the wasps hovering in the shadowy interstices of the branches. His eyes were heavy, and he felt himself lazily drifting off to sleep in the stillness of the grove. Suddenly, however, he had an inclination. He wanted to know where he stood with Elaine. Sitting up, he looked at Elaine insistently.

"You have to tell me," he burst out.

She was startled. "What?"

"Your real feelings. Is it possible for you to love me?"

She stared at him with puzzlement, then dropped her eyes and contemplated the ground beneath her. She picked up the shard of a eucalyptus leaf and crushed it to fine particles in her hand. It was a while before she spoke. She said, with deliberation, "Lucien, that's really too hard for me to answer. Why did you ask me?"

"Because," he said, feeling the tension in himself mounting, "I have to know. I need to know where we're going. Elaine, it's hard for me, I can't just have a Platonic relationship with you. I want to love you," he said, biting his lip.

"Lucien, do you know what love really is?"

"No, I'm not sure, but it's something I cherish, especially when I've gotten to know somebody like you so well---"

"You don't really know," she said absently. "I don't like the word 'love' anyway. It's deceptive, it means too much, and I wouldn't use any word like that loosely."

"But you love your fellow human beings, don't you. You want to sacrifice yourself for them. Why can't you love me too?"

"You don't understand me," she said. "It's not that I can't love you. Perhaps I do, but I'm not ready to make that sort of commitment. It would get in the way, don't you see? I'm afraid what I would want out of myself if I said it."

"Oh, dammit, Elaine, don't rationalize so much. You're afraid of your feelings, aren't you?"

"No," she said. "I know what my feelings are. Lucien, you make love into a cheap commodity, and it isn't that. It's something you have when the situation is right, and I'm not sure--."

"That our situation isn't the right one? Then what would be the right situation?"

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head slowly. "I don't know."

The anger was burgeoning inside him. His anger was not aimed at her particularly, but at some invisible barrier that stood between them. She looked at him with a somewhat forlorn face. He brooded on how lovely she was, which made it all seem even more maddening. She was a temptress, not the sweet and Circean type, but one who bewitched him with her very distant and inscrutable manner. Her beauty had a hard, alabaster purity, something he could only gape at and revere. He did not wish to

prostrate himself and worship her, as one would a stone image. He yearned to love her, not just as an idea, but as flesh and voice, as a woman with whom he might share his whole self, that they might become blood and spirit coursing in the same veins. Now he wanted more than mere chitchat. He grabbed her by the arm and sought to kiss her, but she squirmed away, like a kitten in the hands of a clumsy child. "No, Lucien," she said softly.

Now the thrumming of the wasps seemed to grow louder. The trees were electrified with their rasping cantata. He was not sure what he was doing, but he seized her again. She reared up like an excited mare and tore herself away. "Lucien, please, you can't have everything you want, dammit." On her feet, she started to walk away down the path on which they had come. Snatching the blanket, he followed her down the path, trying to get her to turn her face to him, but she kept on going. "Elaine," he pleaded. In the car he begged her not to be angry. He knew he had gone too far, though he did not regret it. She would not look at him. On return to her apartment, she said with an air of finality, "You'd better wait awhile so we can cool down. Don't call right away, please," and he watched her run to the door. She was struggling not to cry.

After that he was thrown into a dither. It became very difficult for him to work. Though he did his assignments, he had very little enthusiasm. The irony was that Barney was increasingly pleased with his work, and even recommended him for a raise. He did not see Elaine and was afraid to call her. He was afraid she would tell him the awful truth once and for all, that she was incapable of loving him, a despairing thought that trickled out

during his most melancholy moments. The days grew darker. The sun slid toward the southern horizon during the day, betokening the approach of winter. It rained frequently. Sometimes he would go out for walks in the rain and watch the thousand drops hissing and spattering into puddles. He sold the house. It was purchased by a middle-aged couple from Arkansas. The second week before Christmas he moved out and took a single-room apartment not far from his office in Marin County. During that period a news item appeared which arrested his attention. In the Middle East the state of Israel was fighting border skirmishes with the Syrians, and the United Nations had condemned the Israelis in a resolution by the Security Council. Loomis had made some remark about it to the effect that "the Jews are always fighting with somebody." Lucien's anger was kindled. He considered it necessary to put in a brief whenever the Jews were slandered; he had to uphold his mother's honor, even though he himself did not feel any real sense of Jewishness and he believed the Israelis were not always right in international politics. "They have their homeland to defend, and everybody wants to take it away from them," Lucien replied to Loomis heatedly. "If you knew what it was to be one of them, and to have lived through what they did, you...."

"Ah, crap," Loomis said and dropped the subject.

But Lucien could not help being riled by Loomis' comments. The international incident, reported for several days in the newspaper, provoked Lucien to reflect on his own past. Of course, he himself did not really understand what it meant to be Jewish. His mother had hidden that great knowledge from him, and all he had to go by was a dim apprehension of the blood which ran in his veins, a nettling awareness of the dark reach of history behind

him. The historical elements had not assumed much importance until now, yet they began to graze his consciousness, steadily and sullenly. He recollected what he had learned as a boy in Sunday school, about the Bible and the chosen people, whose destiny was supposed to have been decided once and for all by the coming of Christ and the infidelity of the Jews. Christianity had taught him that it was the Jews' falseness which stripped them of the title of having been 'chosen' and that history was no for those who believed in Jesus. The Jews were outcasts who, as a people, could never be redeemed, unless they turned to Christ. Their suffering throughout the last two thousand years of history was their just deserts, and even the terrible massacres at the hands of the Germans -- what Jews called the "Holocaust" -- was somehow deserved. It was the last proposition which especially distressed him. The Holocaust did not seem deserved; it was too thorough and horrible, and it had led, somehow, to his own predicament. It was the source of his mother's irremediable anguish, an anguish which had driven her to reject her only son and which was responsible for his own loneliness and sadness. At times it struck him that he might be cursed, along with her, as a portion of a heritage he had not willed or chosen and was now paying for. He would not accept the curse of his heritage, nor of history as a whole. He would not accept anything as inevitable, and he raged in his own mind against a wake of circumstances that seemed more swollen and complex day by day.

At last he realized whom he should seek out for some explanation. He would find the old man again. It was a Saturday morning. Leaden rainclouds drooped above the hills, green

from the winter rains, and cold wind blustered through the air. He went early to the meeting spot. Soon Lucien saw the old man trudging up the hill, his steps shorter than before, as he ascended the muddy incline with much difficulty. The old man's head was covered with the hood of a gray rain slicker, the streaks of his white hair cropping out along the hem. The old man peered at Lucien with a mystified silence, then stretched out his hand in solemn salutation.

"I came to see you," Lucien said.

The old man winked slyly. "I knew you would," he said.

"It's a nasty day, isn't it?"

"I had to come today," Lucien said.

"What about?"

"Are we friends?" Lucien asked.

The old man smiled and nodded.

"You're a man who knows the ways of God I think," Lucien said, and he added with embarrassment, "if there is a God." The old man smiled again, and Lucien felt that he grasped the intention of his words. "If there is a God," Lucien went on, "can he damn us?"

The old man paused for a second. He wrinkled up his face and said softly, "you're asking troubling questions."

"I thought you would know." Lucien's voice was wavering.

"What do I know? You're presumptuous. I don't study those things. What do you consider me, a prophet? I hardly know you."

Lucien was pricked with uneasiness. He had imagined himself in the classical scene, going before the great sage and posing profound questions; but the old man did not want to play the sage. He chuckled mildly to himself and said, "after all, son. I'm only human. What's really on your mind?"

So Lucien related everything that had happened and been on his mind the past few weeks. He mentioned that he had read the Bible, and that he had a few ideas, but he needed to know more.

He started to tell about Lille and the vision, but , at the last instant, he shrunk back from that confession. The old man would not understand. But the old man seemed to read a number of his other troubling thoughts. "So you've been in and out of love, am I right?" he asked in a matter-of-fact way.

"Yes," Lucien said meekly.

"And you suffer the tortures of love, as few do these days?"

"I guess."

"And you ask if you're damned? Can anyone be damned if he knows what love is? Love is a wonderful and yet a terrible thing. It seems like the answer, but it's terrible. It drives us to God in the end, but God won't let us rest with the love of Him. That's the irony. It only brings us to the face of God, but it doesn't prompt him to reply. You see, we're not in the garden any longer. History has swept us away. We go back to the garden in our dreams, but his face is gone. He's turned it from us. We wish we could know God face to face, in love, but we just meet with the silence. Yet there are some who know. The lovers know."

"Know what?" Lucien was extremely puzzled by the old man's remark.

"And you wonder if you're cursed? You say your mother was a Jew? Her people walked with God. "

"No," Lucien protested, "That can't be. I know the horrors."

"You know the horrors of what?"

"Of history."

"Are they real horrors or only bad dreams? Our nightmares

are only distortions of the real. You must read the papers better. You might find that God is there, in history, as you say."

"But where?" He suspected that the old man was playing games with him. "Where? I don't believe in God, can't you see? I'm a Christian, but I can't believe in God."

"Then can you hear God speak?"

"No."

"Can you not say God has spoken to you in history?"

"No."

Suddenly the old man laughed, and he laughed with a sound which seemed like the rush of many waters. Lucien was a little frightened, but the old man collected himself and said, "you talk to me as if you want a prophet. There aren't any prophets left, only a few ragged pedants like myself who pore over the ancient word. I'm no prophet. I'm just a scholar, can't you see that? The word that comes with listening, and you must listen if you want to hear it. Do you understand? You can believe in God if you hear, and if you listen, if your ears are not blocked with the raging of your own thoughts. You know why I believe in God? Because we're talking to each other." As he said those words, the old man fell silent, and he stared at Lucien with a searing stare.

"But---"

The old man nodded gently, and shuffled forward, on up the path, leaving Lucien speechless, as he had done the former time. "Yes, old man," Lucien thought to himself, "I can see, I think, but I can't make it all out." He stood and watched the old man disappear once more. Then he had another idea. He would go to Reverend Haskings. All at once he had a strange respect for

Haskings. Perhaps Haskings was a man who knew too. He would tell Haskings what the old man had said and request an interpretation. Then he would tell of the vision. It might make sense to Haskings, but he was taking a risk. Haskings might be quite obtuse.

Haskings was ensconced in his study at the church amid large, sandalwood bookcases which climbed up to the ceiling, and which contained scores of thick-bound volumes. He was submerged in the sermon notes which he was preparing for the morrow. He peered at Lucien with surprise. "Well, it's been some months," Haskings said roundly. "I certainly wasn't expecting you today. Now, of course, these aren't my regular visitation hours."

"I know," Lucien excused himself, "but I had a sudden crisis."

"A crisis?"

"Yes, I thought you could help."

Settling into his chair, Haskings rocked backwards and thrust his ballpoint pen between his teeth in a pose of meditation. "I'm here to help when I can," he said.

"You have to tell me," Lucien began excitedly. "I want to know if God has damned me."

Haskings looked down his nose at Lucien and scratched his head. It was evident he was stunned by the force of Lucien's question. He said, "God doesn't damn anyone, at least anyone who doesn't want to be damned. He loves us."

"How?"

"By showing us his love in virtue of our suffering."

"I don't believe in suffering for love," Lucien retorted defiantly. "I've heard that, and now I'm convinced suffering is pointless. It only makes us rage and hate, don't you see. Even

if we say we love, we really hate, especially if we have to suffer; we just suppress our hate. That's only human."

Haskings shook his head somewhat peevishly. "Now what brought this up? Lucien, I realize--- well, I understand you've had a hard go with it since your father----and I don't know if you're over it yet. Is this what you really want me to tell you about--- about why your father---? No, I can't do it in any way that would satisfy you completely."

"I don't care any more about my father," Lucien said.

"I mean, I don't care why he died. His death was only an episode, part of something much vaster."

"Then what are you troubled about?" Haskings asked.

Lucien looked back at him with dismay. It occurred to him that Haskings would probably not receive what he might say.

"You don't really know my past, how I've suffered on the inside. You talk about suffering in the abstract, as if it were a chapter heading in some book, but Reverend Haskings, I'm just one clod in a mass of suffering. You tell me to suffer, but what does it mean--- that I go on suffering until my bones are bleached white, and then what?"

"Lucien, the Bible tells us we will triumph through suffering. Do you see that?"

"No", Lucien protested. "I can't see that. Nothing in my life has been redeemed by suffering. Can the dung heap be redeemed of its stench? No, it can't. I saw the Cross that day in the church; it was hideous, it was ridden with death, and I was terrified. I used to believe in that cross, but I can't now. I can't. We're nailed on that infernal cross until the world burns out, and we'll never rise. I know, I feel it deep inside me."

"Now, Lucien," Haskings said in an avuncular voice, "you must calm your head, whatever it is you're talking about. I thought you came to find out something from me."

"I came to find out the meaning--- of my woes, but now I think it's coming clear. I've answered the question for myself, thank you. There isn't any way up, any way out of this. We are damned because we love, and you call it suffering."

"No, Lucien," Haskings said, shaking his head calmly, "that's not really what it's all about. Tell me, now why did you come really? Did you want to go back and talk about something?"

"Yes," Lucien said. He was ready to divulge all. "you see, the night---it was many nights after my father died, I saw something. It was odd."

"You saw?"

"Yes. Can one see God?"

Haskings looked incredulous. "Can one see God? No, Lucien, Moses wrote we cannot see God and live. I don't really know what you're up to, why you've burnt in here on this Saturday afternoon. Are you feeling alright with yourself right now? Have you seen God, is that what you're trying to tell me? But if you are, how, I don't really follow, I guess."

"No, of course you wouldn't," Lucien said a bit haughtily. "I expected more. Maybe it was an hallucination, that's all. Maybe my mind was rolling around and playing tricks. Maybe I was love-struck, but I saw---it was in the garden. Oh, why am I going on like this? It was crazy."

"Perhaps, perhaps," Haskings said. "I think we need to sit down and talk---"

"No," Lucien said, springing up from his chair. "I was

wrong. I didn't get the answer," and he left in a haste.

Now it was as though he were possessed. Disappointed by Haskings, he came to the realization that the good pastor could never have provided counsel anyway. Haskings was a victim of his own wayworn theology. It was impossible for him to say anymore than he did; he could not help but remain uncomprehending. It was better, Lucien surmised, to mull over what the old man had spoken to him. The old man had said that love "drove" one "to the face of God." What did that imply? Such was the case: he had beheld God's face, the face in the fire; yet the face was only a phantom in one important respect. Having seen the face, he had not been stricken dead, but only overcome with awe and wonder. And now there was another meaning to the face. It was the face of a woman he loved, or believed he loved. No, it was not the face which any woman herself had shown to him, for each face he had seen was merely the mask of the everyday, a mask which disguised her true feelings and her deepest yearnings. It was a face which lay hidden from view, a face wanted to uncover by ripping away the camouflage of outward feints. It was a face encrusted behind the dessembling speech of passing exchanges and encounters, a face with lips poised to utter the word of truth, of love, and recognition, muted in the deepest labrynth of the heart. It was the face that would smile innocently, yet triumphantly upon him, as a mother first smiles, cradling her newborn in fant. It was the face that only one in love could perceive. He thought now of Elaine. He wanted her body, of course, but more than that he wanted that she reveal her face to him. The face in the fire was

not the face of living flesh, the face which turned away and fled from his gaze like a frightened fawn when it hears footsteps in the forest.

He had to see Elaine. He had the courage now to call her. He asked her if he could see her that evening. She actually seemed pleased that he had telephoned her. Yes, she said, she would be willing to see him; she had been hoping they would get back together for she felt she had been too abrupt with him on their last date. She greeted him with a friendly smile. First he suggested that they go over to his apartment, which he had not shown her; but then he considered taking her to the beach. It had been many months since he had visited the ocean. Well over an hour they travelled toward the west and the dark, mallow cavity of sky where sun had set. The night was mild for December. They walked along the strand, looking out at the bilging waves which seemed to quiver like black jelly in the starlight. No one else was there on the beach. He took her hand, and she did not resist. Whatever thoughts she had were locked up in her now familiar quiet reserve. But he could not stand that she be hidden from him any longer. He spoke first. "A lot's been going on in my mind lately," he said.

"And mine too," she said.

"I have to say it," he went on, "you're a damn riddle to me, which I don't really understand. I've admitted it-- I'm in love with you, and I want to know why you can't say the same to me."

Elaine said nothing now as they continued down the beach, but finally she spoke. Her words were measured, hesitant: "Because... well, Lucien, you don't think I'm the one for you, do you really?"

"Yes, I don't have any doubts."

"Do you know me?" she asked. "What do you know but a part of me? Lucien, I can't be tied down with love, that's all. I'm too young. I have to give my time to something else for right now."

"What could be more important than us?" Lucien rejoined.

"That's not the point," she said. "Oh, Lucien, you're so intense, and sometimes, frankly, it scares me. I know you love me. You don't have to tell me that, and---I have to confess, you give me a feeling of worth that most people don't give. But I need more!"

"Do you believe in God?"

Elaine stopped and pondered his question. "You never asked me that before. What difference does it make?"

"Not much, I guess."

"But it seems to make a difference, or you wouldn't have asked me."

"I guess I'm asking because I can't separate love from God. I can't love God, but maybe you do, and that's why we can't reach each other."

"That doesn't make any sense to talk about loving God," she said. "I believed in God once, as I'm sure we all have. But I came to hate God, and then I couldn't believe in him either. You can't believe in God when there's so much cruelty. You have to believe in something else. Well, I believe in man, that's what I believe in Lucien, and I'm ready to make the sacrifices for the love of man that the saints make for God. That kind of sacrifice takes a lot more--- and, that's why I can't really love you at this point. It's not enough, can't you see that? I can appreciate you as a friend."

"Did you love Stephen?"

"No, you know that." Her words quaked slightly. "I haven't seen Stephen in a long time. He was nothing to me. He just wanted to lead me around. I did admire him sometimes, for his honesty if you call it that, but he was such a coward and a fool. He didn't want to go far enough. I think he wanted to seduce me."

"Have you ever slept with anybody?"

He could feel Elaine's hand tingling at that question, obviously with irritation. "You don't need to ask that," Elaine said. "Remember, we're friends, and besides it's irrelevant."

But Lucien kept prodding her. "It's not important to me," he said, "but it's important in one way-- I want to know if and how you can give of yourself."

Elaine exploded. "Give of myself? Give my body to some fool. You were talking about love a minute ago. Is that all men care about? Is that the crucial thing? Do you all have to say you love me so you can get us to screw? What hypocrites!"

"No, no," Lucien implored, "that wasn't what I was after. I guess I didn't make myself clear. All I'm talking about is some sort of commitment. I guess I have to put it this way-- if you go to bed with somebody, it's a kind of commitment, not a very good one, but a commitment nonetheless."

"That's ridiculous. People only screw out of lust, and then it's gone. I want something higher, Lucien. If I don't want God, I want the same thing, and I want to make my life a monument. I can't do that any other way than the one I've chosen."

It's a hard way, and I know every man under the stars will keep after me until I've been seduced away from it."

"You've got me wrong," Lucien said. He turned and stared into her eyes, which shone like pale planets. Compressing her hand and gently putting his finger to her cheek, he said, "I'm not after you for a quick screw. You know me better than that. I just want a commitment, that's all. I'm not asking anything else."

"A commitment to what?"

"To us. That's the best way I can put it. The rest will follow."

Elaine spun away from him. "I am committed," she said, "but Lucien, it has to come first. I've got the trial to go through, and then after that--- Lucien, I was going to ask you to be a witness."

"I can do that," he said, "but I'd rather testify to you personally. Don't you see? There's the possibility for love that's lost somewhere inside you, and I'm willing to stand by you, until it comes out, and then---"

"You're not making sense," Elaine said. "I thought we could get together tonight just to renew our friendship, but dammit Lucien, you're after more. I can't continue to see you if you can't stop from wanting---"

"More? Don't you want more? You'll never be satisfied in your adventure, Elaine. It's like getting in a dinky and sailing out on to that restless sea. You'll never get anywhere, and perhaps you'll never come back. We're all restless. We reach for the shoreless shore, for the unattainable stars, and we go mad. We come to the end of our striving, and there's nothing but endless sea, I guess that's death. I don't want to die Elaine. I don't want to die by myself, and I don't want you to die alone either."

"Lucien, you're a fool. I guess you're a fool like Stephen." Her back was turned to him in the dark. "You're too easily satisfied."

"No, that's not true."

"Well, it is true. You didn't know Stephen. He used to talk about things that were queer, like you do sometimes. He said I was going to burn. I don't know what he meant by that, but---"

"I know what Stephen meant, I think," Lucien said with excitement. Suddenly his mind came clear. "He meant that we all have this fire inside, and it's on the verge of burning out of control. The thing is we can keep the fire in bounds, if we want to, but if we deceive ourselves, if we don't know it's there, it's going to leap out, and it's going to burn everything. I thought he was crazy when he talked like that, but now I think I see. The fire's in you; it's what's propelling you, and it's fine until it leaks out. Do you see what I mean?"

"No," Elaine said coldly. He went over and swung her by the shoulders around so she was facing him. He looked at her keenly, and all at once was beset by an unusual and uplifting sensation. There was a buzzing in his head, and, quite fortuitously, he remembered the noise of the wasps that afternoon he had spent with her. But the noise in his head abated, and he gazed at her face against the backdrop of the rolling ocean. A wan glow seemed to leaven her face, but he blinked and the glow vaporized into the darkness. Her eyes were like black wells in which he could not make out the bottom. The glow was now inside her eyes, fugitive nodes of light that seemed to hang in space, then slowly began to sink, sink deeper and deeper into the tenebrous infinity of her consciousness. The lights began to race at tremendous speeds, faster

faster, until they were gone. He felt a rush of love for her, and he wanted to hold her, to kiss her, but he knew she had cut herself off from him. With an empty sensation, he said, "but you will understand one of these days. I think those days are coming."

She rested her head against his chest, touching his arms delicately and quietly. Then she drew back, glanced up at the sky, and said, "we'd better be going."

Nonetheless, he continued to see Elaine. He saw her on several occasions during the following week, mainly nothing more than the same, for brief and light conversation. Elaine had planned to have a number of guests at her apartment for Christmas dinner, and she invited Lucien. "There'll be several people you do and don't know," she said. "You know Guy, of course, and Helen, and, oh yes, there's a friend of mine you haven't met. He's from Lebanon."

Lucien arrived at her apartment at three o'clock. Guy and Helen had already made their appearance, and they stood together with goblets of sherry, chattering with Elaine as she occupied herself with making supper. The aroma of roast turkey hovered over the enclosed room. Lucien observed that Elaine had decorated a console table with a cardboard manger scene; he marvelled at her sentimentality. Next to the window she had set up a small live Christmas tree ornamented with red and blue glass balls and copious tinsel. Guy gave a modest nod to Lucien when he saw him. Helen continued to talk unmindfully to Elaine, who said to them all, "we're expecting Imad any moment." Lucien set about to make small talk with Guy. He knew that Guy was not especially interested in him, and that he was being polite for

Elaine's sake. He asked Guy about the demonstration and the trial, though Guy did not bring up anything with which he was not by now familiar. "The whole thing's a sham," Guy hooted.

Just then there came a knock at the door. Elaine greeted and introduced the gangling Arab Imad, who bowed to each person with a euphuistic grace. Lucien had the feeling, by the way the Arab was looking, that he knew Guy, if not Helen, and his opinion was corroborated when Elaine said, "but of course, Imad, yours and Guy's paths have crossed..." Lucien was impressed by Imad's appearance. He was flawlessly dressed in a white linen shirt with perfectly pressed herring-bone slacks and a brocaded, silk sash about his midriff. His hair was meticulously clipped, and he had a fleecy, little black mustache. He spoke in spluttering English.

Lucien began to suspect that Imad had his eyes on Elaine, for he would address her very chivalrously and once stooped even to kiss her hand when making a point. Lucien tried to quell his own jealousy. At length he concluded that Imad was harmless, and he knew Elaine well enough that she would not be any more than hospitably affected by the Arab's dash. Soon they all huddled around the table for dinner. Elaine brought the turkey, which she carved herself, along with cranberry jelly, mashed potatoes, brocolli in cream sauce, and apple and nut salad. Imad dug out a bottle of pearly Chablis from a rumpled paper bag, and flooded everyone's glass with much fanfare. No one said much throughout the meal, but when it was time for dessert-- strawberry cheese cake-- a political controversy arose. Imad had been offering a series of toasts. The first he made to Elaine, whom he called "the true-hearted

one." Elaine smile bashfully. The second toast, however, provoked Guy, and it upset Lucien. "To our Palestinian brothers," Imad proclaimed, "who are fighting for their homeland."

Immediately Guy raised his voice. "I won't toast that," he said acidly.

Lucien wanted to protest also, but he figured he would let Guy cause the embarrassment to Elaine. Her face reddening, Elaine whispered something to Imad. "ah," Imad said, "so it is improper, I presume, to say what I am saying. Is justice never proper to speak of?"

"That's an issue we could hash out sometime," Guy said with polite scorn. "But it doesn't fit here. Anyway, it doesn't pertain to our struggles."

"Your struggles?" Imad asked with civility.

Guy appeared slightly flustered. "What we're involved in. The Palestine question-- that's not settled easily. Your people won't compromise. You want to destroy the Jewish state."

"Oh, no," Imad said, "we have no quarrel with Jews. We just want justice."

Guy gave a catcall and dug back into his dessert. Lucien felt it was his turn to speak up. "I don't understand everything about the situation over there," he said, "but I'm half Jewish, and I respect the will of any people to have their own place to live."

On hearing that Lucien was part Jewish, Imad's gallantry weakened, and with a chilling discourtesy he squared off against him. "But you don't respect the will of my brothers either?" Imad asked. "You will let them go on in misery, because you want to

give rights to a people who came as conquerors and do not deserve them. I am sorry; I cannot come to terms with you."

Lucien took a sip from his wine glass. The wine was tart; he reflected for a few seconds. "And I cannot come to terms with you too, my friend," Lucien said, restraining as best he could his annoyance. "You'd let all the Israelis be killed, for what you call 'justice?'"

"No, no," Imad said. "No, no, that is a false saying, that you American---how do you say, 'idealists,' say. Who is killing whom these days? My brothers, I have seen them, they are killed like worms in the ground. They are---"

"Imad," Elaine said, interrupting, "it'd be better if we brought this up some other time."

"Of course," Imad said, "and he gave her a broad smile. "I do not mean to cause a fuss. You have told me these people share in your---ideals---and I thought..."

"It's a little complicated," Elaine said, suggesting now that they have coffee. She brought a percolator, which bubbled softly as the conversation continued. Guy was talking about political matters himself, but on his own terms. He launched back into his favorite topic, the war. "It's in everybody's consciousness; it's a knife in our sides; they can beat us---" He pointed to a bluish scar on his cheek, where one of the deputy's clubs had struck him. "---but they can't keep us back. The American people are like a big, yawning animal who are on the verge of awakening, and then--- then, we'll pull it off. It'll be the first shot of real change fired into the air."

"But what will you change?" Imad asked. Guy looked at him with agitation.

"Guy is saying that we'll bring peace," Elaine said.

"Peace, yes," Guy crowed, "but only peace with a sword. There's no other way. The sword must cut the tendons of power, annihilate them. Then---.

"Guy?" Elaine spoke rather sharply to him. They finished the coffee and adjourned to the living room. Lucien started to blabber with Helen about his job with the newspaper, as the time skidded past. Suddenly it was plain to him that Elaine had disappeared from the room. She had not given him much of her time that evening. He noticed that Imad was absent as well. He was not with Guy, who had fallen asleep on the sofa. He heard low utterances coming from the kitchen, and he recognized Elaine's laughter. It was rare that she laughed. Excusing himself from Helen, he tiptoed to the kitchen, where he saw Imad, his arm around Elaine, who was muttering, although cheerfully, "please, we can't, here---" She broke off, embarrassed, when she spied Lucien.

"I'm sorry," said Lucien. "I was only an invited guest."

Elaine looked peeved at Imad. "Imad was just fooling around, Lucien."

"Like hell," Lucien growled and stalked out. Still, he was at a loss for what to do. His outrage and jealousy were overpowering. But yet he could not say at this point what he actually felt toward her, as he was too choked up with fury. At that point he decided to walk away unannounced, and without even so much as a word to Helen, who watched him with a slightly daft expression as he barged for the door.

By the time he had gotten to his car, his fury had melted into a domitable sadness. For a few moments he sat, his hands

gripping the wheel, in a mood of terrible loneliness and desperation. Once more he had let himself be made a dupe; but it was perhaps his own fault as much as it was Elaine's. After all, he had been the one who had demanded so much of their relationship. He had been the one who had insisted that they share something more than simple friendship. It was he who had reached out for what now seemed unreachable. Perhaps he wanted too much; he wanted more than ordinary people are capable of. It was he who wanted love, wanted her to love him so badly. And now the truth had materialized. He was not sure whether she was really infatuated with Imad; he simply could have misconstrued what was going on. Anyhow, it didn't matter all that much. The evidence spoke for itself.

The night was cold. A damp fog crouched in the darkness and ringed the streetlamps with a haunting, bluish-white halo. He did not feel like going home. Instead, out of curiosity, he drove over to his old neighborhood and stopped the car in front of the house which he had left several weeks ago. The new owners had strung garish yellow, green, and red Christmas bulbs in wreaths about the pine trees, and on the door, illuminated by a huge yellow floodlight, were tacked some styrofoam effigies of angels and wise men. He drove on. It was as though he were undertaking a melancholy pilgrimage now, back into dense shadows of recent memory and time. He stopped at the Rose Garden. He had not thought he would ever return there, but now a vast and impinging mystery lured him. The garden lay in darkness and silence. With lolling strides he hurried down the steps, then halted. He stood frozen for several minutes. He was not sure what he might expect. The stillness of the garden enveloped him; he intoned

his own name to himself, sheerly out of whim, and the words seemed to crash like caving cornices and reverberate in the hollow tomb of his mind. Now he spoke aloud. He called out the names of his mother, his father, Lille, Elaine-- all the names which rumbled amid his active thoughts. But no reply came back. The darkness and the silence were total. He had no new feelings, merely a consciousness of time rushing ineluctably, a great cataract, into the maw of darkness.

There was one name he had not called out-- the name of God, but he was paralyzed, powerless to utter it. The name was feckless, without vitality. Yet it was still Christmas, and he felt a strange compulsion to make one more pilgrimage.

The church was illuminated all about its facade, as bright as the Christmas star. In the sanctuary, however, he found no one. It appeared a service had let out shortly before, as there were a few paper bulletins and hymnals strewn here and there among the deserted benches. He took his seat in the front aisle and closed his eyes. A strange, primitive inclination to pray came upon him; but he could not pray. He could not even think of God. God seemed absent, scourged and forgotten, even though it was the very birthday of the Christ child. He thought about the nativity scene; he imagined it as he had seen it many times as a child. Once, he remembered, he had played one of the shepherds; he had worn an itchy tunic of sackcloth. Unable to bear the itching, he had given into his flesh and scratched himself there in front of all the onlookers. He remembered that the Christ child in the pageant had not been a real infant, as the director wished, but a plastic doll contributed by a little girl in the congregation.

Its painted face was chipped, and it had stared up at him, lifeless, with its dull, enamel eyes.

Opening his eyes, he saw before him the giant cross, the cross which had convulsed him during his father's memorial service. A gold wreath, garlanded about the cross, coruscated in the sanctuary lights. God himself was supposed to have perished on the cross, the crude iron nails impaling his hands and flesh in the most gruesome torture imaginable, crying out from the unrelieved and harrowing pain, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." But that was not what Christmas was all about. What did the cross have to do with Christmas? He gazed at the cross. There was no evidence of the crucified one; it was nothing but a fabricated assemblage of glossy wood, exhibiting no pain; an abstraction from all suffering flesh, an idol. It hung there in its somber insubstantiality from one Sunday to the next, through all sorrow and joy, remorse and celebration. It had been a sign that endured, but a sign that had lost its significance. And now it glittered before his eyes, a tawdry fetish.

The day after Christmas there came in the mail an induction notice from Lucien's local draft board, notifying him to appear for a physical examination in February. The prospect was not all that alarming, as he guessed a letter from his doctor describing his ulcer would serve to grant him a medical deferment. On the other hand, his ulcer had been relatively quiescent in recent months, and it was altogether possible an examination might demonstrate his

condition as insufficiently serious to disqualify him from being drafted.

He contacted his doctor, who agreed to write a letter to the draft board. Then he put the entire matter out of his mind for the time being. The next week he spent absorbed in his work. There was not much local news to report, but he devoted considerable hours to researching a feature story, which Barney had asked him to develop, concerning drug abuse among teenagers in the suburbs. He interviewed a pastor, a psychologist, a narcotics detective, a YMCA director; and he read several recently published books on the topic. The reason for the increasing drug problem, he was told frequently, was the breakdown of "parental control" and authority, not to mention disenchantment among youth with the values and goals of modern society. At the end of the week he had completed his study and wrote it up into a three-part series, which would appear soon after New Year's.

He wanted to talk with Elaine again. Perhaps he had let his jealousy get the best of him. He was lonely without her, and there was the possibility that nothing was going with her and Imad after all. Early on New Year's Eve, he called. Her roommate answered. She was curt, saying only that Elaine had left for the holidays. She would not divulge whom Elaine had gone away with. The New Year came and went. It was now 1967. He was only twenty-years old, yet he felt quite aged, as though the whole of his life in a careless and fruitless way had been spent. The New Year, inexplicably, seemed as if it were his last year, though it was not death which seemed to close off the future for him. Death struck

him as improbable as living. Both belonged to the fecundity of time, and time now seemed as barren and inconsequential as the love which he had lost. Yet he still clung to a vague hope--not a hope in any future event so much as in his own endurance, no matter the pain. He was no longer the author of his own time, but he had surrendered his life to the immense and impersonal time in which flows the whole, mysterious cosmos.

Every day it rained. He would awake early in his darkened room and hear the faint, monotonous dribbling of the rain outside his window. One morning he dressed and went out into the courtyard of the apartment building. Overnight, in a planter box beside the stairwell, ^{there} had bloomed two lovely poinsettias, their fragile, fire-red blooms standing forth in the quiet rain. He remembered having heard once that it was a token of good luck for a poinsetta to flower at Christmas, but these had come too late. It was the New Year, and perhaps, he thought, their appearance was a sign of something yet unreckoned.

The storms, he read in the newspaper, had brought heavy snows to the Sierras. It occurred to him that a trip to the mountains might provide new setting in which to talk things out with Elaine, if she would consent to go with him. Thursday night he managed to get hold of her. She sounded sweet and congenial as always. He made no mention of what had happened on Christmas. Perhaps she had understood his feelings and forgiven him. She agreed to go with him to the mountains, for the day at least. She did not know how to ski, so they decided to rent snowshoes and go hiking instead. He picked her up very early on Saturday morning. The

sun had not risen, but a fine day was promised. They drove to a spot along Highway 50 near Lake Tahoe where there were open forests suitable for hiking. The snow had drifted high along the road, and when they got out and strapped on their snowshoes he could see the pack came up almost to the tops of the lesser pine trees in the woods. The sun was spearing through the branches, dazzling the tracts of snow that were not covered with shadow. They spoke few words to each other. The forest was muffled in a great hush which seemed to rise out of the snowy fathoms beneath their feet. Not even the twitter of a bird was audible. Elaine walked ahead of him, her feet slopping with the snowshoes and making huge, awkward tracks like those of some prehistoric beast. They came to a ridge which looked down the mountain toward Lake Tahoe, a glittering blue bijou amid the spiring, white peaks. Hiking along the ridge, Elaine finally halted, panting. He squinted at her in the brightness of the snow. She stood, staring out over the distant valley, and he thought it was time to say what he had to say.

"You know I've had a lot on my mind," he said.

She did not turn to him, but kept staring away. "Yes, I know," she said.

"I'm sorry I walked out on you Christmas," he said.

"You had a right to," she said, "even though it wasn't what you thought."

"What is it between you and Imad?"

"It's nothing, really," she said. "It's over for the time being, anyway. He's just a casual friend."

"It didn't look like that to me."

"You have to understand," she said, "he can be more forward than I'm used to. But we're just friends, that's all, and really Lucien, you ought to know me better."

"I guess I don't really know you," he said. "That's why I have to keep coming back with you. I don't know what your feelings are; I don't really even know my own feelings."

Now she turned to him and smiled wistfully. "Lucien, what do you really want from me?" she asked.

Her question fazed him at first; he thought his intentions had been clear to her all along, but suddenly he recognized that she was far from understanding him. She was deaf to what he was trying to tell her. He said: "I've said it before. I've wanted to be in love with you, that's all. I don't know any other way to put it. I can't say just why I love you-- it's not rational. There's something in you, something I can't help but respect and admire, but I want more than admiration. I want it all to be perfect, and I want you to love me. I know it's hard to love; I guess the reason I want to love you, and you to love me, is because it is so damned hard. I'm no saint. Neither are you. But that's the challenge, don't you see? Two saints could never love each other. Love is something that grows, in spite of our weaknesses and inabilities, and that's where God comes in, I think. There can't be God without love. No, it's not the kind of God we're used to. It's not the God who we worship. It's the God who speaks to us through each of us, in our own fumbling and tortured speech. It's the God locked up inside of each of us who is crying to break out and speak in the space between us. I can't say it any other way, Elaine. We can't hear that God speaking unless we're committed to

each other, and---" He was not certain exactly what he was saying. Never before had he uttered such poignant phrases, and his testimony seemed to spurt out, as though he himself were not really deciding the words. She gave him a befuddled and blank look.

"By the way, Lucien," she said, "I wanted to tell you. They dropped charges for me and Guy. I guess they didn't want to bother anymore."

"That's good," he said. He was glad for her, even though he was angry with her for changing the subject.

"It's too bad in one respect," she said. "I was looking forward to the trial. You were going to be my witness and---" She reddened slightly. "Lucien," she said, "I know you weren't involved in that demonstration, were you?"

He shook his head.

"I realized from the beginning you weren't. That's alright, I guess. I sucked you into it. You weren't really the type, and I don't begrudge you. But, when it comes to what I really feel for you, it does make a difference."

"What does?" he asked with vexation. "That I didn't risk killing myself, perhaps? Do you only value me if I let myself flogged for one of your precious causes? Do you only value me as some wood piece in your political chess game?"

She dropped her eyes to the ground, shuffling her snowshoes in the powdery snow until they had made a broad, clean scar on the surface. Then she looked up at Lucien with frozen anger. "That's not fair, and you know it."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"Oh, Lucien, my God." She began to walk on. He stumbled after her. They passed into an open meadow. The whiteness from

the ground was blinding.

"Elaine, let's come to terms," he pleaded. She stopped at last and did an about-face. "To terms with what?"

"I want to forget about politics, about everything except us. I'm a simple person, I don't want anything else."

Stooping down, she picked up a fistful of compacted snow and lifted it to her lips, licking it. Then she threw down the remaining wa^d at her feet. "Lucien," she said, "you do want too much out of me. You've got something on your mind I can't figure out, and I guess I don't want to figure it out. I've always lived for my ideals. They're pure ideals, and they're what I have to measure myself against. I can't be anything else. You just want me to be your woman, that's all, I'm sure. Of course you talk about it in a different way, but you're a man, Lucien, and it's easy for you to delude yourself. I can only be a woman when I've proven myself by doing something that's greater and higher than what you want."

"I don't just want you," he insisted. "I just want to get on a steady keel with you. I want to share, share something deep. I'm tired of chasing after your pure---whatever it is--- I want the real you."

"Lucien, please---" She turned and walked on, quite fast now. Though his leg muscles ached, he refused to ape her pace. He watched her stride quickly ahead of him in the glittering snow-field. The sun was glaring in his face, and for an instant he lost sight of her as she shriveled away, a black mote in the pure, white resplendence. He slogged on, following her trail of footprints which proceeded back into the woods. She was waiting for him. "We've

come full circle," she said, pointing to the line of tracks which they had intersected, "It didn't seem like we went very far."

Indeed, he did not go any further with her. He was tired of trying to penetrate her defenses. He had already exhausted most of his energy in pursuit of her, and now he was ready to give up entirely. He had lost a good deal of his passion for her. Her resistance had left him painfully detached from his own aspirations. He had forgotten the vital sense of what mattered in their relationship. At times he doubted his own values. A mood of emptiness settled about him. Just about every other day it would rain. The radio reported extraordinary amounts of rainfall for that particular season. The gray weather only accented his mood. At work, Loomis noticed his low spirits, but refused to pity him, making occasional wisecracks about "our man of sorrows." But Loomis still made overtures of friendship. It was obvious he liked Lucien. One day Loomis offered to take Lucien to lunch. "We can talk about girls," he said, smirking. But Lucien's induction notice was the first item of conversation.

"Shit, you don't have much to be happy about, do you?" Loomis said.

"It's alright," Lucien said. "I think I'll get rejected. I've got this ulcer."

"You do? Shit, you are in pretty bad shape. A guy like you needs some good times to get your mind off the bad things."

"But, then again, it could all go the wrong way," Lucien said. "They might find me fit, and I'd be up a creek."

"Ah, those horses' asses don't want people with holes in their stomachs," Loomis said. "They want animals who they can train to kill, and you're not mean enough."

"How did you get out of the service?" Lucien asked.

"I convinced them I was queer," Loomis said. "The boss doesn't know that, or he'd castrate me for not being a patriot. I had to pull the wool over their eyes. Even if you do pass, I'm sure you can do the same. You're smart."

"Maybe. But it's hard for me to do that sort of thing."

"I know your problem," Loomis said in a cocky tone of voice. "You need a little woman to ball with and make you happy."

"I've had that," Lucien said, "but it didn't come out that way. She was screwed up."

"Doesn't matter," Loomis said with a glint in his eye. "You were happy for the moment, weren't you?"

"Have you ever really loved a woman?" Lucien asked. He had come to realize that Loomis never talked about his own women; he only gave advice to others.

"Sure," Loomis said testily. "Many times. I get the best for balling."

"Oh, come off it. You're making a lot of noise. Women aren't just like that. They don't come to a man just to fuck."

Loomis stared at him with a elfish expression. "Of course they don't," he said, "but that's the thing-- you've got to plant ideas in their head. Make them think you're a free spirit, that you can love them and see into their soul, and then you've got them in your bed."

Lucien was slightly irritated by Loomis' flippancy. Shrugging, he said, "so that's all you think there is to it. You make it all sound as if a woman were nothing but a slab of meat hanging on a hook."

"That's a good part of it," Loomis said. "I'm a hungry son of a bitch most of the time, and so are you I bet."

"I don't know. But there is one thing I'm sure of. I'm not satisfied only with what you're talking about. I want more, more than that."

"More of what?" Loomis quizzed him with an air of lofty indifference. "What else is there to get?"

Lucien bridled. "What else? I think I see it some of the time. It's crazy, but there's a---a spiritual quality. That's as good as I can describe it. It's hard to see, I know. I see it in myself, and sometimes I think I see it in her face. It's like God, maybe."

Loomis just stared, uncomprehending. "Do I detect a touch of the preacher? Hell, should I call you Reverend, Reverend Lucien? The next thing I'm going to hear is a sermon on lust and vice."

"No, no, you're way off. Look, it's easy to talk, to talk about these things when you're on the outside. I know there's more to it. Sometimes I feel as if we're all going through the motions and nothing more, like sleepwalkers."

Loomis shook his head. "You're a strange bird," he said. "What you need is a woman. Marry one. Maybe it'll get you out of the draft."

The day arrived when Lucien was to report for his draft physical, and Barney had excused him for the day, saying simply that he hoped it all "worked out." He had received the doctor's letter, which he tucked in a clean, white, legal-size envelope. The morning was chill and rainy. He drove to the induction

center, a large, gray and nondescript building in downtown Oakland. Hundreds of youths were millin about the locked front door in the rain. At eight o'clock a young officer with curly hair, and wearing a tan uniform, came to open the door, barked some unintelligable orders, and the crowd swarmed in. They were herded to a locker room and instructed to strip down to their underpants. Then they filed into a small gymnasium, and made to stand at attention in rows, while a team of physicians pawed over their bodies, poking at their genitals, and testing their reflexes with a hammer. Lucien observed that most of the youths in his group were black. They seemed quite casual and disrespectful, and at one point he watched as an officer began screaming at one of the black youths, who stood limply, sneering at the whole proceeding. Afterwards they were shepherded through a series of rooms for conducting vision and hearing tests. Lucien tried to feign deafness during the hearing tests, but it seemed as if the officer knew that he, like everyone else, was doing the same, for he simply scrawled with comment some information on a card and commanded him to continue to the next phase.

The next phase for those who had medical letters, was a private interview with an army doctor. The doctor, a thin and tow-haired man with a Roman nose, read the letter cursorily, then stamped "rejected" on Lucien's papers. Lucien was highly relieved. Now he had simply to wait for the final screening to be discharged. Unfortunately, he had to wait for what seemed like most of the afternoon. About three-fifteen his name was called, and he appeared before another officer, who reviewed his papers with sullen deliberation. The officer was quite young. He looked something like Barney, and he seemed rather tired. He read over the letter and

consulted a huge, military medical book open on his desk. Then suddenly, he scratched out with his pen the "rejected" stamp the army doctor had made and handed the papers back to Lucien. "You don't have an excuse," he said sharply.

"But the doctor---"

"It says different here in the manual," the officer said. "It doesn't meet specifications. You can make a formal appeal, of course."

Lucien wanted to argue, but the officer waved the next person to come forth. "You can make a formal appeal," he said. "That's it."

Lucien was stunned. All at once he felt a kind of vertigo. He wanted to protest again to the officer, but the officer would not even look at him. Out into the street the sun was shining. Now the improbable was strangely imminent-- he was going to be drafted; he would be involved in the war, after all, having to choose to kill or be killed. Never before had he considered having to kill. The realization was stymieing. He could appeal, of course, but he did not hold out much hope. Within several months he would be in the service, along with the masses of other ill-starred and aimless young men whose lives had been plucked to fight and die, at last to be expunged from memory. Until now he had not taken the war seriously; now he was filled with vivid alarms and indignation. It was the last and most devastating blow. He began to muse about death, his own death. He did not want to die. But, more poignantly, he did not want to die if there were nobody to care about his dying. The thought of dying anonymously

in some lonely jungle across the ocean enraged him. He thought about death and suffering as the lot of many of which he was now one. And he wondered if there were any reason for it. No, there was not any reason for it. No one, not even Christ, could have died for such a brutal and absurd purpose. The image of the cross flashed in his mind again, and he recalled a picture which he had seen somewhere in movies or read in books, of a field of tiny white crosses laid out on a quiet battlefield. The crosses were transformed into heaps of fragmented bones and skulls, all glistening white and evil in the light of day. He looked up. The late afternoon sun was irradiating the huge crystal dome of sky, and far above some sea gulls were flopping through the vacant spaces.

He got in his car and went up to Berkeley. Another crowd, this one much larger than what had been at the induction center, thronged about Sproul Plaza. A platform with microphones and loudspeakers had been set up, but ^{with} no one delivering an address. At the fringes of the crowd, beside a fountain, splashing gently in the sun, a smaller flock had assembled. He heard somebody yell "Hubert, Hubert", and there drifted the hoarse voice of a man bawling about God and sin and the devil. Pushing through the crowd, Lucien beheld near the fountain a slight and stocky evangelist with slick, groomed hair and a sunburnt, freckled face with two missing front teeth. The evangelist stormed in a stentorian manner, and whenever he would emphasize a point, a few of the onlookers would taunt and jeer.

Lucien observed with mild detachment. Hubert's eyes were glittering and his face contorted as he ranted. His baggy trousers and work shirt were stained about the armpits with

perspiration. Now and then Hubert would jab his finger at the crowd in threatening and declamatory gestures, and the crowd would merrily applaud, amused by his theatrics. Lucien wondered whether Hubert was simply playing to his audience.

The evangelist's message was straightforward and familiar. The world was sunk in sinfulness and ripe for perdition. God was preparing a great and terrible judgement for all. Christ himself would soon appear. "One who is greater than us all is at our gates," Hubert shouted, "but we will not let him in."

"Where is he now?" a girl yelled.

"He is coming!" Hubert exclaimed, "And he will come before we know it. He will---"

"Hubert, Hubert, come on."

The evangelist smiled proudly. "He will come!"

Lucien edged closer to the front of the crowd.

"He will come!" Hubert expostulated in a guttural frenzy.

"He is coming, and every eye will behold him."

Lucien pushed his way to where he was facing the evangelist.

"And all shall know him." Lucien seemed to have captured the eyes of the evangelist, who looked slightly startled, then pointed his finger and roared, "And he will be known in all the earth. He is coming, my friends." Suddenly, Lucien felt a quiver inside himself. It was impossible for him to understand immediately what he felt. The evangelist thrust his finger at Lucien again.

"What will he do, Hubert?" another called.

"He will judge us," Hubert answered in a rapid and righteous retort.

"Why will he judge us, Hubert?"

"Because he loves us. Don't you see, he loves us? That's why he will judge us."

"When will he come, Hubert?"

"He will come when we don't expect it, like a thief in the night, the Bible says."

"Hubert, Hubert---"

All of a sudden Lucien reeled from a strange and overpowering tremor in his brain. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced before; it was as though a great river were gushing through his head and carrying the sediment of his idle thoughts away. He heard the evangelist's voice, but the voice had now become distant and whining. The rushing noise rose to a crescendo, then swashed away, and he heard what sounded like birds fluttering and twitting; he heard a woman's soft voice, his mother's voice. He was startled. But it turned out to be a young girl muttering something to her boyfriend beside them.

"I do not speak my words, only the Word of the Lord."

"We're starting." The last voice surged from the loudspeaker. It was a young man's voice, and then the voice of a woman came on. The loudspeaker choked off the fulminations of Hubert. The woman was speaking about the war. "We're going to have a rally this Saturday, and we're going to march through San Francisco and get everybody to join us. We're going to close the place down. We're not going to do anything violent. That's not what we'll be there for. We're going to let the Pentagon know where we stand; we're going to march, all of us together, in solidarity, and we're going to make them see the people are against our government's policy. We're going to show the SOB's."

Suddenly he recognized the familiar voice, which had been difficult to identify because of the echo through the loudspeakers. The woman was too far away for him to make out her face, but he knew it was Elaine. "We're going to march all day if we have to." She droned on. As the crowd warmed to her, it would applaud more frequently. Then the young man, who had first spoken, took the microphone. It was Guy speaking. Lucien tried to shove his way through the teeming crowd near to the platform, but he quickly rebounded against a wall of bodies. Pushing to the side of the crowd, he finally managed to secure the closest position possible and listened as the rhetoric continued. His attention drifted away from what was being said; he was aware only of the blare of the loudspeaker; the words seemed to slur into an electronic gabble. In time the speeches ceased, and the crowd slowly began to scatter. Now he managed to get to the front, but Elaine had disappeared. He searched through the crowd, to no avail. A cool afternoon wind whisked through the plaza, stirring up and tedding scraps of garbage and paper. Over near the fountain a pack of dogs-- an Irish setter, a wolfhound, and a small mongrel-- barked and romped with each other. He sat down on the ledge of the fountain and stared into its shivering waters. The little geyser squirted in the fainting subbeams; it splashed and sang amid the settling hum of voices of young people in the plaza.

He had a feeling of time which consorted with the tempo of the fountain and the shuffling of feet everywhere around him. Time seemed to have suddenly decelerated; it moved as idly as the water itself, agitated merely now and then by a shower of drops which came with each gust of wind. He watched a young couple, who had come to the fountain loitering and gazing dreamily into

the water. The girl had a simple and pretty face; she snuggled up to her lover, gave him a smile, and the two walked away.

Some yards away along the street, Lucien discerned another pair of lovers strolling hand in hand along the sidewalk.

He was utterly dismayed. It was Elaine he saw; she was holding hands with a swarthy man, Imad. They were in the company of a third person, who looked much like Guy. Lucien leaped up and dogged the trio at a distance. He followed them up the street a way, where they turned and proceeded down the block to a parked white Volkswagen, and drove off.

Lucien was aghast. Elaine had lied to him about Imad; or at least she had not been entirely honest with him. He imagined Elaine in bed with the tall, gallant Arab. He had not conceived of her sleeping with anybody. He remembered what Imad had said about Israel. It was as though the Arabs were not merely menacing the Jews, but his own dignity as a person. He was tired of playing the fool.

But, then again, he was not really jealous of Imad as Elaine's new lover. In one respect he was happy she was willing to take a lover; it made her seem human. But he could not forgive her for lying to him. The lie wounded him even more than her having spurned him. He did not want to hate her, however. It was impossible for him to do so. He still felt a furious love for her, one which flamed even more intensely in spite of her having deceived him. In a sense her betrayal was an act of truth, the truth which exposed her lack of the very purity and idealism she flaunted. She was not all that pure. She had succumbed to passion, and it was easier for him to love a woman who had shown passion, even if he were not the one chosen. He wanted to

confront her with this truth.

He surmised they might be going to Guy's house. He would confront her there. It didn't matter that Guy and Imad would be present. They would be her witnesses. He wandered around the university campus mulling over what he might say. Finally he was ready. The wind had died down, and the evening air was redolent with sweet smells of flowers. He was unsure of Guy's address. After long searching, he came upon what looked the right street. But the street was dark and the houses all indistinguishable, except for the ones on which porchlights glimmered. He recalled Guy's house being somewhere in the middle of the block on the right. He went to ring at one of the houses and ask for directions. As he got out of the car, he observed several black teenagers, including a girl, gathered about a car in the driveway next door to the house he believed to be Guy's. It struck him to inquire of the teenagers whether he was in the right location. He sauntered over to them. Two boys, both slight in build, were seated on the hood of the car. A third boy and the girl stood beside them. Chattering and laughing, they suddenly fell silent as Lucien approached.

"Excuse me," Lucien said politely, "I'm looking for someone who lives either in this house or the one next door. His name's Guy."

No one replied. Lucien felt their unspoken hostility toward him, and a chill came over him. "I'm looking for his house; I think it's the one next door to you."

Still there was no answer. Then one of the boys on the hood said in an insolent tone: "Nobody like that lives 'round here."

Who you looking for anyway, whitey?"

Lucien thought it best just to walk away and ring at the door, but as he started toward the porch, the same boy called, "he ain't home, whitey. Now it seems you ain't got no idea who you're looking for. And anyway, man, you don't belong here."

Lucien swung around and glanced at the boy who had addressed him. The boy had slid down off the hood and was staring at him, standing in a slouch. "I said, man," the boy said with rising temper, "you don't belong here. Now you'd better get your ass out of here before there's some trouble, man. I said, the dude you're looking for ain't home."

"Alright," Lucien said, and he turned back to the car. But the boy would not leave it at that. "You ain't in the right territory," he said from behind with a threatening ring to his voice. Lucien heard swift footsteps, and suddenly he was staggered with a blow that walloped him behind the neck. The boys had jumped him, and were drubbing him with their fists to the ground.

"You ain't gonna go without a little souvenir," he heard the same boy say.

He was lying on the ground with his arms above his head, simply trying to withstand the blows. He felt them kick him in the spine; his whole body was laced with pain. Then he tried to throw them off and run for the car. One of the boys sent him tottering with a fist against his cheek, and he could taste the acrid blood in his mouth and nostrils. He fell onto the sidewalk.

"Now ain't you gonna let us finish it," the boy grunted, and Lucien looked up to see him brandishing a knife, which twinkled like the silver tail of a fish in the dim light. The

other boys stepped back; Lucien froze with fear. "Now whitey, you gonna learn a lesson," the boy said. "You don't come round here and show you're friends of dudes we don't want."

Lucien could see the boy's face black and outraged. "I'm going," Lucien said, stammering. "No you ain't," the boy snarled, and Lucien saw the knife come flashing at him. An extreme, burning pain ripped through his shoulder; the boy coiled back to stab again. Lucien could see the dark street rollin' out before him. He was petrified, not knowing exactly what was happening. The world seemed to be whirling about him, the porchlights bobbing around in the darkness like buoy lamps in a storm. The pain was terrible. He closed his eyes; he heard the other boys laughing. Then suddenly the night was pierced by a girl's high-octave voice. The black girl was shrieking: "leave him alone, leave him alone." Lucien did not consider any longer. He jumped in the car, switched on the engine, and lurched off down the street. A rock clanged against the hubcap as he whizzed away.

Now he was in delirium. He could hardly keep his mind on his driving, as the car hurtled almost by itself down the lighted city streets and across intersections which appeared strangely void of other traffic. He seemed to be racing through a dream, the kind of nightmare in which one is going somewhere without knowing the specific destination. The pain in his shoulder throbbed, and touching it with his hand, he felt the hot wetness of blood. The black girl's voice still reverberated in his ear. Who was she? She was like a ministering angel who had heard his plaint and intervened at the proper moment. He had stumbled into the gaping

hole of death, but had been rescued.

Odd thoughts entered his mind as he staggered through the door of his apartment. He thought all at once that whatever had befallen him was no longer mere happenstance, but part of some mysterious and inexpressible plan. Not until now had he really felt that way, as he had been too mired in his own grief and self-reproach. But now it had all come to a head. The transformation was abrupt, beyond his paltry understanding. The horror of it all was lifting like a mist at daybreak. A light-headedness swept over him. Turning on the light, he unbuttoned his shirt and examined the wound, a long, red slash from which trickled blood but which luckily was quite shallow. He went to the medicine cabinet and dressed the wound. Then he flopped supine on the bed and stared at the ceiling. It all seemed to hang together--- the vision, the preaching of the evangelist that afternoon. A strange sense of imminence arrested him. Words tumbled into his mind without his forcing them.

He craved to sit down and compose a letter to Elaine. A letter was the best way to articulate his fumbling feelings. He wrote:

Dear Elaine,

I saw you this evening with the man you've chosen instead of me. I was angry at first, but my anger is gone now. At first I felt you had somehow betrayed me, but I know you never made any commitment to me to betray. That, of course, is the problem. You never really wanted love, not the kind of love I was offering to you-- a deep and enduring kind of love. I'm not sure anybody can carry on, or even be sane, without such love; you obviously think you can. What you feel about Imad is your own business, but I'm convinced you don't really love him. He's a silly infatuation on your part, I suppose. When you get right down to it, you're afraid of love, you're afraid of being confirmed in your deepest being, because that would make you give

up your romantic lies and illusions. You don't want to hear the truth from me now, but you will have to one of these days. I came tonight to tell you the truth, but another thing happened-- I was beaten and almost killed. It was strange, almost as if it were meant to be just that way. I felt no malice for the black boys who did it. They were just acting according to the script. I hardly even saw their faces; but when it was over, I realized I had to come close to death in order to see the truth myself. And now I can tell you that truth honestly: we're nothing unless we give of ourself to each other. Politics, humanity, noble sacrifices-- what are these but chaff caught up on the wind. What is of value unless it is affirmed in the love two people have for each other? That was the truth I wanted to tell you. You will have to wake up and stare it in the face. The days are coming soon when you will have to do that. The days are coming when you will have to meet me face to face, to look me in the eye, and see what is the truth. That's the best way I can put it. Elaine, I love you, even though I myself often now refuse to believe it, I feel empty inside, but I have to love you, and I want you to love me, and someday--someday-- you will love me and embrace me, as the long night embraces the dawn.

Lucien

Yet still there was more. For some reason he could not quite bring himself to say the one very last thing he reckoned in his chaotic mind. The evangelist that afternoon-- he had uttered something, perhaps unwittingly, which sparked a brushfire in his thoughts. The spark had not fallen where the evangelist most likely intended it to fall. The toothless little man had braided the same old words. But in Lucien's head the words had gathered a new energy; they had touched off a response which no one of sound temper could initiate. Deep inside he could feel the hot magma crackling and exploding; it was rising, rushing to spew out. His frustration with Elaine had brought him to a crisis much more immense than that of being loved by a woman whom he passionately desired. Now he was the bearer of a truth infinitely more eminent. At the edge of

death, in the pain of his lacerated flesh, amid the confoundment of his ideas and senses, he saw clearly. His loneliness was not some callous misfortune; it was purposed. At the brink of desperation, he had been driven to a notion which seemed utterly insane: he was the witness to the fullness of time, he was the one who was to come. That was the explanation of the vision.

Yet it was not he alone who could ransom the broken world.. He had no power, no superhuman prowess. All he wanted was to love and be loved, and he wanted that to be the truth of the ages. He thought about Christ on the cross. He was not one to savor martyrdom, in fact he detested the whole idea of martyrdom. There was no gladness in suffering for truth, any truth. His suffering revealed to him the emptiness of suffering. There was no God on high to reward him for his endurance; nor could he cast out his afflictions by his own efforts. He was waiting, waiting for the words of love, recognition, and confirmation that would be spoken from the soul of a woman. In her voice would be the voice of God; he would reach out to her and she would embrace him, a holy embrace, which was no longer the melding of corrupted matter, but an incarnation of the living God. The living God-- yes, that phrase meant something to him all at once. The living God no longer thundered from his throne in the heavens, but cried out in a still, small voice--- the voice of two lovers scrabbling for words to bring forth their own inmost spiritual treasures, which would be united not as disembodied ethers, but as sanctified flesh, in the conjunction of the marriage bed. The "Word became flesh." Yes, he knew that expression from the Fourth Gospel. The Word

was flesh. It was the word uttered in the eternal kingdom of intimacy, the kingdom for which he yearned. He could not enter the kingdom by himself. He could not enter into it without her; and thus he would have to wait. Spared death, he would have to wait just a little while longer, until she would come, not in the whirlwind, but as a gentle face that smiled out of the darkness and gave him peace. He was the one, and yet he was not the one to arrange for his own redemption. For the kingdom was not within him, but it lay present at hand, in the sphere where two lonely personages crash and mingle as eddys in a maelstrom. It was the kingdom which overcame death, the kingdom in which love abided and in which did not cloy the corrosive vapors of time. It was the kingdom which was still not yet, but was nevertheless within reach, and he would be the one to announce its arrival, to declare that it had come.

That night he found it exceedingly hard to sleep, and when he did sleep he was unable to dream. It was as though his mind had been rinsed of all the offal in its unconscious, and was now as stainless and pure as a new tablet. In the morning he heard the birds: they were no longer background static, but sweet and phonic voices, which telegraphed to him their secret messages. The voices said, "go, go forth, this day, and make the way straight for the kingdom. Show others the way, and then you will, as the last one, go into the kingdom yourself, for the time has come."

It was another work day, but Lucien could hardly set his mind to the customary business at hand. Loomis glowered in his

usual insouciant manner. Loomis asked him why he seemed to be in such good spirits, and Lucien just replied with a self-effacing smile. Barney had a pile of assignments for him. There was an old woman in Sausalito who owned an aviary with countless rare birds, and the town development council was convening at noon in the Holiday Inn to discuss the financing of a future shopping mall. But Lucien would have none of such folderol. He showed his wound to Barney and told him of the episode the previous evening. He said he was still dazed by the whole affair, and he requested a week off without pay. Barney was sympathetic, muttering something about "how crime reaches us all." He gave Lucien until the following Thursday.

Joyous, Lucien went out, first to find the old man. Perhaps the old man would let him know whether he was simply going mad, or whether he had discovered a marvelous truth. He trusted the old man. He met the old man again on the path. The sun was bright, the air limpid. The surrounding woods were starting to green out of their winter shroud. Lucien recounted to the old man the whole story about what had gone on since summer, about the vision, and about the realization to which he had finally come. The old man was grim-faced; he listened to Lucien's story with no hint of emotion, and when it was over, he said, "so you must keep things in perspective without going off the deep end. You must listen to be sure if you've heard the right words, that they're not more of the babble we hear so much today. You must find a place that is utterly silent. Have you been to the desert?"

Lucien said that he had visited the desert before, when he was in college in Southern California. "You should go alone to

the desert," the old man said. "The word of God always manifests itself in emptiness and in silence." Lucien was not certain how far the old man gave credence to what he had been saying; but the old man's suggestion was a good one. In a week, he hoped to come back to the old man and tell him what he had discovered. "Come and see me when you know something," the old man said firmly.

In the afternoon Lucien set out for the desert. He decided to leave his car at home and hitchhike, for he wanted to be free and alone, listening for the cloistered voices of the vast world. Strapping his gear on his back, he hit the road about two o'clock. For the first three hours it was easy to thumb rides, and by sunset he had traveled as far as the Salinas Balley. His last ride dropped him off at a truck stop beneath some waving poplar trees on Highway 101. The sun was drooping behind the trees, and he felt the sepulchral chill of night closing in. Inside the truck stop he purchased some potato chips and a can of coke. He thought he had better continue on, even though the darkness was descending, and the thought of riding alone with strangers at night as a bit uncomfortable. Just as he was going out the door, however, he came face to face with another hitchhiker, a short, but husky young man with bronze skin and a black beard-- who was on his way in.

The other hitchhiker looked at him with friendly concession. "Laid up," he asked? "C'mon, I've got a ride as far as Santa Barbara. The other hitchhiker asked for a glass of water, swigged it down, and led Lucien back into the darkness to where a small pickup truck was parked. The hitchhiker made a remark to the

driver, a grizzled farmer wearing a Stetson hat, who nodded; and the hitchhiker signalled Lucien to clamber in the back with him. Lucien set his bedroll next to that of the other hitchhiker, and they lay back against the wall of the cab, as the truck wheezed and lumbered off down the highway.

The wind off the road was cold and biting, and Lucien rummaged in his pack for a heavier jacket. The other hitchhiker introduced himself as Louie. He said he had been a college student for two years, then dropped out in order to see the world. "I studied a lot of philosophy," he said, "but I knew it wouldn't get me anywhere until I'd had some real experiences, until there was something to philosophize about."

The truck rolled on through the darkness. The wind carried the pungent scents of the fields along the highway--manure, alfalfa, cabbages, and some strong, unidentifiable vegetable smells. They sped past lighted farm houses and through sleepy towns, the little stores dark and shuttered, neon signs still twinkling green and yellow. Soon the towns disappeared, and the highway narrowed into a long, straight furrow through bare hillsides that heaved up black beneath a rising moon. A large car, its high beams galring, moved up right behind the truck, and Lucien had to shield his eyes from the brightness; then the car passed and was swallowed in the night. Louie had remained quiet so far. He lay back, his eyes peering out into the windy darkness, and hummed a medley of all unrecognizable folk tunes. At length he reached in his rucksack and yanked out a bottle of vodka. Quaffing the spirits directly from the bottle, he offered a drink to Lucien, who accepted. The vodka broiled his throat as it washed down, but it made him feel warm. "Thanks," he said timidly.

"Where you headed for?" Louie asked.

"The Mojave."

"Why are you going there?"

"To get some things straight."

"Things straight? In your head?"

"You could say that."

Louie kept on humming. Then, halting suddenly, he asked, "You just keep on going with me and you can get your head striaght."

"Where are you going right now?"

"I don't know. I could follow you out to the Mojave, if you want me to."

"I'd like that."

"I'm not sure I could show you anything, but I know a place we could stay; its not too far out of LA, a monastery."

"You know the monks?"

"There's a Father Weston I know really well. He's put me up before."

"Where do you come from?"

"Who knows? The wind, the tides, maybe. I was born in Santa Monica."

"This is my first time out on the road like this."

"The spirit moved you?"

"Yes, you could say that." Lucien wondered whether he should explain exactly why he was on the road. He thought it better not to let on with most of the details. "I hear marvelous things happen in the desert," he said.

"It's just like any other place," Louie replied, "except it's so quiet you can't tell your own voice from an earthquake."

I've slept out there many times."

"You ever ask yourself religious questions?" Lucien asked.

"Much of the time. That's why I gave up on philosophy. It didn't satisfy the spirit, and I've got this feeling this is a very spiritual year."

Lucien was stirred by Louie's suggestion. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing, just a feeling. Just a feeling in my guts, that's all. You get the feeling when you watch the sun go down. There aren't the same colors in the sky."

Lucien lay back and sighed. "I've got to ask you about that," he said.

Their conversation tapered off, and Lucien fell asleep to the jogging of the truck. He awoke when the truck stopped. They were in the moonlight not far from the ocean. Louie had jumped out, and was thanking the driver. Scrambling to collect his gear, Lucien waddled out the rear gate, and hopped to the ground. Turning up a dirt road into some orange groves, the truck bucked off with a fading moan into the night. The beach was several hundred yards from the highway. Louie led the way, through a barbed wire fence and over some billowing sand hills to an arroyo banked with scrub brush, all finespun and gnarled in the white glow of the moon.

"We can sack out here," Louie said, "It's sheltered so the cops won't see us from the highway."

They rolled out their sleeping bags and crawled in. Weary to the bones, Lucien craved sleep. The sand was soft, and he was reminded of the times as a young child he had come home in the car late at night, having fallen asleep in the back seat,

and his father had laid him deftly and gently laid in his bed.

Before he realized, he was awake. The night had fled, and the sun was scorching his face. A pesky fly buzzed in his ear. Louie was still snoring in his sleeping bag. Lucien got up and looked out over the waters. The sea was gray and glassy; a short distance offshore specks of seabirds could be seen drifting, silently as kelp, on the sun-glossed surface. Breathing deep and stretching, Lucien sniffed happily the smells of the sea. The day was new and warm, and he felt exultant. He wandered off onto the beach, thinking all the while about the last time he had sauntered along the seashore, that time with Lille in the ardor of their love and the passion of death. It had all been consumed in his memory now--- even the doubts and agonies with Elaine had been put to rest. He shared in a new kind of existence. The unmentionable past, the heartbreak, the anticipation--- these were resolved in his consciousness of a new power within him, a power which promised, perhaps, to transform the whole world. He had discovered a strange new God, and he was waiting to hear the God's voice, couched within the silence of each day and ready to issue forth loudly as the roar of a new thousand years.

He rambled about the beach. In a small crater of damp sand a solitary crab was digging industriously to shelter itself from the baking sun. High above the cry of gulls shattered the silence; a slight breeze came up, and he wrinkled his nose at a blowing whiff of fetid fish. He went back to where Louie was sleeping. His friend seemed to sense his approaching steps, for he grunted, and stared up at Lucien with languid eyes. "Oh," he mumbled. "We need to travel on, don't we?"

Lucien smiled at his companion. There seemed something cheering and beneficent about Louie, which showed in his kind, bearded face. As Louie wriggled out of his sleeping bag, Lucien noted his muscular arms, covered with black hair, and his enormous hands, like two scales, which could have held either a great globe or a little child. He had the appearance of a strong man who never needed to use his strength, the kind of person so strong that he would have little capacity for anger or violence. Brushing his hair out of his eyes, Louie said, "it's late, I know."

Tramping back to the highway, they stood for nearly an hour with outstretched thumbs until a man and a woman in a station wagon with Oregon license plates picked them up. The man was middle-aged; the woman, a blonde, was quite young and garrulous. She did not seem to be his wife and kept referring to the two of them as "boys." Every now and then she would call to them over her shoulder, inquiring about such personal matters as their views on sex and marriage. Each time Louie answered, politely shutting her off with flippant retorts that bordered on the outrageous, for example, quipping that he thought marriage was a form of "enjoyable slavery." And each time the man would turn to her, bewildered, and say, "we don't need to bother them now, honey."

The couple from Oregon took them farther than they had counted, to San Bernadino. Then they hitched a ride north, only for a few miles, to a lonely place among some more orange groves. Louie announced they were not far from the monastery. The air had grown hot and shimmered with a gassy film. The odor of new orange blossoms clogged the senses. Louie dropped his gear on the dusty

ground and grubbed out of the knapsack some cellophane-wrapped sticks of beef jerky along with the half-empty vodka bottle. Handing one of the sticks of jerky to Lucien, Louie said, "it keeps the pain out of the stomach for a little while til we get where we're goin'. The good fathers'll feed us."

Lucien was not very hungry, but his mouth was parched. The prospect of salty beef jerky displeased him, and he forbore until Louie offered him a draught of the spirits. The vodka stung his dry lips, yet its ferocity served to slake his thirst, as he swilled a mouthful or two around. Louie squatted on his hams, chawing the tough jerky with forceful bites. "You know," he said, "I don't know exactly why I'm taking you to this place."

"You said you know them there," Lucien reminded him.

"Yes, but they're not all what I'd call my people. It's funny. I guess it's the Catholic kid I was raised still in me, that I've got this pious reverence for men who work, meditate, and stay away from the women." He shook his head.

"You keep goin' so much, you probably don't ever get tied to any women," Lucien said.

"That's not really true," Louie replied. "I've had my share, before I started travellin'."

"Why did you leave them behind?"

"Oh, I didn't really. They left me, really, you might say."

"You scared them?"

Louie looked at him with bemusement; then a rapt smile came across his face, and he chuckled. "Sure, I guess I scare them, a monster like me---"

"No, I mean, did you scare them, because you wanted too much out of them."

"I don't think I demand much out of anybody," Louie said. "That's not my style. There just wasn't anything that would carry us on any further, so I thought--- well---it's time to see the world. Philosophy."

Lucien took another gulp of the vodka. He said with seriousness, "I demanded a lot out of women, and they spurned me for that."

Louie sneered facetiously. "I guess you would make a lot of demands. You strike me as the earnest type. Well, maybe that's your problem, you know. You come on like a heavy, a saint or something, and you scare their cunts away. No woman ever loved a saint."

Smiling, Lucien said, "I don't ever pretend to being a saint."

"Well, if you're so serious about loving them, then they'll read you as a saint, whether you want that or not. That's why I can understand these monks, you see, they're trying to be saintly, and they don't make any pretense otherwise."

"I see what you're getting at," Lucien said. "It's true in one way. I've suffered a lot, and I used to take some kind of weird pride in it."

Louie laughed. "Now who hasn't suffered a lot? They're two types of sufferers. Those who make a big deal out of it and those who don't. That latter are the ones who think they're saints, and it makes them suffer more."

"I came to a point just a few days ago," Lucien said, "where I swore off suffering, at least I wasn't going to make a big deal out of it. But something else happened at the same time. I was gripped-- yes, gripped with a vision of what it meant."

Louie said, "well, if you had a vision, then you're still wallowing in your own sainthood. The problem is you don't recognize it."

"Well, how do I get out of it?" Lucien asked.

"Get out of it? Work it out. Try being the real saint, try to save the world, and then you'll work your way out of it."

It took them the rest of the afternoon to get to the monastery. Dropped off about two miles from their destination, they had to hike the final distance in the atrocious, afternoon heat. Lucien was nearly gagging from thirst. The monastery was situated on a ridge within a lone ring of trees backed up against the northern slope of the San Gabriel Mountains. From its entrance one could look out over the Mojave desert, which swept away to the northeast, a vast, leached-gray plain with its sheer, faraway horizon blunting the blue edges of a cloudless sky. The monastery did not compare at all with those ancient stone and moss-grown cloisters which readily leap to mind, but was a modern glass, wood, and cinder-block construction that included a dormitory and out-buildings. Great cottonwood trees canopied the gray-dirt grounds with steep shadows. In the center of the grounds was a fishpond strewn with water lilies, around which swaggered several fat, white ducks. In the dining hall, which was part of the main building, the monks were engaged in supper. A pudgy and jovial monk in his black frock and white collar greeted them at the door. He seemed to know Louie. "Yes, yes, come in," the monk declared heartily.

The monks wereseated along a long, oaken banquet table and conversing in a solemn cacaphony. Near the end of the table, a tall, bespectacled, and aged monk with wavy, silver hair rose

from his chair and in a hasty and solicitous manner nodded to Louie.

"Father Weston," Louie said eagerly.

The elderly monk smiled a stiff, but amiable smile, and he extended his hand to Lucien as well. "Father Weston," Louie said, "we dropped in. I feel ashamed of seeking your hospitality so often. This is my comrade, Lucien---"

"Lastman," Lucien added.

Father Weston shook his head. "Neither of you should feel ashamed. The monastery has always been open to wayfarers. Come and have a meal with us."

Father Weston cleared a space at the end of the table and asked one of the monks to bring two chairs. Soon an attendant appeared with two plates of food -- brown rice, candied carrots, and chunks of beef in an herb sauce. The attendant also poured glasses of white wine, which had an odd, resin taste. "It's Greek wine, Retsina," Father Weston said, noticing the uncertain look on Lucien's face. Then he said, "tell me, what brings you here?"

"I can only speak for myself," Louie said. "Wanderlust."

"Ah," Father Weston exclaimed, "but it's funny how someone who always wants to rove would keep coming back to a sedentary place like this. I suppose we are all bound to the earth in a way," Turning to Lucien, he asked, "and you?"

"I wanted to visit the desert," Lucien said.

"Of course," Father Weston said, "the desert is a very quiet and beautiful place. Most people don't think of it as beautiful, this parched wilderness. But there's a hidden beauty here. You must think of yourself as making a pilgrimage."

"That's a way of putting it," Lucien said. Since he was desperate with thirst, he had emptied quickly his whole glass of

wine, and Father Weston casually lifted the bottle to refill.

"And where have you been of late?" Father Weston asked Louie.

"It's been-- I think -- since November."

"Yes, that's right," Louie said. "I haven't been too far, up the coast, where the redwoods reach up to the sky, then out to Colorado, and back to the Pacific."

"Well, nothing has changed here," Father Weston said.

"The days have gotten hotter, that's all, and I've been reading more Bonaventure."

Louie looked at him with interest. "Yes," Father Weston said, "I've been studying the text more closely, The Mind's Road to God. It has to do with a monograph I'm working on." Father Weston turned to Lucien. "Are you familiar with Bonaventure?"

"I never studied philosophy," Lucien said.

"You would like it," Father Weston remarked. "It's psychology also. The purification of the soul--"

They finished supper and adjourned to a sitting room, where Father Weston served brandy. Lucien observed that Father Weston appeared very tired. Lucien himself was growing quite sleepy from the wine. Before he knew it, he was nodding off, and was oblivious to the conversation except for a few faint snatches which punctuated his drowsiness. Suddenly he strained to open his eyes and listen, for Louie and Father Weston were arguing. They were arguing about the war.

"It's a fraud," Louie was saying heatedly.

Father Weston was calm. "It's only a fraud if you don't believe it is done for a just cause. But you must think of how the people will suffer under the Communists."

"I don't believe they'll suffer any more than they're

suffering now," Louie said.

"But then you are naive, if I may frankly say so," Father Weston added sharply.

Lucien thought it appropriate to relieve Louie by saying something, even though he had missed the earlier part of the dispute. "I can't see fighting a war we have no chance of winning," he said.

"But how do you know that?" Father Weston asked.

"Because people my age -- the one's who will have to do the fighting-- have no will. They don't see the justice, and besides, more blood will be spilled than saved."

Father Weston glanced at Lucien captiously. "Is that an argument, no really? Do you just weigh one pint of blood against another? Sometimes blood is necessary."

"Too much blood has been spilled for 'good' causes," Louie said.

Father Weston looked puzzled. "I know the ethical problems," he said gravely. "One must not be a pure utilitarian, but one must not also stick solely with deontology -- doing what is right in itself. One needs a sense of fittiness, prudence ---"

"I don't think you can rationalize it," Louie said.

"No," Father Weston said, "but -- one can be guided by both reason and scripture, and the latter says it is sometimes necessary to give our lives so that we may save them."

Lucien was somewhat irritated now, even with his great respect for his host. "Are you saying that we have to be saints?" he asked.

Father Weston smiled. "No, that's not what I'm saying, but what I mean is whether our moral principles are actually informed

only by our secret desire to save ourselves, even if others are dying---"

But the dying, it's no point, oh---"Louie protested excitedly.

Father Weston pondered a moment. "I guess I'm a little old and weary to see the reasons your passion invents," he said to Louie. "you're a young man with sensitivity. But I've given so much of my life to charity for others, and I can't see--- I can't see how you think we are going wrong."

"I didn't mean you personally," Louie said.

"No, I realize that, but it's all --- things are very slow in the desert, and I suppose I'm not close enough to the young people who have the new spirit." Father Weston dropped his eyes, his face showing the ridges of troubled concentration. He shook his head. "I'm not really a political man," he said. "I'm a servant of Christ, and I know how hard it is to serve sometimes. I must be honest -- out here in the desert one runs the risk of always thinking abstractly, and I wonder at times how effective a form of service that can be. But, then again, there are the lives of so many good men and women to take into account. They're lives are at stake, and it would be hard for me to justify letting them perish at the hands of a godless political creed. There are times when-- well -- we have to choose, choose not what will work, or will avoid conflict, but what serves to redeem. Sometimes redemption can only be accomplished by a great sacrifice. We must make sacrifices ---"

Louie stared at him. "I love you and respect you, Father," he said, "but I doubt your choice of words. Are these sacrifices

necessary? Does a man step into a brawl if it's obvious he and everybody else will end up the victims? Do we really need to sacrifice?"

Father Weston retired into thought. For the first time Lucien noticed a small, gold cross strung on a chaplet around the elderly man's neck. The cross caught a glint from the overhead light; it twisted slowly as Father Weston fidgeted. "Well," Father Weston said, "it must be so. We must sacrifice because God glories in our sacrifices, and he will redeem us for our perserverance. I'm reminded of Saint Francis ----"

"But he was a man of peace," Louie interjected.

"Yes, I know," Father Weston said sadly, "I know."

As the hour was late, Louie said they ought to be going. Father Weston appeared surprised. "But, please," he said, "you will stay with us this evening."

Louie smiled. "Thank you for your kindness, but the desert floor will do."

"I hope you're not upset with me," Father Weston said.

"No," Louie said, smiling. "It's good to talk again."

"And I've been very pleased to meet you," Father Weston said to Lucien as they flung together their gear. "You must come back. It's a good place for reflection."

"Yes," Lucien said. He was quite sleepy.

As they hiked back down the road in the darkness, Lucien could hear his companion chuckling under his breath. Louie was in good spirits. "I take it you weren't all that mad at the good father," Lucien said.

"No," Louie said. "We have our arguments. He's a lonely

old man who rarely has flesh and blood to struggle with. He needs somebody for an argument. All he has, otherwise, is the silence of the desert."

They had traipsed what seemed several miles. The moon was up, casting its feeble, topaz light over the sagebrush and yucca. Their shadows paced along at the side of the road--- hulking, monstrous things that flitted low above the ground. Finally they came to the main road, but instead of turning down it, Louie led them into the open flat of desert. They stumped onwards for at least ten more minutes. To the northwest, below the big dipper, there was visible a spangled scarf of lights from a distant town. Lucien was curious where Louie was going; he seemed to be heading out into the wild lonely blackness of the Mojave. But soon Louie stopped and said, "here's alright." There was nothing particularly striking about that particular plot of hard, alkali ground.

"OK," Lucien agreed, for he yearned to sleep.

They crawled in their bedrolls. Louie grabbed the vodka bottle and squirrelled it away in his bag. "Ah," sighed Louie, "the saints give us rest."

Lucien wanted to sleep, but it soon became evident Louie was bent on talking. Guzzling the rest of the vodka, Louie produced now a steel flask of whisky, which he passed to Lucien. Louie became animated and said, "about Father Weston, he's a decent man, and I love to listen to him spout about St. Thomas and the Arabs, or anything Medieval for that matter, but he's wrong on the political question."

"I agree," Lucien said.

"The other problem is that he's locked up in a whole way of life that's obsolete. His mind's in the medieval thing--- the

quiddities and what have you. And -- well -- he needs a woman, like we all need a woman."

Lucien took a long swig of the whiskey. He remembered now that he had come to the desert to find something out for himself. His own words, gratuitous as they were, tolled some sort of message. What he had just said was in a fashion trivial, but it made a peculiar suggestion to him, a suggestion he could not quite unravel. "That's it," Lucien said.

"What?"

Lucien downed some more whiskey, then handed the flask back to Louie. "The thing about women. His politics are the politics of not having, that's why he sacrifices."

"I think I've got you," Louie said. "Who needs the Mother of God? I got that business most of my growing up. The mother, the virgin, they're all sexless, right. You don't have to love them, just adore them, and make sacrifices for them. Yeh."

Lucien was pleased with the point Louie was making. "So we go on making sacrifices, of our bodies, our very souls, for a love without a body, because we're afraid of the real love of a woman, or a man, for that matter."

Louie was quiet. "Now I don't see," he said.

"Hell, we all want a woman, a woman we can love -- not just fuck, but who'll love each one of us, and say they'll stick with us. That's so hard, to honestly want that. We run away from commitment to somebody, but it's commitment that acts as a rudder for our lives. It means we always have somebody to confide in, and to be confided, somebody to tell us when we're full of shit as when we're right on the beam, and it's all done out of love, don't you see? The desert -- the dark, enormous, and lonely desert -- is

just a reminder of how it is when we're right with another person so much of the time. We flee into the desert, lonely and scared. We flee from the face of one who might love us, who might speak to us in the loneliness of our fear and isolation. Who can speak to us? Not God, the old God. Not the disembodied God, but the God made flesh, the God who has a body, who has sex. That's another part of it -- have you ever wondered why God invented sex? So people could know God. Sure. Sex keeps the human race alive, being born and procreating, but there's more to it. Sex is what makes possible knowledge of God through the other person. Loving a woman binds you to her, in a way you can't slough off lightly; and when you're bound to somebody, you have to take them seriously; you have to listen to them, you have to share in what they are, what they feel, and what they think about you. You can't flee into your own tempting illusions about yourself, because they're always blasting through those illusions with the reality of who they are. Why has man been scared of woman, or woman of man? Why have they been scared of each other as human beings have always been scared of the mystery, the divine mystery? They're scared of being whole, don't you understand? Because being whole means we have a responsibility to the two, not just one halves of ourselves. But half of ourself isn't the same as the whole self. If we hear the other half of ourselves, the other half of our mind and flesh, who is real, out there, we hear God. No monk alone in the desert can hear God. That's why a monk's prayer goes unanswered. You can only hear God if you have someone to say "I love you," and you can say the same back. God is dead. The disembodied, faceless God is dead. The real God is very near;

she's coming, and I wait to hear her voice, and --"

Lucien's head was becoming wavery from the whiskey, and his stomach felt slightly queasy. Louie was still silent. Finally, Louie said, "you can really go on, can't you? It sounds pretty good."

"No," Lucien insisted, "it's not just good. It's a scandal, you see. It's a scandal because we aren't -- the world isn't -- ready to admit that God can be human, really human. Not that God is any one of us, but God comes into the space between you and me, or between me and her, and I hear God's voice in her voice; I feel God's touch in her touch. Isn't it possible God can touch us too? Father Weston has lost God; his God is a dry abstraction, that's why he wants us to go to war for God, to sacrifice our lives for a God who can't speak and who can't touch and who can't love. But -- God is right here, here in the clearing between two desperate selves, who crave to be rescued from their own darkness and loneliness, to love and be loved. He wants to serve, to love humanity. But humanity's just another idol. Nobody can love humanity. Can you touch humanity? Can humanity talk back to you? Nobody can love God in any other way than as the real man or woman who has the glimmer of God within them, a God who is human as well as divine, who loves, hates, wrongs, forgives, and is forgiven. That's the God of whom we are really afraid, but the love of such a God is so hard, so hard to accomplish in any enduring way. We don't want a God who is always in our presence, who is always the flesh-and-blood other bound up in our lives. I once thought love was easy, even easier than the love of God; but it's far harder than I ever dreamed. I can't love any God who's not breathing flesh,

whom I can embrace and give my life to, that's all. There can't be any other God. The lovers know who God is!"

Lucien was totally awake now. His own words had aroused him to a fit. He felt queer, not knowing what Louie was thinking of his oration. The ideas seemed to flow easy, but in a sense they struck him, their very author, as rather mad. He went on, "that's what's so strange about it all. It's so easy and yet so difficult; it's a truth that's been here all the time, but we're only waking up to realize it. How little do we even sense the ground that we're lying on! How often do we know the small and insignificant things around us that are yet so important? Maybe it's so obvious we can't see it, like the curve of our nose in the corner of our eyes. But somebody has to tell, and that's when the truth will come to be known to us. You see, I don't know about myself; I think I'm the one who has to tell everyone, even if they think me mad, even if ----"

The sound of Louie snoring broke into his rhapsody. He was stunned and chagrined -- even Louie did not want to hear. Louie did not want to take him seriously, but perhaps that was how it was meant to be. Louie had made him talk; he had prompted Lucien to thresh his own words, which were the words he wanted to hear, the words he had come to hear. They were the very words immured in the desert's silence.

It was impossible now for him to sleep. The words came crashing into his brain, demolishing the silence. Yes, he thought, so that is what I've wanted to say all along. My voice is only one solitary voice crying for another to hear it, and it is the other's voice who I cry for. He listened attentively, but all he

could hear in the darkness was the all-infecting silence. "No, I will not hear the voice here," he thought, "and that's why I came here, to discover the silence, to know that the voice is not in space, but in a time yet to be fulfilled, when she will say "Lucien, I love you," and she will mean it from the depths of her spirit. The word is coming; it is ripening in time."

He had drunk too much. His head was spinning now, and he felt the horrible nausea rising in him. Climbing out of his sleeping bag, he stood straight up, his eyes swiveling about the sky. It was as if the sky might have some message for him, and in his sickened stupor he saw it. It was not what he had expected. He trembled with fear and anticipation. Near a bright star to the east he saw a light streaking, coming fast; it careened across the firmament, a strange, white fireball, and for an instant, it seemed to hover, then rushed westward. At first it was a dim light, then it seemed to burst into many colors. It kept moving toward the west. His body stiffened. A prickly chill settled over his entire limbs and trunk. His legs began to carry him in the direction of the light, as if he were drawn by an invisible force. He muttered to himself, "oh my God, what have I thought? What have I done?" His stomach tense and lined with fire, he stumbled toward the light. Then suddenly he felt himself teetering. The light explodeed again, like sparks of a roman candle. And he tumbled onto his own face. The sickness in his stomach welled up, a gusher of pain, and he vomited on the ground. "Oh, my God," he shouted. "the Word, come to me," and his eyes flooded with tears.

But a hand fell on him. It was a strong hand, lifting him

up with tender prowess. "Are you alright?" Louie asked.

"Yes," Lucien said. "I don't know what came over --"

"You've had too much booze," he said. "C'mon, I was asleep; I didn't know what you were doing until I heard you. Let's both of us sleep."

They were back on the road early, in the heat and gritty dust swirling off the desert floor and the wind that had come up just about sunrise.

"I'm sorry about last night," Lucien said as they stood together, waiting for a ride.

Louie looked at him with stony composure. The wind blew in another whorl of dust, powdering his beard with a gray-white patina. Louie nodded. "It was OK, friend," Louie said. "I wouldn't have let them get you."

Lucien was puzzled. "Who are they?"

"Forget it," he said. "Maybe I'm a little superstitious. The old ones. The Indians have a legend about them in this desert."

Lucien prodded Louie to explain, but he just laughed and repeated, "forget it." Then he said, "the devil forces. They say those forces are working out here. I don't believe it, but well, I saw the light too."

"Then it was something?"

"Maybe. That's all I can say. I don't believe in spooks or all that."

"The old ones?"

"I've heard stories about them out here. Maybe they wanted you." He laughed again. "You weren't exactly in your right mind, I don't think."

"But it was the whiskey, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps."

In a few minutes they heard the faroff whine of an automobile.

"Can't you tell me about the devil forces?" Lucien asked, now at an excited pitch.

"I don't know much myself," Louie replied. "It's maybe just a lot of superstition. Anyway, if it was true, they didn't get to you. I think you've got too much of the force of good in you to withstand whatever it is."

"But you -- you were here last night too." There was something strange about Louie he could not put his finger on. "Were you listening to me before I got up? I thought you were asleep."

"I was listening, but I couldn't answer. I couldn't answer, but I knew you were with the forces of good. That's all I can say. Your problem is, as I've said, is that you take it all too seriously. You have to laugh a little."

"But --"

"Nothing more," Louie said. "I've met the man I wanted all this time to meet. Now you've got to do what you have to do. Let the right spirit guide you."

"But I don't really know what I have to do."

Lucien could see the car coming fast toward them from the east; it was not headed in the direction he thought they wanted to go.

"You get this one," Louie said, suddenly with a stolid resolve. He squinted into the dust at the onrushing car. "You

go back to San Francisco. I'm going the other way, but -- give me your address and I'll come to see you soon."

"But, no, you didn't say we were---" There was a strange, but yet seemingly fearless intensity on Louie's face. "I just decided," Louie said. "I have to go back to LA first, but you must -- yes, you must do it now. Give me your address."

Lucien recited his address, and Louie said, "OK, I'll remember. It'll be soon." Louie stepped out into the roadway to flag down the car. The car, a rickety old Buick with dented chrome, slowed to a stop. Inside Lucien could see the curious, peering faces of a teenage couple, the girl and boy no more than sixteen. "Go," Louie said, "and wait for me." Lucien climbed in the car. He watched the profile of his friend fade back along the road in the dust. The boy asked Lucien in a guarded and polite tone where he was going. "As far as you can take me," Lucien said.

He was waiting by the highway for his next ride. It was early afternoon, and he was somewhere along route 99 in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley. He was alone, but he was not afraid any more. He was on his way home. He had to do what Louie had told him; Louie had given him confidence, though he was unsure what his next move should be. What did Louie mean about the "forces?" It was as if every event seemed to be working itself out, as if time was sweeping him in an inexorable and predetermined course. The night was over; he had gone through his last night of fear and perplexity. He was serene and at peace with himself. There were many cars on the highway; he had the sense, the queer sense, that

the next one would stop to pick him up.

A blue Volkswagen came chugging to a halt along the asphalt shoulder of the highway. It was a sign. Someone of great consequence had stopped for him. He walked casually upto the car. A young woman stared at him from the driver's seat. She gave him a cordial smile.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Berkeley."

"Can I ride?"

She nodded.

"Yes," Lucien thought to himself, "she is the one." The forces, whatever they were, had designated her for him. "I'm grateful for the lift," Lucien said. "You must be brave. A single girl in a car doesn't usually stop for a man."

"You looked nice," the young woman said, "and besides, I wated to have somebody to talk with. My name's June, what's yours?"

Lucien studied her with care. She was attractive in appearance, a fair, opaline complexion with dark fawn's eyes and bobbed black hair. She wore a loose-fitting ivory blouse and matching shorts that left bare her smooth and chunky legs. She kept her hands steady at the wheel. There was something extraordinary, magical -- he believed -- about her showing up when she did.

He learned that she was a student, majoring in history, at the University of California, and, most significantly that she was Jewish. She was the other half of him, and that was why she had an unspoken allurements, an opaque power within her. Somehow she was the key to his odd predicament; she was a mediator of

his destiny. He savored the presentiment. She had come to him for a special purpose, though undoubtedly she herself was not conscious of her own role. She would listen to him, and she would understand; she would help him communicate the message inside him.

Before she let him off, he asked her out for the following weekend, the eighth of April. "Alright," she said, "I'd like that very much."

"I'll call you and work out the details," he said. She smiled at him as she drove off.

Now he understood. The vision, Elaine, Father Weston, the light in the desert, Louie, the "old ones", the girl. It all connected in an uncanny way. The connection itself was not explicit, but he knew -- he knew. He was not simply crazy. The impact of the revelation itself was so strong it left him to court insanity, but his anguish had not been a mere vanity. His anguish had driven him to an awareness of the incredible fact that he was the one who would proclaim what the world was keenly awaiting, what the forces had disposed. He wondered if he could really bear the insufferable weight of such a fact. She would help him, she would understand.

He was the one. The prospect was terrifying, yet he would do what had to be done.

The next day he went back to work. Loomis was muttering to himself about a feature in one of the San Francisco newspapers. "The hippies," he grunted. "They call them hippies, you know. Interesting weirdos. Music and drugs. Somebody from here ought to look into them -- would make a good story."

Lucien smiled. "I could write about them," he said. "They're so different than the rest of us, they might understand."

"Understand what?" Loomis yapped.

"Whatever it is that's coming."

Loomis gave him a queer look. "Coming? Did you get too much sun in the desert?"

"It wasn't the sun," Lucien said. "It was the forces, the old ones, the spirit moving --"

At his desk, he stared at the roll of blank newsprint beside his typewriter. Dozens of press releases had piled up for him to rewrite, but he could manage no words. His mind was sated with other concerns. As he sat and meditated, he heard Loomis cursing under his breath.

Soon Barney came up. "Lucien, welcome back. A good rest? I have an assignment, especially for you." Straightening his greased hair with his palm, Barney chirruped, "a Mrs. Nisbet -- she lives up on Mt. Tamalpais. Last night, she claims, she saw these lights gliding over the mountain. Says they were there for about twenty minutes. I checked with the sheriff. They got several calls on the phenomenon. A local UFO story. Want to interview her and check it out?"

Lucien felt a twinge of terror and amazement. "So it was," he thought to himself, "that they've come here. They've followed me. Yes, they must want to communicate." No, it was all too absurd. "OK," he said to Barney, "I'll check it out for you."

He drove to the address that Barney had given him. The address was high up Mt. Tamalpais on a deserted, private road overrun

with pyrocantha thickets and low, swooping branches of trees. The house itself was an ancient, sprawling stucco building with a red painted veranda that jutted all the way out to the drive, the kind the rancheros built in the nineteenth century. On the front door was a mammoth, brass knocker, which made vibrations through the wall as he rapped. There was no answer, except a small dog which immediately set off behind the door with frenetic yipping. Lucien knocked again. The little dog became more savage in his barking. And then Lucien heard another sound, a sustained, high-pitched keen which came from out of the forest behind the house. Lucien grew frightened. Looking about, he saw no cars in the drive. It was more than he could take. Perhaps they were coming for him. He drove away as fast as he could go. He told Barney that the woman was not at home. "Check later," Barney said.

In the late afternoon the clouds gathered and it began to rain. The rain trickled and spattered outside his window, while he thought to himself: "Am I going mad? Or are there forces -- are they driving me --- where?"

That night he was unable to sleep. Every ten minutes or so he would wake up with a sudden and strange suspicion of invisible presences lurking in the darkness of his room. And he remembered the exploding light over the desert. What did it all mean?

Gladly, he welcomed the morning. He ate his breakfast slowly. There was nothing in the San Francisco newspaper about the UFO sighting. He breathed a sigh.

Loomis was grinning at him when he walked into the office. "I got the story, the flying saucer lady. She thinks she sees a lot of things up on that mountain."

The rain struck at midday with inclement fury. Lucien gazed out the window on to the street, where the rain slashed into the gray puddles. He could not keep his mind on his work. Loomis was out on assignment, and Barney had absented himself for some reason. He decided to go home. If Barney asked tomorrow where he had been, Lucien would say he was pursuing leads to a new story.

Home in his dark apartment, he sat for a moment on the couch, his ears averted to the constant hiss of the rain. The rain was interminable.

All at once he remembered the letter he had written to Elaine. Had she written back? He went to his mailbox to see. There was an envelope, on which he recognized her script. His hand quaked as he sliced open the envelope with his finger. The letter was dated April 4, and said:

Dear Lucien,

I must admit your letter caught me by surprise. I was expecting you to call some time, but I did not anticipate your contacting me in this form. You've told me your honest feelings, although I wish you had said them outright. Let me begin by telling you that I am not in love with Imad; I've suggested this before, but I want to reaffirm it. I don't know where you saw me with Imad. Imad is a friend, only a friend. That's the truth. Of course, he is forward and even affectionate with me at times, but it is the affection of friendship, comradeship.

I'm terribly sorry about what happened to you. I wasn't at Guy's house that night, and I wish you hadn't presumed it. His neighborhood is very rough, and I'm happy you weren't hurt badly. I guess I really don't know what to say. I suppose you would want me to feel sorry for you, but you insist that I should do more -- love you. Lucien, someone like myself who isn't sure exactly what love means--- I've said it before, I can't really love you the way you want me to. How can love be forced? Lucien, I like you. I like you very much, but there's something about you which frankly scares me. I can't put my finger on it. It's your

intensity, I guess, and what you're after exactly makes me draw back. Certainly you will be able, if you keep on, to find a woman who can give you what you want, but it can't be me. The one whom I am willing to love has not come my way yet, and I will continue on with my work, my business, until that happens. I know I am probably hurting you, but it's better that you be hurt now, than we both be hurt irreparably in the long haul. You speak about telling me the "truth", but what is the truth? The truth is that we've only been friends. I'm sorry you've experienced jealousy, but your jealousy comes from your own obsessions and imaginings. Perhaps you make love too much of a thing, and for me, it's not that much. It's only one thing among many, and right now, it's of less importance than other things. I hope you can understand. I'm always glad to see you, and-- well, it's late at night already. I have to close now. I hope you can work it out with yourself.

Sincerely,
Elaine.

He crumpled the letter and threw it into a puddle outside in the rain. It was all over -- he recognized that now. But somehow the shock was not very great. The days would go on. He thought about his date with June on Saturday, and he realized he still had another opportunity. It was all very odd. He had no real love for June, not even an infatuation. She was simply another excursus in the wider account of his life. Yet he had a special interest in her. His interest transcended any amorous feelings he might have harbored toward her. She was to be his helpmate in a venture that would shake the world at its very foundations.

June resided in a student dormitory on the university campus. She looked stunning, all dressed up in a beige skirt and paisley blouse of red and bluish hues. He took her to supper at the Ratskellar, then to a coffee house upstairs in a building on one of the sidestreets. The lights inside were turned down low. Throughout the evening he had been struck how she kept harping

on what she called "my Jewish dilemma." She never spelled out the dilemma. It had something to do with her cultural identity as a Jew who had, nonetheless, lost all sympathy for her religious heritage.

"You know, I'm half Jewish," he told her proudly.

"Oh, so you should know," she said.

She mentioned the "crisis" that was unfolding with respect to Israel. "They shot down six Syrian planes today, and I'm afraid there's going to be a terrible war."

Lucien monitored her utterings and facial expressions. She was quite reserved, passionless, though she stated the political issue vigorously. Lucien was not at all concerned at this point with the International dilemmas. He was curious how she might be feeling about him, for that was everything which mattered. But she gave no clue to her feelings. Friendly as she was, she remained rather aloof, abstracted.

As they sipped hot coffee, he asked: "have you ever wondered what you're going to do with your life?" The question seemed rather sophomoric to him, even though he had said it; but it was a way of pricking the conversation.

"Many times," she said. "I think I want to teach. Maybe teach in a Jewish school."

"But what would you teach?"

"History, literature, culture."

"But how can you teach the culture without the religion?"

"You can't," she said smiling, "but religion is a part of culture; it's part of the heritage."

"But do you believe in it?" he asked pointedly.

"No, I can't really believe in it for myself. But I don't count on belief so much. It's the Jewish thing, plain and simple. You ought to understand that."

She dropped her eyes and took another sip of the coffee.

"But,--- oh, I guess I can't go along with you entirely. I'm half Jewish, I've said, but it's just the genes inside me. It doesn't make any more sense than that."

"Then you haven't studied it enough," she said.

"No, no," he blurted. "It has a meaning, but the meaning goes beyond all that's past. Listen, my mind has been running in all directions lately. Last week I was in the desert. Have you ever been to the desert?"

"A few times," she said, "but --- what's the point?"

"The point is that in the desert everything comes clear. The stillness, it's everywhere. It was in the stillness that the first word came to our people, and the word was powerful -- it changed history."

"I don't understand."

"No, maybe you can't. I don't really know what I'm talking about all that much myself, but I have this compulsion. I want you to help me work it out. I think the word has come."

Her face was immobile; she hardly reacted to what he had said.

"I don't really know what you mean," she said apologetically.

"No? Listen, let me tell you a parable." He was not sure exactly what he was prepared to say. The idea, the parable had come to him in flashes in recent days.

"A story, listen, it's about our history, our lives. We're striving for some knowledge that's vain and empty. We're struggling to speak words to each other that are silly, futile, and we go on working toward some distant goal that we haven't even defined. We work in service of an idol that cannot save us in the end. Culture, humanity, our people -- what are they all but idols? We don't hear the word among each of us.

" Listen, once upon a time there lived a boy and his father on a farm somewhere out in the wilderness. The mother had died long ago, and the father compelled the boy to work hard, clearing the forest off the land with his axe so that there could be more space for cash crops. The boy resented the severe tasks his father demanded of him; he remembered that things had been easier when his mother was alive, but that was long past. When not having to work, the boy would slip away to the forest where the tall trees grew. Happily, he would idle in the cool darkness of the forest, and he would talk to the trees and the birds, who were his intimate friends. They spoke in a language which was not human, but which he could understand nevertheless. In the middle of the forest grew a giant tree, many times taller than all the other trees of the forest. He loved that tree. The wind in its branches sighed deep and inexpressible things, and the tree would tell him all he needed to know about life. It was his refuge, the oracle of his secret knowledge. He would listen to the voice of the trees for hours, until he would hear his father call, loudly and sternly, to come out of the forest and return to work.

"One day his father did not call. Curious, the boy stole back to his father's house. It was a chill winter's day. The boy discovered his father lying on a mat beside the fireplace, which was cold and without logs. The father beckoned the boy to come

close, and he said, 'son, I'm very old now, and I'm about to die.' The boy stood, horror-stricken, without knowing what to do; he felt both love and hate, pity and contempt, for the father who had driven him all his life. The father went on: 'before I die, I would like to have a last fire to warm my bones and soul. We have no logs, but there is out in the forest a tall and beautiful tree whose wood will burn for hours until I finally shut my eyes. Go and procure the wood from that tree.

"The boy was stunned and frightened, but without arguing he took the axe and went to the tree. The tree stood before him, moaning in its branches, and whispering its wordless speech to him. Dutifully, he raised the axe, and he was about to swing when a strange event occurred. Out from behind the tree stepped a young girl. She blinked, and smiled at him. The boy drew back in terror. 'Who are you?' the boy asked. 'And why do you stand in the way of what I'm about to do?' The girl replied, 'don't be afraid. I've been wandering in these woods all the years of my life. I have known about you, but you have not seen me, and now-- now I come to you so that we may know each other.' The boy trembled. In a rage he shouted, 'I have come to do my father's will, his last request,' and hoisting the axe, he swung it first at the young girl and then at the great tree. He swung again and again until he had killed both the girl and the great tree. Then he chopped the fallen tree into logs and carried them back to his father's house.

"But when he arrived there, he discovered his father was already dead. Frightened and confused, he fled into the forest. He tried to talk to the trees for solace, but they would not answer him. The trees and the birds were now silent. The next day a great fire came and burned down the entire forest."

June gaped at him in the pallid light of the room. Her eyes fixed on him, graven as two jewels in a locket. She seemed to have no answer for him. Had she grasped the import of the parable?

"It's a story I didn't choose -- it chose me," he said with impatience. "It's as though it were all written out, on a letterpress, in the closet of my intuitions."

Measuredly drawing the last sip of her coffee, she said very softly, "it's all a bit odd."

"No, it's very straightforward," he exclaimed. "The problem is always with what's right under our noses, like a pair of spectacles, which we never see, because it's too much there."

"What?" she asked, now a bit querulously. "This whatever it is?"

"It's the word, the word of our own voices, which we neither speak nor hear. It's in our midst."

Suddenly he felt an eerie presence alongside him. He turned around to see an old woman with a pug face standing there. Unspeaking, she held up to him a hand-lettered sign: "I am deaf and dumb. Give what you will." Amazed, Lucien stared at the old woman, who glowered back at him like a ghost in a mirror. Finally, he reached in his pocket and gave her a half-dollar. The old woman nodded appreciatively, bowed, and vanished. Lucien turned to June. "That old woman --- why was she here?"

June shook her head slowly. "What old woman?"

"The old woman, the one who couldn't hear or speak, she was begging --"

The waitress was just here," June said. Pointing in the direction of a young girl with jets of blonde hair, who was wiping the table across from them. "But an old woman?"

Lucien was aghast. "An old woman! I saw an old woman. I gave her a fifty-cent piece."

"You were just fiddling in your pocket," June said. "What are you talking about?"

"No," Lucien whined, "it was an old woman I saw. She must be here." Frantically, he scanned the room, but the old woman was nowhere in view.

"It must have been a sign. I saw her, I tell you. I'm not a madman."

"A sign?" June inquired, her tone of voice becoming somewhat testy. "What is it a sign of?"

"A sign -- that has come to us. Oh, I'm not really sure. It's all so strange. Sometimes I wonder if somebody is driving me over the edge, or --"

June smiled weakly. "Of course not," she said, finishing her coffee. "Anyway, I ought to be going back. I have studying to do, and I did like your little story."

"I'd like to talk to you some more about what you think about -- Judaism and all that," he said as he escorted her to the dormitory.

"Yes, I would too," she said.

"Could we get together again? Next weekend?"

After pondering a moment, she said, "OK, I'm not busy. When?"

"Saturday night again."

"OK."

"We can go over to the city. Dinner and a play?"

"Alright," she said. "Well, goodnight." He watched her tiptoe up the stairs and out of sight.

Driving home, he agonized in his mind. Why had he been the

only one to see the old woman? Was she a spirit, an emissary from the forces? He shuddered. He remembered the vision again. It was not right that he had seen what he did. It was obvious that he was being beguiled, but for what end? He had the overpowering sensation that his time was gaining momentum and his life verging on a decision from which he could not turn back.

Back in his apartment he was greeted by the cat, Emery. The cat had been cooped up in the apartment all evening, and wanted attention. He had not paid attention to the cat for a long while, but tonight he felt a very warm attachment to the animal. The cat nestled its head in his armpit and purred with abandon. Then he set the cat down and opened the door for it to go out.

Relaxing, he unbuttoned his shirt and sunk onto the couch. He noticed his Bible, which he had not read in months, opened on the coffee table. He did not remember having opened it. Thumbing through the Bible quickly and cursorily, he came once more to the last book, the Revelation to John. He read from the beginning:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God... and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near...

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty..."

'....I will come to you soon and war against them with the word of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.'

He continued to read about the angels with the trumpets, the sign of the woman in the sky, the devastation of Babylon. It all

seemed a cosmic fantasy, a cinematic spectacle in words without any durable significance. His mind meandered, then a while later he came to a passage that seized his attention again.

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself.

"The name known only to himself," Lucien thought, "the unknown one who is to come. Yes, he would be unknown. But ---"

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water without price from the fountain of the water of life. He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God...."

....There shall not be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face...."

He thought, "they shall see his face. Yes, God will be among them. And they shall see his face." He had seen the face in the fire, the face of a woman. Of course, it was the eternal face. Hidden behind every face was the fire and glory of God. In every face is hidden the face of God, the God who is with us, and who was, and who is to come!

Out into the night he ran. He thought, "the Word is about to be spoken. It is the purpose and power of history, and poised

to crash like a bombshell into the silence. Yet, few can yet hear the word, for they are timid, having cocoons around their brains, they have not heeded the power within themselves, or listened to the word as it crackles and sputters in every human voice; the word of flesh, the word of man addressed to woman and woman to man, the word from the fire. He had seen the face of God, in the face of the woman he loved, who herself burned with fire, if only, if only, she could love --. The fire raged in his soul; it scoured every petty anxiety and hatred clean; it cauterized the curse that had been upon him.

"I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last --" The phrases shattered his head like a rifle blast. "The New Jerusalem -- prepared as a bride." In the marriage bed, the reunion of eternal faces, the absent mother resurrected as the woman he might love, who would speak the word of love, faithful and true, until death.

The night was clear, and in the woods nearby he could hear the thunderous chirring of the crickets, and somewhere -- somewhere in the infinite, omnivorous darkness, the twittering of a nightbird. He had heard the nightbird sing before, once -- once as a song, as a sign pregnant with all the powers of the universe. Looking up at the sky, he marvelled at the marquee of twinkling stars, havening the dusky horizon. The stars were illimitable, and now -- now he felt a joy, a triumph that was illimitable as well. He stumbled off into the forest. The twigs and leaves beneath his feet snapped and crumpled with resounding joy. "A name inscribed which no one knows but himself -- the time is near -- and death shall be no more -- and the sea -- the restless sea of human striving and faithlessness -- shall be no more -- and he shall wipe away

every tear from their eyes."

He wept with joy. The moment was at hand. Two thousand years had elapsed, and now it was time. The idea was utterly insane, yet he could no longer deny it. A new thousand years had just commenced, a thousand years when God would appear in a thousand faces, and even if the world would fragment and hurtle into chaos, even if man destroyed the earth on which he dwelled, God would prevail, the God of a thousand faces, the Alpha and the Omega. God would be in man and woman, holding hands, treading the way of the new thousand years, no longer estranged from God, as it had been at the beginning. The broken image restored, the face of God in every face that beheld another face --, smiling, loving, speaking the truth, naked their bodies in the world, yet entwined together as the power that has bound together as the power that has bound the race, and will ever bind the race, until the stars fade out. He was the last man of the old world, but also the first of the new world, the new heaven and the new earth, mind and body, man and woman, rooted and bound together as all life is rooted and bound in the earth from which it sprung, conscious -- conscious of themselves as the two faces of God. Man and woman, woman and man, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, birth and death, suffering and resurrection. They would no longer flee the face of God -- no longer ashamed, no longer fearful, no longer staggering along the dusty and unending trail of history -- for it was time now, the time of the end, the end of all that has been. The God of the end time, who is, and was, and is to come, the Almighty.

In the enclosing darkness of the woods he heard a humming sound, the threnody of a fly swarm, though a thousand times louder. Staggering toward the sound, he cried out, an involuntary,

exultant cry which erupted with the very joy he felt. And then he looked up. It was the sound of power lines strung out above the branches of the trees, its hum saturating the pores of the night. It was the power, the energy, of the place, the time, powerful, concentrated, life-rewarding. And then he heard another sound, the gurgling of a brook spurtling in the starlight; and he bent down to splash his face with the cool, tingling water, as the sounds of the night ^rushed on. "It's time," he mumbled to himself, "it's time."

He rang June to confirm the time he would pick her up on Saturday. June, however, was suffering from a bad cold, and she suggested they postpone their date until the following week. Even though he had to consent, he was terribly disappointed. He could not bear to wait another week to see her, for he had much more now to tell her. Sunday evening, however, he received an unexpected telephone call. The voice was vaguely familiar, that of Liz Domeshek. "Ted and I have been wondering about you all these months. We found where you were living, and we were wondering whether -- if you might come to dinner at our house a week from today. We'd so much like to see you, and hear about what you've been doing."

Lucien gulped. The last thing he considered these days was a visit with the Domesheks. He thought he had erased them from his life for good. But then a notion hit him. Such a visit

might prove therapeutic; it would help him put what was happening to him in perspective.

The succeeding week rolled by uneventfully. He went about his work, came home, ate, read, and slept. Yet he knew that he was only marking time, waiting for the moment when he would have to act. The precise moment depended on his developing relationship with June. He could not do what he had to do alone; he could not expose himself to possible misunderstanding and ridicule, or even failure, if he did not have someone, whom he trusted, to support him. But he was certain now he had a mission, to disclose what without qualification had to be made. The time was weighing ponderously on him; it was mounting toward a climax.

At last Saturday arrived; it was raining again. Throughout the day the rain had come down in white, winding sheets, though by evening it had diminished somewhat, and the night was transfused with an invisible mist that clung to his face. June was radiant in appearance, but she hacked with a persistent cough, the vestige of last week's cold. He had purchased tickets for a play in San Francisco, a contemporary drama entitled The Outer Limits. Prior to the play he intended to have dinner with her in a small, moderately priced French restaurant. The meal was quite elegant. June ordered chicken cordon bleu, and she smiled with delight at each mouthful. As they dined, she chattered on about trifles -- about a wearisome professor she had for an English course, her father's business, her work in a local Jewish community center. He realized what a simple person she was in one sense, the bald antithesis of himself with his quandries and longings. Perhaps, he considered, that was good; anyway, he felt confident she would understand, as soon as he revealed all to her.

"It's funny," he said. "Don't you think it's funny how we came together just when we did?"

She replied nonchalantly, "not really, or at least I hadn't thought of it that way. I have picked up men on the road before."

"But why? You know it's dangerous."

"Not always," she said. "I'm a pretty good judge of people's faces."

He chuckled: "what did you see in mine?"

"Somebody kind and earnest, somebody without malice."

He laughed aloud. "Actually the opposite."

She shrugged, and swallowing a final mouthful of her meal, she said, "you looked OK."

"But there was something else about our meeting. You see, I had this unexplainable feeling it was you who was going to stop, just that instant."

"A coincidence."

"No, not just a coincidence. You see, there's a lot about me you probably don't realize. I can't spell out all the details. When you picked me up, I was on my way home to do something that isn't ordinary. I was going to -- well -- tell something to the world, about some experiences I've had."

"You were going to write a novel?"

"Hardly. I was going to -- well, to proclaim -- oh, dammit, I don't really know how to say it."

All she could do was stare at him, tranquilly and bemused, as if she would allow him to say anything. Yet, at the same time, she did not appear to have the capacity for understanding as he had hoped. Her face remained a white slate, a sweet and impenetrable smile on her faint lips, her eyelashes fluttering lazily as the

gossamer wings of a mayfly. "Well, possibly," she said, "you'll find a way."

The play failed to start on time. They waited in the balcony of the hushed theatre until finally the curtain went up. It was difficult for him to follow the drift of the dialogue and action. The play was one of those contemporary pieces, cast on a shadow-drenched stage, where the actors strut and posture about the creeping incoherence of modern vision, the bankruptcy of belief, and the ineffectuality of action. In the last scene the actors lined up before the audience and implored that someone unravel the meaning of it all for them.

"That was rather depressing," June lamented as they filed out of the theater. The play had affected Lucien otherwise. Not at all was it depressing, he thought, for it was just another sign. An answer -- they asked for an answer.

Once in the car, he knew that he could not continue to make allusions to her anymore. It was time he laid out everything about himself, and what his interest in her consisted of. "Alright," he said, "you have to know what's going on. You see, it has to do with the way I see things, how they hang together. You're Jewish; my mother was Jewish; I've told you that. The Jews have been the suffering servants of history, the bearers of the meaning of history. For they're the ones who've had to carry the message, the word, the one that we haven't realized. It says somewhere that they're a light to the nations. But no one has really seen the light until now. Why is that? Because they haven't known what the light was. The Jews were looking for a messiah; what they didn't realize was they were the messiah themselves, if you know what I mean -- as a people, together with their common experience. So they kept on

waiting, and thy've waited for thousands of years. Some of them got impatient, and this man Jesus came along, and some of them believed he was the messiah. He came among them; they thought he might be God, but after a while he left them. They claimed he was resurrected, that he was with them in spirit, but after a time his spirit withdrew from them. And how could he be the messiah himself, alone, anyway? How could one man save the world? It was too much for him. They expected him to come back, but the years wore on, and nothing happened. They forgot what he was really like, so they fashioned an idol of him, just as we hang portraits of some venerable ancestor who nobody really remembers.. He's not there to speak, to laugh in their faces, to correct them, so they can imagine anything they want about him; they can even say he still saves people from "sin." They thought he was the light, and he was, I guess, for a time, but his light's gone out, and people are looking for a new one, to light the dark stage in the final act. Don't you see? The Jews are still here, and they're carrying the light, though it's very weak. I've seen it flickering. I saw it flickering as the torch of my mother, and then I lost sight of it, as a ship captain loses track of a beacon in the fog. The Jews, they possess a revelation, and the Christians, they've got part of it, but neither one has all of it. It says in Revelation, I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come. He's one with a name that only he knows, and for the most part he's unknown. The light -- it's still to come. It's burning, burning in a crevice of the darkness we can't yet see, and you and I, we're part of it. We're the ones who can make the light burn for everybody else. That's why I felt strange when I met you, June.. It was destined, that you would be the one to help me light the

way out of the darkness for all mankind."

June shook her head incredulously. "What are you talking about?" she gasped. "Your words -- they just flow on, and I'm not sure what you have in mind. You say I'm the one to help you, but I'm not the one. I'm not religious, don't you see, I'm Jewish. And my Jewishness is not something fantastic, it's ordinary. It's being part of my people. I'm sorry I can't help you."

He stared at her with stifled incredulity. He had expected her to be thoroughly sympathetic, especially when he lay bare the particulars of his mission. How could she be so obtuse? Dumfounded, he started to say, "It's the light between us, the man and woman about us. Don't you --"

"I think I'd better go home, " she said with cool resolution. "I'm sorry I can't help."

Now he was beside himself; he had come to the end of his options, it seemed. She had uttered the final "no," the last renunciation of all he represented in his own eyes. She was as deaf and dumb as the old woman in the apparition.

The rain poured on the streets as he drove. The windshield wipers clicked and swished in the scuttles of water. Every few minutes he would glance over at her. She stared, her eyes shining like moonstone, out into the rain and the city lights, blurred by the splotches of rain on the windshield, strained to keep from crying. Of course, he had expected her perhaps to have some doubts, never to compass his ideas and his plans altogether; but all along he had been sure, unquestionably sure, that he could win her over to his cause. Now he did not know which way to turn. Her silence tortured him. Had he been wrong all along?

Was he indeed touched with a kind of lunacy? No, he still nurtured doubts about himself, and the presence of those doubts confirmed his own sense of sanity. His thoughts and feelings were not disconnected; they converged on one persuasive, though fantastic, intuition. But the intuition itself was awesome. Could he in reality be the custodian of such an overlarge truth, a truth which undermined the convenient assumptions of two thousand years of religion and culture? In his own dispossessed soul he cried out for some sort of guidance.

Walking her to the door, he said, "I'm sorry I might have upset you.

She replied, "no, don't worry about it. I need to think over what you've said."

But he realized she would not see him again. The episode was finished.

Sunday morning he awoke before the glimmerings of dawn. A tonnage of humiliation freighted his brain. In the smothering darkness his body thrashed about in the bedsheets, as his consciousness came clear and he recognized where he was and what time it happened to be. At first he found himself powerless to face the morning. His mind was a burnt-out fuse that had failed to detonate. Then, slowly, he drew himself together, sufficiently at least to read the newspaper. There were the familiar accounts about the tedious Southeast Asia conflict, some new items concerning the rumblings of war in the Middle East, and a feature on the bizarre weather that had been going on that winter and spring in the Bay Area. Besides the heavy and unrelenting rain, there had been some other unusual happenings, including "mysterious flashes of light from atop Mt. Diable," the "mount of the devil" in Spanish. The last item arrested

him. A sign. Yes, the world was replete with signs, everyday tokens of an essential mystery which he had inadvertently uncovered, as in the case of the man who falls into a crevice and discovers a cave with hidden booty. He had not failed. The signs were inescapable. "Oh my God, my God," he groaned to himself.

Liz Domeshek had spread the table with her finest crocheted tablecloth, in spindle and trapezoid patterns, together with elegant pewter plates and silver cutlery with aquamarine handles; and she had cooked a lamb roast which, she tittered, "is always a man's favorite." Still, the aroma of the roasting lamb nauseated him for some reason. His nausea increased as Liz blathered about her Bible study circle, which this month had taken up reading Colossians, as well as the fund drive for the internal renovation of the church sanctuary, which would involve the fabrication and installation of a new, modernesque cross. "It would be beautiful," she said concerning the cross. "Some of the members want chrome, but I prefer good wood. You can't have a metal cross."

After the meal, Liz brought out a chocolate layer cake, which she said she had baked "just for this occasion." Suddenly, as they ate, she said, "and by the way, I really liked your young lady. Do you still see her?"

Ted, having said little during the evening, shifted in his seat.

"I'm sorry to say, we broke up some months ago," Lucien said.

"Oh, what a pity. She was so nice. Didn't you think so, Ted?"

Ted Domeshek nodded perfunctorily, slashing with his fork at his final cake crumbs.

"I wish you could have maybe gotten married, but -- that's your business. I hope you find another girl as sweet as she was."

"I hope so too," Lucien said.

"Tell me," Liz said, "I've been curious as to your job. I understand you're a newspaper reporter. That must be exciting."

Lucien politely explained to her the details and routines of his present occupation, implying that lately it had become rather tedious.

"Well, you don't have to work at it all your life," Liz said. "You know, Ted and I have thought all along your calling might be in the ministry. Your father would have liked that, I'm sure. And you always were so involved in our church. I'm sorry we haven't seen more of you lately. But the ministry -- that would be a fine occupation, if you ever decide to quit what you're doing now. I know the church would support you in seminary."

The queasiness in Lucien's stomach had changed into a wrenching pain, much like severe indigestion. It was as though a great, invisible hand were squeezing his diaphragm. "I hadn't really thought about that," Lucien said. "I'm not sure it's my cup of tea."

"Well, you should know yourself," Liz said, "but I think it would be grand. You could do so much and serve so well."

"Maybe, but --"

"Don't let me change the subject," Ted put in, "but did you know there's an eclipse of the moon tonight? About eleven o'clock, so I read somewhere."

"Oh, yes," Liz said to Lucien. "That'll be interesting."

"We'll see it if it doesn't rain," Ted muttered. "So much of this rain we've had since -- it seems like since last August. Strange weather. Might drive a man crazy. I hope we can see it."

"I'll look for it," Lucien said. And then he wondered to himself. It was the twenty-second of April. There was nothing unusual

about the twenty-second of April. He remembered the report of lights on the mountain, the pathos of the night before; it was the conclusive sign, he thought. Yes, this was the night. But the night for what? Could it be the night when he would have to carry out his design? He thought, the night of the eclipse of the moon, when the great light in the sky goes out, and --.

The pain in his gut grew ever more intense; it seemed to be ripping his very body open.

"I know you like religion," Liz purred. "It ought to be your occupation. Tell me, you don't favor a chrome cross, do you?"

His stomach was on the verge of breaking with pain. "This is the sign, and the forces, the forces penetrating my mind and body; they won't let me be, they'll force me, tonight."

Ted was saying something about "the so-called hippies." He said, "you've been reading about them, over in that part of the city called Haight-Ashbury. Filthy people. Allsorts of drugs and loose sex, and they never wash their bodies. It's enough to make a man's stomach turn. Somebody ought to preach them the good word."

"Yes, they are the ones... Tonight, go to the Haight-Ashbury. The moonstruck children of a dying society. They will listen. They will be the ones who will follow. Tonight, at the time the moon turns dark."

"I have to be going," Lucien said excitedly. "I'm sorry, I don't feel too well, and --"

"And what?" Ted asked, flabbergasted with a slight hint of irritation.

"I don't know. I want to thank you two for the dinner."

Liz looked at him with wounded sentimentality. "You liked my dinner, I hope?"

"Of course," Lucien said, grimacing from the ache. "It was wonderful, but something's come up."

"Maybe some hot tea would help."

"No. I must go," and he flew out the door, as he heard Liz declare behind him, "what is it with that boy?"

Toward home he drove, hardly conscious of his road along which he sped. He was thinking, "the forces are driving me there. I can't do it, not by myself, alone. No, I will not go, not tonight." The pain worsened. "It's the fire, the fire unquenchable, until I say, until I say."

He was crossing the San Rafaël Bridge high above the waters of the bay. He checked his watch. It was four twenty-one in the afternoon. The girders of the bridge whizzed past in a blur, and through them he could make out the sparkling, blue Bay down below, and a cargo ship floating at anchor, and on the horizon frothing rivers of fog flushed through the Golden Gate from the expansive ocean beyond.

"The time has come. The world groaning toward its transformation. The coming. Christ has come. Christ has come out of hiding. No one himself is the Christ. The face of God illumined in the other. We are all Christs to each other."

It was the first time he had articulated the truth to himself in such a way, that he had unveiled it. That was the liberating message, the meaning of what he had intended all along. The face in the fire, the living God, his search for recognition from another who would love him so they might consecrate their lives together. No one could love him, not yet, because he had not proclaimed the message, that we are all Christs to each other, the second Coming,

the final epiphany of history, happening now, in the fullness of time. It had been not possible to comprehend or broadcast such a truth until now. "I will go. I will do it." In that immeasurable instant he exploded with joy.

And then he noticed his watch. The dial read four twenty-two. The second hand had frozen in place. The time of the watch had stopped, the tiny contrivance having ceased to run. The pain flowed away, emptying from his body, like a dam that has burst, sending into the valley below. And he felt a staggering kind of peace, a victory..

He would go that night and issue his proclamation. He would be the one to return from two thousand years in triumph, yet, ironically, announcing that he was only one of a myriad who would so return.

His first impulse was to locate the old man. It was important he tell the old man what he was going to do. But how to find the old man? He drove onto the seminary grounds. Along a quiet, curling lane stood rows of two-story houses with black-brown, creosote shingle siding. At the first house he tried, a young woman with flaxen hair in braids answered the door. Unassumingly and tactfully, he described the elderly gentleman of whom he was in search. "Ah, yes," she said in a chopping, Germanic accent, "that's Dr. Mueller, three houses down."

At the second house he was greeted by a gentle, old woman, Dr. Mueller's wife. "Yes, he's in," she said softly. "And you are?"

He introduced himself.

"Just a minute," she said, after going away for an instant, she invited him to come in.

The old man, Dr. Mueller, was ensconced in a straight-backed arm chair, his spectacles drooping over his nose, he was reading a fat volume with an embossed title in Greek. "Well, well," he said with friendly crustiness, "what brings you here? You found my hiding place."

"Yes," Lucien said meekly, and he undertook to recount all that had transpired, especially the peculiar events during the past hour. Dr. Mueller peered at Lucien down his spectacles, and squinting with a solemn concentration, he at last commented, "you probably know what you're doing, but don't go off the deep end."

"Do you think I'm going off the deep end?" Lucien asked, tensely.

Dr. Mueller smiled, "no, not entirely. You've heard unspeakable things spoken, it seems, and you must abide with them. You must trust your intuitions, but I say, be careful, that's all."

"Should I go then, tonight?"

"You must decide," the old man said in a forthright manner.

"You alone know what you've seen and heard."

Soon, thanking Dr. Mueller, Lucien started to go, but the old man called to him gently from behind, "come back and let me know. I'm always here."

Lucien returned to his apartment. His mind could not support the weight of his idea for now, and so he fell asleep. Awaking, he discovered it was night. He looked out his window at the moon, a gleaming bangle in the black vacancy of the beyond. He could accept now what he had to do. He went to the city, down to the mysterious quarter called Haight-Ashbury which he had heard so much about and which suggested strange, bawdy behavior in dark conventicles. Parking his car on a side street, he made his way

through an undulating mass of young people -- boys with hair teased like that of girls, and young, scrawny women in a shadowy marquetry of witches' faces. The main street was illumined with the lights of open shops whose stalls brimmed with cheap costume jewelry, leather goods, and glass-bead necklaces. Somewhere a tambourine was jangling and he could hear the low radio caterwauling a popular song by Diana Ross -- The Happening.

Then, as he stood, half-hypnotized in the faint light and din of the street, he was aware of a shadow leaning against the wall of an alley adjoining the street several doors away. Curious, he stepped toward the shadow. The visage of a pimpled girl with ratted dark hair loomed in the sparse glow which trickled from the shops into the alleyway. She had a spreading, manic smile on her face, and she whispered to him in the dark, "Boy, who are you looking for?"

It appeared she might be a prostitute, but her style was different. Her voice had a grating twang, and it quickly became obvious she was not retailing favors. "Who are you, boy?" she asked insistently.

He went up to her. "I'm Lucien. Do you want me?"

"Not you. Just what you represent," and she broke into a cackle.

Lucien felt rather foolish. "What do I represent?" he pressed with irritation.

"Boy, you're Mister Moneybags, no?"

"No, I'm not."

"Then I was looking for somebody else. Strange shapes and forms haunt around here at night."

"Can I help you in any way?"

"Yea, tell me who you are, boy?"

A rush of excitement went through him. She was testing him -- that was it.

"My name is Lucien," he said, "and I've come to tell something to you and your people that is the beginning, the beginning of --"

"You stutter nicely," she said, chortling. "The beginning of the end of the world? Now come off it."

"You're right in a way," he said, and he invited her to join him in one of the coffeehouses.

"My name's Mary," she said cheerily as they pushed their way through the crowd on the street, "but not Virgin Mary. I'm from Iowa. Ran away from my old parents there. Where are you from?"

"Right around here. The Bay Area."

"Beautiful place. It's the promised land for hick kids like me. Now, boy, what'd you say you were doing out tonight?"

They sat down in one of the coffee houses, and he outlined his mission to her. "You see," he was saying, "it's a strange-sounding phrase. We are all Christs to each other. It's lunacy, but it's what has to be told."

Mary looked at him with innocent intensity. "You know," she said, "some of the people have been saying that around here lately. You're with us."

"Tonight, at the eclipse," he said, "I'll"

"You could get right up on this coffee table and say it," she said. "It's as good a place to begin."

"But where will it get me?" he asked. He sought her guidance at this point.

"Who knows," she said, "but you've got to start somewhere."

Maybe it'll stop the war. Maybe."

Heretofore, the prospect of stopping the war had not entered his mind. But now, instantaneously, the notion ratcheted up into his head. Stop the war? How could he do so? Perhaps now he was in possession of sufficient power. The word itself would exert the necessary power. Its power would first be exhibited that night, by his proclamation. The people would listen, spellbound. And soon a movement would rise and sweep the land. All would be waiting for the Word, and their hearts and minds would be transfigured in a twinkling. They would amass, like clouds of locusts in the heat, and they would carry the word on their threshing wings to the fruition of its destiny. They would anoint him as their prophet, to go before the President, the man with the temporal power to bring the war to a halt, like Isaiah before the king. And he would stand before the great man, and he would pronounce the Word face to face with him. And if the President would ask for a sign, he would reply, "Do you not see? The people are a sign." And the power of God Almighty would be revealed in the whole earth. It would be a stunning event, ushering in the end of history, when the greatest power of all time would become manifest. Was he mad to entertain such a ludicrous project? He could feel the power surging within him, and he was unable to resist it.

"Do you know," asked Mary, "what they're saying also? They say there's a prophet among us who can deliver us. But no one's found such a prophet. They don't know where to look, and their heads are filled with ugly things. Acid, too much acid. They have strange visions, and they don't know what they see."

Lucien just smiled. "They will both hear and see," he said confidently. "Tonight, near midnight, when the moon goes dark."

"Let's go," Mary said. "I have some friends I want you to meet. We can drink our coffee later. We can come back at the hour you speak of."

She led him through the dark streets to a ramshackle, paint-apattered apartment building, and up a creaking flight of stairs to an open door, through which drifted the aroma of frying meat and onions. Inside the apartment they were met by two women and a man, whom Mary introduced, though Lucien did not pay attention to their names. In the kitchen another young man was cooking supper in a large cast-iron frying pan atop a greasy, electric range. He was slicing green peppers into a stir-fry concoction. The young man looked at Lucien and nodded. Mary introduced Lucien, then in a friendly and casual way began to explain everything Lucien had related to her. "Don't you think he's on to something?" she inquired.

The young man continued to stir with lackadaisical strokes. Lucien noticed that the pupils of his eyes were enlarged and filmy. The young man now did not even bother to give them a glance.

"I've heard it said that he would be coming to us," the young man said.

"But do you think Lucien may be the one?"

"Could be."

"Do you understand what he's said?"

The young man made no response, but gazed vacantly into the frying pan.

"C'mon," Mary whispered to Lucien. "He's out of touch. Some zombies we have to live with here." She took him back into the living room. "Wes," Mary called to the other young man, who had seated himself, cross-legged, on a large, torn ochre hassock in a

corner of the room. "I want you to meet the one who's come among us. This boy's named Lucien."

Wes looked up and smiled broadly, a big Cheshire-cat smile.

"Glad you're here, man, " he said.

Lucien was a bit unnerved, perplexed by the casual way in which all of them seemed to know his identity. Could they have been forewarned? There was a weird, abstracted quality to the way they all talked, as if he were simply practicing a script which each of them had themselves written.

"Lucien's going to talk tonight, at one of the coffee houses," Mary said.

"Give 'em the good word man, eh?" Wes said.

Lucien frowned. "Yes, the good word."

"Well, man, we've been waiting for it."

When they had left, Mary said to Lucien, "I don't think they really understand. Everything's out of sight for them. The weird is so common. They get the words, but not the message." She added, "there's a guy around here who can probably help you. His name's Joe Shalom, or that's what they call him. People say he's really in touch, and he might understand. He works at a theater down the street. Maybe tomorrow you can get in touch with him."

Lucien wondered: tomorrow would it matter? The name Shalom meant "peace." It was a fair bet.

Returning to the coffee house, they chatted for quite some time. He liked Mary, though at this point he had no sexual interest in her. She had a subtle ingeniousness, which showed in the manner in which she took eagerly to everything he said. She seemed to trust him, and he trusted her as well. She was a child, yet

a child rapt with her own modest wisdom. He heard it all about her regrettable life in Iowa, a choleric father who valued nothing but money and work, and who had insisted she only marry a well-heeled professional, a lawyer or a bank manager. "He doesn't understand the beautiful things," she said wistfully, "love, spirit, little kids. He's a robot. And so I ran away. He won't find me here."

Lucien smiled at her affectionately.

"But I hope the word comes to him too," she said. "I want him to know what I know. I can forgive him, even though he's been so impossible with me."

Lucien thought to himself, "yes, he too can be redeemed. In the end she will be able to speak with him."

Suddenly, there was a disturbance in the coffee house. A girl came running in, frenzied, but in a mute voice reporting to some of the patrons, "it's the eclipse. The dragons' eating the moon."

Most of the patrons paid no heed, but some got up and began to shuffle out onto the street. And now Lucien knew the decisive moment had arrived, he could enact it in his mind no longer; he would have to act.

"Where shall I stand? Shall I get up?" he asked Mary.

Mary shook her head. "I don't know," she said, somewhat frightened.

More patrons at the next table got up. Lucien was ready. He stood up; he had the words clearly in mind: Christ has come. We are all Christs to each other.

But then, unexpectantly, a horrible sound swelled the air -- a man groaning like a maimed animal, and roaring, "it's not, it's not." Peeking around, Lucien saw a wild-looking man, naked to the waist,

with long, soiled, waddled hair, like that of the legendary harpies, perched on a table across the room. He was picking up chairs and hurling them to the floor, shrieking, "it's not." His voice droned wretchedly, comparable to a tape recorder playing at the lowest speed. "It's not you. It's not any of you."

Lucien sat back down, trembling. "It's a sign," he mumbled to Mary. "It's not the right time. I must wait for Joe Shalom."

He bade good-bye to Mary. She said, "we can meet again, here, perhaps tomorrow night. And then you'll know more."

"Yes, tomorrow night," he said.

The next morning he did not go to work. He did not even call in, but drove back to the Haight-Ashbury in search of Joe Shalom. He tried to envisage this Joe Shalom -- another prophet, similar to himself possibly, but one with a quiet sagacity that only prefigured instead of revealing, a latter-day John the Baptist who preached in the wilderness of decadent America. He had a premonition that Joe would know him right away, that the two would become allies.

Nevertheless, he had some carping doubts. By chance the "sign" he had received in the coffee house the previous evening had been more than an admonishment to wait. It might have foretokened his mission coming to naught, that he had read the times completely wrong, that he would end up a buffoon and laughingstock. He pondered: could this be the final, merciless ruse that God, or fate, or the forces -- whatever they were in their black impalpability -- had arranged for him? Perhaps there were two powers at work in his case -- and one was seeking to divert him from falling under the sway of the other. The hypothesis was too remote for serious consideration.

This time the streets of Haight-Ashbury were almost deserted. Here and there a few hippies loitered on the sidewalk. In front

of a shop a teenage boy was prying at a gum machine with a coat-hanger. Lucien looked for the theater Mary had mentioned, which she had said was "down the street." In a short time he located what appeared to be the place; but the front door was locked, displaying a sign that said "open at ten." So he wandered about the street, peeping in store windows.

Suddenly he felt a tap in the small of his back, and he turned to confront a short, dumpy Latin-looking woman with a Bible in hand. "Sir," the woman said, "did you know he's coming?"

"Who's coming?" Lucien asked intently.

"The Lord is coming, sir," she said with eyes flashing.

"When?"

"Very soon," she said in her naive manner. "Perhaps today. May I give you this?" she asked, holding out a thinly printed pamphlet.

Lucien put his hand on her shoulder and smiled. "It's not necessary," he said. "I believe you, but it will happen in a way stranger than you think."

The woman stared at him with a rigid expression. "Sir, he is coming on the clouds, and all will see his face."

"Not in the clouds," Lucien said, chuckling. "Not even he," and he walked away.

Was she another sign? Lucien asked himself. It was possible. No more laughable than he, she simply did not understand what the Coming would consist of.

Ten o'clock came, and he was able to get inside the theater, where he accosted a crow-faced boy sweeping the floor. When Lucien asked him about Joe Shalom, the boy put down his broom and disappeared up a flight of stairs. Soon Lucien heard the tramp

of heavy footsteps on the stairs. The boy brought back a hulking, middle-aged man with receding gray hair and bobbling jowls. The man asked Lucien politely who he wanted.

"Joe Shalom," Lucien repeated innocently.

"Nobody by that name works here," the man said.

"Could it be his nickname?"

The man shook his head.

"Well, I'm sorry," Lucien said, and was about to go, when he saw the boy mumble something to the man, who brightened with surprise and said, "oh yes, that Joe. Funny he would call himself that. He's not here now. Won't be back to May Nine."

Lucien thanked the man and departed. His frustration burrowed into him. All of a sudden he had an empty stretch of time on his hands. He deliberated whether he should wait for the return of Joe Shalom. He decided it was worth waiting. He could not countermand the signs. That evening he had his rendezvous with Mary, as scheduled. She was more than a half hour late. She came alone, and spotting him at a table close to the door, she slipped somewhat nervously into a chair. Sadly, he apologized to her for not making contact with Joe Shalom. "It throws off the timetable," he said.

She shook her head. "It's better that we wait," she said. "I'm getting the willies. I've got bad vibrations about this place. Everybody's in outer space, and they won't come down."

"What do you mean?"

"You can see it in their eyes," she whispered, peering around the coffee house as if she were being observed by someone unspecified. "They're like creatures without flesh. Did you see The Body Snatchers?"

He had a vague recollection of such a horror movie.

"They've lost their souls," she said. "All body and no souls. They won't hear what you want to say. This isn't the place."

"Joe can tell me that."

"I'm sure he will," she said. "But, believe me, boy, it's nit right, not the right time or place."

"How do you know?"

"I can see it. See, you look into their eyes, and you think you're gonna meet somebody there, but there's nobody there. You talk to them and they come back with those love grins. Love grins. They're in outer space. They can't hear either. Stone deaf, on their acid trips. The whole world's on acid. It's spooky. Listen, you got a cigarette?"

Lucien said he did not smoke.

"I got a need for a cigarette," she said.

"Sorry."

"That's okay. I'll do without. Listen, what are we going to do?"

"Wait," Lucien said.

"OK," she said, "but let's get out of here."

They were on the street.

"Listen, I've got to tell you," Mary said. "Friend of mine wants me to go down to LA this week with her. OK if I go? I don't want to miss anything."

"Yes, sure, I'm going to wait for the ninth anyway."

"Maybe. Maybe, that's the day," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yea, there's gonna be another eclipse that day. About four thirty in the afternoon, partial eclipse. That might tell you

something."

Lucien thought: the time of waiting, between two eclipses. He had not been wrong; he had merely misread the signs. "It might very well," he said. "You go down to LA and come back here and meet me on the ninth, alright?"

She nodded.

The street was dark. Toward the west end, where the street came to the edge of Goden Gate park, a large crowd was milling on the sidewalk. Mary froze. "Something funny," she said.

There was shouting. Lucien elbowed through the crowd to where he was treated to a bizarre sight. A young girl, no more than thirteen or fourteen, and with scraggly hair, lay on the pavement, her blouse unbuttoned exposing two small black nodes for breasts. Her arms were raised, straight as broom handles, in a propitiating gesture toward the sky, and she was intoning with the throaty voice of a crazed sibyl: "love me, all, help me, love me," while some members of the crowd hooted and called, "give us more, Crazy Janie."

The young girl began to curse: "shit, you're all full of shit. Bastards, can you lie anymore?"

Lucien stared at the girl. In the sallow light he thought at first he saw the face of Lille, but the resemblance was only accidental. He drew a sigh of relief.

"Crazy Janie," one of the same hecklers called out.

Then Lucien stepped in front of the crowd, and a hush descended over them. Lucien glared at the crowd, then swung his attention to the poor and distraught girl. Battenning his gaze upon her, he observed that her eyes were turbid and sunken in their sockets, like brine water in the depths of a dark well. Her lips were scabby

and contorted into a possessed sort of smile, and she stared into space, heedless of him, her mind seemingly disincarnate.

"She's on a bad trip, man," he heard a voice from behind vellow.

Again, Lucien turned to the crowd, and this time he said calmly, "she's not beyond help." For he was seized with the conviction, there on the spot, that he could penetrate her madness. The crowd was feeding her illusions, and only the Word of truth could dislodge her from them. For this was his opportunity to show the power of the Word.

"Janie," Lucien said with gentle assurance, "listen to me. You're not damned, only in the imaginings of your own hell. There's someone here who knows you, recognizes you, accepts you for what you are. You don't need to pretend, to draw the scorn of people who are prisoners in their heads anyway. You want real love, not phony love. Look at me."

The girl looked at him, stunned, and her eyes blinked. "You are what you are," he said. "You're a real person. You are loved. There is someone near, who can love you, for what you are. You don't need to rant and rave, to tease and to entertain in such a contemptible way. That someone who loves you is very near. But you have to know their love for what it is. You are not Christ to yourself, but we're all Christs to each other, and in another you can find real love." He felt frustrated, for it was difficult for him to find the words.

The girl's eyes fixed on his, and her lips wiggled, as if about to speak. He peered into her eyes, fazed and searching, with all the ardor and earnestness he could muster.

"Love me?" she cheeped. "Who loves me?"

"You are loved," he said. "There is someone, some one person, in this world, who can love you, because each one of us is worthy of love, and worthy to give love."

"No one loves me," she muttered, and then she swore under her breath, "bastards, they all make a mockery of me." She sat up in a daze, staring around at the crowd.

"Listen to me," Lucien pleaded.

Another taunt issued from the heckler: "Crazy Janie, she's got a lover. The man's after her. He wants to fuck her," whereupon Janie stuck out her tongue at the heckler, like a sassy child..

"You're a fake, Janie," the heckler jeered. "Who you gonna ball next? Is it me, Janie?"

At that point the crowd parted, and a man, whom Lucien had not noticed before within the crowd stood facing them. The man wore a white, clerical collar, a small silver cross dangling about his neck. "I'll take her, if you don't mind," the priest remarked with stern condescension.

Caught by surprise, Lucien dumbly stared at the priest. The priest's face was cured and grave with deep lines and fissures, a staid monument to his many years of pious labor.

"I've been trying to bring this girl back to her senses," Lucien explained.

Unsmiling, the priest said curtly, "I can take care of her. She needs to be in good hands. She needs to be taken off the street." And with paternal affection he laid his arm around the girl, who had begun to sob.

The girl looked at the priest. "Father, thank you, I don't know what's going on. They want to rape me."

"It's alright, child," the priest said, comforting her. "It's alright."

And he turned to Lucien and said, "you needn't judge her for what she says. She needs a rest. The church will show her the way. Too many people have kicked her around."

After they had left, Lucien returned to Mary and asked if she knew anything about the girl. Mary said, "Crazy Janie's a sad case. She just wants people to love her."

"But why does she go with the priest? He'll stifle her. He can't give her real love."

"Oh, but she'll feel love," Mary said. "Even if it's just another demon in her soul. Don't you see -- she's too far gone for anybody else to love her."

But for a minute, Lucien thought to himself, she knew more than the pretty, vaporous illusion of love in the abstract. She had heard his voice; she had been called out of her lonely, self-pitying love and given the promise of one who might truly love her, even though it was not he himself who could in the end truly love her. The priest would extend her love -- a cloying, merciful, but ineffectual kind of love; for the priest would not judge her. He would not speak to her in the depths of herself. He would not confirm her as she was in herself, for that would mean he would have to surrender his power over her. He could sustain his power only so long as he loved her, as a helpless and confused child, the way Christ was supposed to love. But that was indeed the source of the illusion, the hoax.

Lucien watched at a distance as the priest shepherded the crazy girl off into thenight. The priest's arm was firmly in place about the girl, clutching her, like the subtle coils of a serpent. And

Lucien thought, he is smothering her with the love of Christ. But what was Christ's love? It was only the mask of self-love, the mirror of one's own vain pretension. Christ came not only to love, but to judge the world. What was judgement, if not the word which shatters the illusions that people weave about themselves, the self-infatuation which causes them to hide from the truth which another pronounces. The judgement of truth is necessary to love. It exposes the two as naked in the sight of each other. Once upon a time Christ, in his love, had left men naked in their own sight of each other; but the priest would not have that. He would only comfort her. He would comfort her as a father comforts his child. But there could not be true, divine love between a father and a child. The child looks to the father for strength; the father pities the child. Neither can judge the other for what they truly are. Neither can glimpse each other's nakedness. Only a man and a woman, in the marriage bed, can do that. Only a man and a woman can take responsibility for the power and failure of each other's love. Crazy Janie wanted love, but she did not know yet how to love, for she preferred to remain a child, and the priest preferred the same. The priest sought to manifest Christ's love, but his Christ was a vapor, an idol of his own imaginings, which had its hideous back side. "Judge not, that you be not judged." That was what Christianity taught. But in refusing to judge, one refused to love, deeply, painfully, honestly. The time had come for real love to show its power.

On waking the following morning, Lucien came to the realization that he had to go to work. His job, though, had lost all its savor; it had no place in his life any more. Barney would be

wondering what had happened to him yesterday. Possibly, he could get by making up a story, or merely say he had been laid out over the weekend with the flu, or something. No, he did not have to make excuses. He would say nothing at all. But, then again, how was he to apply himself to his duties, when he had grown utterly indifferent to them. His dilemma was resolved when he walked into the office. Loomis made a wisecrack: "so we just don't have enough excitement for you anymore?"

Lucien looked at him sheepishly. Loomis had recently taken to smoking a pipe, the expensive briar kind, and as he drew in deep, ostentatious puffs, he said sarcastically: "the boss has been wondering about you. Thinks you don't have your mind on the work anymore. You think there's more happening than just the news?"

Lucien grinned. "Ah, shit," Loomis huffed, "let the boss tell him."

Barney was solemn as he gave Lucien the news. "Your work's not been up to what it was when you first started," he said, "and I've got the feeling you're up to something at home that's affecting you. Well, I'd like to help you work it out, but we've got presses to run. There's too much news around these days. I called you yesterday. Where were you?"

"I was out," Lucien said.

"You didn't even have the courtesy to call," Barney said. "Well, Lucien, I'm afraid I'll have to let you go. I can give you three weeks severance pay. That's generous, and maybe it'll help you with some time to think things over."

Lucien smiled faintly. He should have expected it, but then again he was glad after a fashion. He was free to do what he really wanted.

"I know you had a hard time, when you got beat up," Barney said, "but I think you should have come round by now. Anyway, I've got to pay my employees for the job they do. Maybe you can understand."

"It's alright," Lucien said. "I don't have any ill feelings. After all, the reason I've been out of touch with things here is -- well -- you might have to report on it some day." He left.

Three weeks severance pay! That was enough to tide him over, for by then, he calculated, his movement would be in full swing. Money was unimportant, at any rate. He could find means to live. Why should he be concerned about the morrow?

There were exactly two weeks until the ninth. During those two weeks he spent long hours, sequestered in his apartment, reading his Bible, contemplating, speaking aloud. In his isolation he began to talk aloud, strangely, as though the words were inserted in his very mouth, by a power beyond him. The words came to him in a torrent, an ecstatic irruption.

Christ has come, and all is fulfilled. We are all Christs to each other.

The living God has come into our midst. The living God appears in every flesh, the voice of God in every voice that is spoken from the heart, from the depths, in awe and self-revelation.

God is love, and love is the power of God. As children we have loved as children, yet fearful of a God more powerful than us, invisible, and whose face we could not even see; but now we see God face to face. In every face is the face of God, and it is only the face of God we can love.

Lucien thought of the sacrament of baptism. To be baptized, he remembered from his church confirmation class, was a sign of a covenant with God.

Yet now we make a covenant in the flesh. To be sealed, in love, in marriage, in the union of our bodies, that

is higher than baptism. That is the highest sacrament. To be united in our bodies is the seal of the union of our persons, our minds, our hearts, in the words which we speak to each other, and through which we confirm each other, in our faith in each other, in our everlasting commitment.

In the past it was said: 'you must sacrifice your bodies for the glory of God. But I say to you, 'do not sacrifice your bodies,' for God does not demand sacrifice. Give your bodies to each other, along with your very hearts and lives. For we are all Christs to each other.

God the Father is dead. The face has vanished from the sky. But now you shall see the God resurrected, just as your minds and bodies shall be resurrected, as you meet, and embrace, face to face.

Christ has come. You shall not love the old Christ, but the new Christ whom you meet face to face. God is not three in one, but two in one, man and woman, who are to each other strange yet familiar, far yet near, the mystery of the other, the God who comes in each meeting.. The kingdom of God is between us.

What you pray is what you say to each other.

The living God has come among us. As each of us lives, so God lives. We must all be sacred to each other.

God does not demand that we love him. For God is neither male nor female, but male and female. God loves through the love we give to each other.

Far, yet very near. The mystery that each one of us senses in the other; yet we are blind. We do not hear the voice of God in the words we speak to each other, and we are deaf and dumb at once.

Do not cleave to your own innocence, your own precious sanctity, your own martyrdom, your own righteousness. For you have no sanctity or righteousness apart from that which is given to you. We sanctify each other; we make each other righteous; neither of us by ourselves is holy. We are holy only in the truth that we give to each other, and in this regard we are both great and small, righteous and sinful; yet we are cursed no more.

The history of man is the history of God becoming man. God was first a woman; then became a man; now God is seen in man and woman, standing, naked, face to face.

Who can flee from the face of God? We flee from the face of God into our hollow selves; we close off all sounds, all words, and then we are damned, in the hell

of our own imaginings. Until we hear the word break through, the word which speaks, "I love you."

Many have seen God with the face of wrath, but few have seen God with the face of love, the face that is in every face, until the stars go out.

No one shall die any longer for their beliefs. In the end there shall be no martyrs. All shall stand face to face in judgement before each other, and all shall love, for that is the power of the living God. No faith shall separate man from man, or man from woman, for we shall all have faith in each other, as the living God.

A man leaves mother and father and takes a wife. So a woman does the same with her husband. They shall become one flesh, and they shall be restored as the image of the living God.

Do not say, "I have fallen into sin," but I have been estranged from you, whose beauty and mystery and worth I was ignorant of, and that I have wronged you, wronged you by not letting you be as you can truly be, and not letting myself truly be myself to you, for in this act of revealing myself to you, and you to me, and in loving what you are to me, and you loving what I am to you, in spite of our failings, we have the power of God.

The living God shall set the world on fire, the fire of devotion.

A man is drowning in the ocean. One jumps in to save him, but the tide is too strong, and he drowns. Another throws him a rope from the shore, but the rope is too short, and the drowning man has no lifeline. A third comes and wades halfway to the man. Then his lifeline will reach and both are saved.

Christ is here now. Yet we do not know the Christ, just as we do not notice the dewdrops on the grass beneath us. They are there always; they are too familiar; therefore we do not realize and we step on them before the sun dries them out.

Christ is coming, not on the clouds, but in the silence of the room, when we see each others faces, and we speak the truth to one another.

The words would come involuntarily; he remembered the exploding light in the desert, and he wondered, if they are directing me, will they show themselves to me? On clear nights he would go out into the forest and stand in a meadow not too far from his apartment, his

eyes sweeping the skies, his whole body trembling in anticipation. One evening he witnessed a flurry of shooting stars, and for a few, chafing moments he expected the final disclosure. But the meteor shower petered out, and he was left goggling into the same, now familiar, timeless and unending universe blown up with its trillion, silent stars, as he mused, the old ones, whoever they are, do not have the power that is within me; they are dead matter, energy that has congealed out of its fiery origin; they are not God, for God is more mighty and mysterious than the old ones, greater and more incalculable than the entirety of stars. My mind glows with fire, and yet it has nothing to ignite. I wait for one whose mind I may set on fire, and whose body will merge with mine in the gravity of union -- indissoluble, solid, and eternal, two stars burning, but not extinguished, in the whirling motions of the night.

And death too seemed unreal as he gazed up at the fiery energies of the night. (The resurrection of the body and life eternal. The body by itself is dead, drained of its energy, just as the mind by itself is merely a smoking brand which needs another mind to touch it with fire again. The word is the leaping fire, two bodies in embrace, the union of matter by which the fire is sustained. The stars surge and flow together, all creation groans for union, two stars unite and become one, and the two become many, but the creation begins with the two, the progenitors of life, welding all matter which becomes spirit in the fiery furnace; and death shall be no more, and death shall be no more, for the fires of the heavens continue to burn. Now I stand here alone, but I am in the midst of the fire, and I wait for the one who will come to me, and together we shall light each other's fire. The coming one, the Christ whose face shines in a hundred billion stars.

The afternoon of the ninth of May Lucien went back down to the Haight-Ashbury. The sky was laden with lowering rain clouds, and as he walked along the street he was soaked through to the skin with a sudden downpour. Dripping and bedraggled, he entered the theater where he hoped to find Joe Shalom. This time he encountered a woman employee of the theater, who had no idea who Joe Shalom was. Lucien asked to see the manager, the middle-aged man which he described to the woman. The woman looked uncertain. "Just a moment," she said, and she came back with a man, in his early thirties, dressed in jeans and a grimy work shirt. "I'm the manager," the man said. "Who are you looking for?"

"Joe Shalom."

"Strange name. Nobody by that name works here."

"Anybody named Joe?"

"Several people named Joe, they come in here from time to time."

"I was told he was out of town and would be back today."

"Who told you that?"

Lucien characterized the young boy with the broom and the middle-aged man. The manager shrugged, and looked at the woman, who also tossed up her hands.

"He seemed very important. The man I talked with."

"Look," the manager said, "we get people come in and out of here every day. I can't keep track of all of them. I'm the one who's supposed to be in charge."

Then the woman said, hesitantly, "there's a restaurant on the next block. Can't think of the name of it." She instructed Lucien how to get there. "A lot of our people hang out there. Maybe you ought to ask around."

Lucien thanked her and headed toward the restaurant. It was all so very strange. Why did no one know of Joe Shalom, if he was supposed to be important? And why, if he had interpreted the signs correctly, could he not find such a person? Something was amiss, he sensed, but he was unable to specify the trouble. In a few hours the eclipse of the sun would occur. He felt a slight panic, but no, he reasoned, there was little cause for alarm, not quite yet. He would go to the restaurant, and surely someone there would be able to steer him to Joe Shalom. Or perhaps he, by some fortunate confluence of events, would meet him without asking, especially if it were ordained.

The restaurant was an inconspicuous little establishment with rough, plank tables and a few booths scattered about a large, open room, thick with the smell of cooking. Sitting down in one of the booths, Lucien inspected a menu on the table. He was not very hungry. When the waiter came he ordered a soft drink and potato chips. Meanwhile, he inquired of the waiter about a possible customer named Joe Shalom. The waiter shook his head. "Never heard of somebody like that around here."

The soft drink refreshed him, and he quietly munched his potato chips, staring all the while about the restaurant in search of a face which, by some remote chance, might give forth a clue as to the mysterious personage Joe Shalom. Finally, he saw a man, clean-shaven, walk in and take a seat in the booth beside him. The man was clutching a bright orange tiger lilly in his hand, and he sat at the table, quietly examining the flower. There was a look of rapture on the man's face. All of a sudden Lucien was gripped by a feeling of recognition. It was apparent that here was the individual he sought. Boldly, yet with a certain reticence, Lucien

left his payment for the snack on the table, got up, walked around, and slipped into the booth where the man had sat down. The man was quite young, perhaps even Lucien's age. He had shoulder-length, straight platinum hair, and he was ogling over the lily. The lily, Lucien thought, was auspicious. It was the flower, the name, the girl with whom it all had somehow started. Lucien was amazed. Yes, the flower was auspicious, growing, the symbol of it all -- the flower, the beautiful, growing, delicate flower signifying life, the living God. "Hello," Lucien said. The man gave no evidence of hearing, but continued to moon over the flower. "Are you the one they call Joe Shalom?" The man made no response. "Joe Shalom, peace, are you he? I've been looking for him. I was told I should find him."

The man's head swayed back and forth, in an easy motion, his eyes never averting to Lucien's importunate chatter. The man's gaze remained cemented on the flower, as if it were the totality of his consciousness. Slowly, the man worked his mouth into an idiot smile. Frantically, Lucien leaned over to him, and muttered, "are you here for me? Are you Joe Shalom?" And in that dread instant he had the experience of one who might awake in the limbo of the dead, where immobile, stone faces stare at the last scourgings of life for an unholy eternity. The flower was the only thing that seemed alive, and yet it too was wilting under the stone-faced man's demented gaze.

He left the restaurant in a hurry. His next aim was to find Mary. She had promised to come back that day. He raced to the coffee house, where they sat that night and he had unfolded his plan for her. But the coffee house was closed. Standing on the sidewalk by the coffee house was the boy who had been sweeping the

floor of the theater. Lucien was startled. "Remember me?" Lucien said.

The boy looked bothered. "No," he said.

"At the theater. I was looking for Joe Shalom."

The boy twisted his neck, as if to shake a crick out of it. Then he spat upon the pavement. "Don't know Joe Shalom."

"Do you know a Mary, a girl from Iowa. She said she would meet me here."

The boy laughed. "Mary, Mary quite contrary, how does your garden grow? Say man, your old lady give you the slip?"

"Forget it," Lucien said. Now he did not know what to do. The sky above was blackening. It would be impossible to view the eclipse, and he grew more confused by the minute. He started walking back to his car. Perhaps Mary had been right. Haight-Ashbury was not the place; it was not owned by flesh and blood, but haunted by the wraiths of misbegotten humanity. And now there came to his nostrils the fetid stench of sewer gas. He hastened on, and the stench went away. He had the feeling somebody was following him, though he did not turn around. At last he was forced to halt for a stop light. He heard the boy's voice behind him. Perhaps the boy knew something after all, and was coming to let him in on it. The boy croaked an unintelligible sentence. "Man, you want ---?"

Lucien turned around. The boy looked piqued. "Man, you want ---?" Lucien still could not understand the last words of the sentence.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

The boy flew into a rage. "A blow job, that's what I said. Man, ain't you listening? Now come on back with me."

The light changed, and Lucien started running. Running as fast as he could to his car, he drove away through the rain toward Marin, and the unspoiled sanctuary of his apartment. He was crying to himself. What was happening? He was prepared now to abandon the whole, ridiculous scheme, if that proved feasible. Perhaps he was on the edge of a madness, from which he might never be able to retreat. The rain had turned into a cloudburst.

When he got back to his apartment, though, he discovered he had a new lease. There were several people sitting in a car in the parking lot, and when he climbed out of his car, one of the persons also got out. And in the dripping rain he saw the face of one he knew and had almost forgotten. "Louie," he cried jubilantly.

Louie came up to him and slapped his huge hands on Lucien's shoulders. "I said I'd come see you," Louie said with a big bear smile. Then he turned toward the car in which he'd been sitting. "Hey, I've got some friends you gotta meet. They've all heard about you." Louie waved, and a man and a woman got out in the rain. The man was short and skinny with short, blonde hair; the woman was dark-skinned and had black hair. She had a demure smile on her face.

"These are my friends," Louie said excitedly. "Kevin here's from Arizona, and Laura, she's a good friend too. We all came to see you."

But Lucien could not help staring at the woman named Laura, with her tawny skin, raven hair, and shy, nut brown eyes. He wondered if she were Louie's girl.

"Come inside," Lucien beckoned. He led them through the rain to his apartment. Once inside, he clapped his hands merrily and said, "I don't have any beer, or anything, but we can go out for

some."

"Don't bother," Louie said. "Listen, I'm staying with Kevin here, at an apartment over in Berkeley. We were gonna have a party tonight. Why don't you come?"

Lucien considered for a second. Having a party just did not seem right, but on the other hand what was there left for him to do? He could not face his empty apartment, where if he stayed he would just brood and hector himself. The idea of a party sounded perfect. It was time he had normal amusements again. "Alright," he said, "can I follow you over?"

"Naw," Louie said, "just come with us. We can drive you back in the morning. We've got sleeping bags. You working tomorrow?"

"I'm unemployed," Lucien said with slight compunction.

Louie laughed. He had not expected Louie to laugh, but there was a degree of folly in the whole situation. He joined Louie in laughing. The laughter felt good. Rarely did he ever laugh. "They canned me," Lucien said laughing. "I was too strange for them." The others looked at him and, in the spirit of things, started to laugh too.

Kevin's apartment was located on Dana Street, two flights up. Kevin was a student at the university. The apartment was a typical student flat, the floor cluttered with dog-eared paperback books, beer cans, and dismembered pages from the San Francisco Chronicle "sporting green." Kevin made a self-deprecating crack about his own slovenliness, the fault of living alone. "I could use a woman to clean up after me, he said, slightly defensively, while casting an arrant eye at Laura, whose attention he seemed obsessed with capturing. Kevin appeared to have some special attachment to Laura, though it was obvious from her lack of overt affection toward

him that they were not lovers. On the contrary, the opposite seemed to be the case. His solicitation of her with constant glances and flippant, bragging comments appeared similar to the method of the schoolboy who tries to win the interest of a young girl through his bluster and swagger. Finally, Lucien took Louie aside and asked about Kevin's relationship to Laura.

Louie chuckled. "Kevin's just trying to make it with her in whatever way he can. But he can't succeed. She can see through him, and she knows he has a girl in LA who he's engaged to, anyway. Kevin's a good-natured guy, but he gets these things with women. He wants to prove himself, but it's easy for him to make an ass out of himself."

"And you?" Lucien asked. "What's your thing with her?"

Louie smiled. "Nothing much. She's just a friend. Somebody I know from around here who I thought --" He smiled benignly. "I thought you might have something in common with her. She's a quiet, honest kid, smart, and -- loving -- if the right guy comes along." He winked at Lucien.

Soon they had all settled into an evening of casual conversation and jug wine and Colt-45 malt liquor, which Louie had provided. Kevin was talking with high seriousness about baseball. Louie began to tease Kevin by asking silly questions, pretending he knew nothing about the sport, while Laura kept silent on the couch. At last, Louie shut Kevin off and turned to Lucien. "I thought these people would want to hear about what you were saying in the desert. What's happened in the meantime? I remember you --."

Lucien felt uneasy about bringing up such a serious matter all at once. With slight hesitation, he said, "I've done it already, sort of ---"

"Already?" Louie looked at him askance.

"Yes, on the way home I met this girl. She dumped me, then I went over the the Haight-Ashbury and I lost my job. Oh hell, it's too long a story."

"So where are you?" Louie inquired with earnest.

"Where am I/".

"Where are you going with it? I think these people might be interested."

Lucien groped his way through much of the story. Suddenly, he realized he had been going on for nearly an hour. Kevin had become tight-lipped and Laura had a blank expression. Lucien was not sure of anybody's reaction. Louie was the only one who had any discernable look on his face, and he smiled at Lucien, knowingly and supportive.

"If I didn't know better," Louie said, "I'd think you were the craziest person who ever walked in here." He grinned broadly, glared at the others, then slapped his knee and guffawed. "But you're not, Lucien. The craziest things are usually the most obvious and true. That's what the philosophers can't understand."

All at once Lucien sensed that Laura had understood, and that she was on his side. He did not want her to go before having a chance to talk with her alone. It would be an opportunity to get to know her better. "Would you like me to walk you home?" he asked. "I don't mind being your escort."

Laura seemed caught by surprise. She smiled at him warmly. "Sure," she said. Laura looked at Lucien with searching eyes. It seemed she wanted to say something, but was at loss for words. Lucien felt a twinge of embarrassment; he feared he had said too much in front of someone who did not know him and who probably, in her heart, found him too peculiar for her liking.

Finally, Laura spoke up, confessing she ought to be leaving. "It was a nice party, and I was glad to meet you Lucien. I have to think about what you said."

"I'll drive you home," Louie said.

"It's no problem," Laura said politely. "The dormitory's just up the street."

The night was quite pleasant. The rain had stopped, and the sidewalk was honeycombed with little, shallow puddles through which their feet squished as they walked slowly along. During the first block they said nothing to each other; but he found himself beautifully mystified by this quiet and friendly girl. She seemed wholly ordinary and transparent, unassuming and good-hearted, with none of the inner scars and hidden compulsions which had damaged the women he had known in the past. She was not complicated, at least in the way Lille and Elaine had been. Yet her simplicity seemed matched by a profound capacity, as Louie had said, for love; the kind of love which is neither overpowering nor exciting, but which is steady and endures. On the other hand, he had no hard evidence for such intuitions about her. It was a wordless, inconspicuous evidence that shone in her smiling face. In a strange way he felt he knew her, and she knew him, as if they might have once encountered each other long ago in some time and place. He asked her: "what did you think of what I said this evening?"

She looked at him and smiled, "I didn't quite follow everything, but what you said made sense. It touched some feelings I've had lately."

"Do you have a guy? Tell me. I couldn't be surprised."

Laura smiled again. "Not just now," she said, "but I have to admit there's an admirer. I know Kevin's interested in me."

"But I thought Kevin had a girl in LA."

"He does, but -- well -- he has other fish to fry. I like Kevin, but he's a bit too much, if you know what I mean."

"Have you ever been in love?"

She smiled, this time with a hint of modesty. "Yes, once, but it's really not your place to get personal."

"I know," Lucien said, "but if you had, you'd understand."

"Of course, I do understand a bit," she said, "but --- oh, nothing -- you're a guy who really has strong ideas, and I like that."

"So is Louie."

"Not in the same way."

"How do you know Louie?"

"From a friend. He used to hang around her a lot."

"Does Louie ever have serious relationships with women?"

"I don't know. I think he has, but he's pretty particular. He never got serious with my friend. Mostly he's just a good-time Joe who gets along with everybody."

"That makes it easy for him to understand the value of friendship."

"Yes, maybe, but not love."

They came to the door of the dormitory, the same door where he had said goodbye to June a few weeks before. It was a strange sensation. "I went out with a girl from this dorm, not too long ago. Her name was June. Do you know her?"

Laura thought a moment. "No, I don't know anybody named June."

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"I hope we can see each other again," she said.

"Yes, I'd like that," he said, but for right now he did not

want to be making any promises. "I hope Louie stays in town, so we can all get together."

Louie was dozing on the sofa when Lucien came back to the apartment. "Laura's a nice girl," Lucien said.

"Yea," Louie said. "I wanted her to meet you. That's why I brought you over. I think you two would hit it off."

"It could be," Lucien said, "but I've had enough madcap affairs with women lately. I'll be cautious this time."

"I don't blame you," Louie said. "That's the best way. Listen, though, if I heard you correct this evening, you want more than just a woman."

Lucien smiled. "Yes, it's really blown up into something. But, dammit, Louie, I still wonder if I'm crazy. You know, everybody wants somebody to love, and be loved by them, and every man wants a woman to love. But isn't that just a plain, everyday truth? People have been falling in love for ages. But -- there's something special about what's happening now. People are looking for something, something they're missing. They've been praying for false saviours. They don't want a flesh and blood Christ. They don't know how hard it is to love flesh and blood, or to be loved. And so they're hung up with their strange prophecies and beliefs. They don't understand that it's so simple -- it's right here at hand."

Louie smiled. "Listen, you speak so simply it's hard to take you seriously. I know what you're talking about. I came to that realization out there in the desert. No, I didn't tell you what effect you had on me, but you did. I've been the restless sort, always moving on to some promised land that's just over the horizon, but I never get there, and now I'm ready to settle down. I need

the right woman. All of us need the right person who will love us. What are all those popular songs that go on endlessly about being loved and being lost. They're cries from the heart, but they're also sacred music of sorts. The problem is everybody listens, but nobody takes them seriously. You're right, everybody thinks there's coming a Christ on a white horse. Just somebody who'll stay by you all through the night, if you know what I mean, and night after night. There isn't anything else. I know that, all this time I've been wandering around. Now I'm ready to stop my wandering. Listen, I want to help you. I've talked to Kevin about it, and he's ready to help."

"Kevin?"

"Yea, he comes off as a simple dude, but he's gung-ho on what you're saying. It's got potential. It's beautiful. What you need is a forum, maybe an organization."

Lucien heard the toilet in the bathroom flush, and Kevin appeared, looking somewhat shame-faced. "Listen, man, Louie and I've been talking. I didn't know what to say, just before you left, and you might have thought we weren't interested, but man, it's incredible -- it's too beautiful for words. Louie tell you we want to get you going?"

Lucien nodded.

"It's all beautiful and weird. Weird but beautiful. I can get into it, quite a lot. I've got this girlfriend, and she could get into it too. We're all tired of getting the heavy rap on us. The war -- they want us to give up our lives for a fucking little war nobody wants. My old man, he says, 'now you gotta be responsible.' What am I responsible for? I'm not responsible to anybody except the one I love. I'm not gonna give myself for some shitty cause

nobody understands; I'm gonna give the one I love, whoever that might be. We're gonna stop this fucking war, and we're gonna do it by saying, 'no, there's only one great thing my life's important for, and that's love. Because, when you get right down to it, everybody's got a right to be loved, and that's all that matters. 'Love of country' -- that's what my old man think's most important, but he doesn't have any idea of what it is to love. Well, Louie and I are into what you're doing. Where do we begin?"

Lucien thought a minute. "Maybe right here in Berkeley. I've tried over at the Haight. Everybody's off in another world there."

"Sure," Kevin said, "they'll listen around here. We need to get the word out to them."

"You ought to print some flyers," Louie said, "then set yourself up to make a speech on campus, like Hubert."

"I don't want to sound like an evangelist," Lucien said, but then he considered: if the word was indeed powerful, there would be many who would listen. He would start up the movement again, here in Berkeley, right away. .

"Good, I'll write something up," Lucien said. "I'll try to lay it out in a way people can understand. And then we'll set a time for me to speak. We'll announce it in the flyer, and then --" He had an afterthought. "And what about Laura? What does she have to do with all this?"

Louie smiled cagily and said, "well, we ought to keep her out of this business for the time being. You don't want to get her involved in your affairs, not right now at least. There'll be time for her."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," Louie said. "Sometimes I get superstitious and I think -- well, the forces have something else in mind."

Louie bit his lip. "Maybe the machine's doing their bidding."

"Look," Lucien said, feeling a bit exasperated at this point, "I'm tired of having tricks played on us. I've come this far, and --"

"But you musn't push it, really," Louie said.

Just then Kevin intervened, his voice tense, resolute. "I think we ought to go ahead. Fuck all that superstitious garbage." His eyes were blazing like twin suns. "You got a copy of the Proclamation?"

Lucien handed him the copy of the Proclamation.

"I'll take care of it," Kevin said. "When are you going to speak?"

"Tomorrow," Lucien said. "Tomorrow when people gather in the plaza for lunch."

That evening Kevin walked in smiling. He appeared happier than Lucien had ever seen him. "I've done it," Kevin boasted. "It's all set."

"How?" Lucien asked.

Kevin explained that he had given the Proclamation to a girl at the student newspaper of the university. "She read it, and she really liked it. It's going to appear tomorrow. Then you'll have an audience."

Kevin was right. The next morning, May 18, the following notice was published, along with the other news of the day, in The Daily Californian:

THE PROCLAMATION -- 1967
(The following was submitted by
The Eschaton Society).

Lucien could not figure out just what Louie was thinking about. Perhaps Louie knew something that he did not. Louie's last comment seemed to set Kevin on edge. Nervously, he said "but you're right, we keep Laura out of it." Turning to Lucien, he asked, "what do you want of me and Louie? You call the signals."

Before Lucien could reply, Louie looked at Kevin and said firmly, "we're all in this together, now aren't we? You don't mind if Lucien here stays with us awhile. We got room in the inn, don't we? And, after all, it's not like he was gonna move in and marry you, is it? Just give him time to do his thing, and then --"

Lucien went back to collect his things for the temporary move to Berkeley. He asked a neighbor to look after the cat, saying he would not be long away. In the beginning, however, Lucien did not feel at all comfortable in the new situation. The problem was with Kevin. Though Kevin was enthusiastic about their undertaking, he seemed to resent silently Lucien's presence in his apartment. After all, it was Louie who had invited him to stay there. He wondered about Kevin's resentment. Ostensibly, it had to do with Kevin's suspicion that he was a potential rival for Laura. But Lucien could not understand why Kevin was so infatuated with her, especially since she was cool to his advances. Then again, why was Kevin at the same time willing to back Lucien's mission? Kevin was hard-headed and obtuse, it seemed, and he could not possibly grasp the genuine meaning of everything Lucien had talked about. It was quite possible Kevin did not understand, but was using Lucien for his own ulterior purposes. Yet, in the final analysis, Lucien was not worried. Kevin was harmless, and Lucien felt a little sorry for him.

Wednesday evening Kevin owned up to what Lucien had surmised all along. "Look," he said, "I gotta come clean with you about something. I don't want you muscling in on Laura. Louie doesn't know how I feel, and I don't think Laura does either, and the reason they both think I'm safe is because I've got a girl. Well, I do, I do love Katy -- she's a good girl, and a level-headed kid, you know, and as far as I'm concerned, we're gonna get married, and that's that --- but I've had different feelings, since I met Laura. I don't have anything going with her, and I wouldn't let on to anybody, mainly Louie, but -- well -- I wouldn't want you muscling in. I know you'll hate me for saying that, but I gotta say it."

Lucien smiled and put his hand on Kevin's shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm not here to start up anything. But I'm curious -- why do you love Laura?"

Kevin looked somewhat abashed. "I don't really love her, not like I love Katy. But, man, there's something about her. Maybe because I'm away from my own woman too much. I get horny. Katy and me are gonna get married this summer, but that's a long time. You know what it's like having to go every night without a woman, and you dream what it'd be like to have a woman in your bed with you? Well, maybe if I could get her into bed with me just once, then I'd be satisfied."

Lucien shook his head. "Do you think that's all that'll matter? If you did get her in bed, you'd find yourself in a whole mess of problems, mostly with yourself. I say, stick with it a few more months. If you love Katy, you've got to be true to her."

"Shit," Kevin exclaimed. "Be true to her? I've heard that from my old man, too much. Be true to what? Be responsible? I've heard all that shit before."

"OK, look, just don't worry about me muscling in; as you put it. I'm not into doing that. Remember, it was Louie who asked me to come stay with you guys."

"Yea, I know, but I'm not sure about Louie either," Kevin said.

"Just trust me," Lucien insisted. But Kevin shrugged and did not seem to want to listen at all.

Thursday morning, May 11, Lucien awoke with an inexplicable sense of crisis. Neither Kevin nor Louie was awake yet. He picked up the morning paper and read a disturbing front-page story. The Middle East was at a flash point. Israel had announced it was prepared to defend itself against the "aggression" of the neighboring Arab states, and was mobilizing its armies. Wars and rumors of war. The entire world atmosphere was charged with crisis and danger. Perhaps it was just another sign, another confirmation of the necessity of his mission. But there was something unprecedented about this particular crisis. The threat was to Israel, the chosen people of God. A strange God was at work in this time, he thought, and his mission was affected. The crisis could not be resolved until he had unleashed the word into history. He could delay no longer.

He sat down to compose, as tersely as possible, the substance of his message. The words tumbled without effort from his mind onto the paper. He called it The Proclamation of 1967. 1967 was the year, the year in which the end of history was occurring -- the "end" not as the close of history, but as its fulfillment. He wrote it all down and read over what he had written. It was sufficient for now.

Louie was up now. Stumbling into the room, half asleep, and with glazed eyes, he looked curiously at Lucien, who showed him what he had written. Louie studied the Proclamation for some time in silence. Then he grinned and said: "It sounds right. We've got to print it on some flyers."

Soon Kevin was awake and read the Proclamation as well. "Man, you're on to something," he said. "I'm not sure what, but you're on."

Louie said he knew a printer in Berkeley who would do the job quickly and cheaply. "We can all pool our bread together," Louie said. Kevin turned and looked out the window.

That afternoon Lucien took the text of the Proclamation to the printer. The proprietor of the printing shop was a pudgy, balding Jewish man with a stubble beard who gave Lucien a frozen stare when he presented the text. "OK," the proprietor said, "but I want cash as soon as you pick it up." The proprietor said the order would be finished on Monday. Lucien inhaled a deep breath. When Lucien came to pick up the flyers, he was informed, regretfully, by the printer's apprentice, an underweight and long-haired kid with a freckled face, gawked at Lucien in the manner of a country boy, and said as an excuse: "look, the boss don't make a lot of money, and he don't charge his customers much neither, so you gotta hang on."

Lucien spotted the press at the back of the room and went over to look at it. The apprentice said sourly, "you don't think you know nothin' about mechanical dealies, do you? I sure don't, and the boss claims he can't fix it. He's got to get one of them specialists in."

Lucien stared at the press. Certainly he had no knowledge

of how to repair printing presses, but he did not believe mechanical failures should stand in the way of his endeavors. Besides, the apprentice was not in tune with what was going on.

"Have you read what we gave you?" Lucien asked, his heart leaping.

The apprentice had gone over to a desk on the other side of the room and was pasting together some copy. "Don't think I have. I don't usually look at what customers give us."

"But this is important. You have to get the press fixed."

"Sorry, I can't do the impossible. Only the Lord can do that."

"Have you tried talking to the press?" Lucien asked without even considering.

The apprentice gave him an odd stare, but said nothing.

"I mean it," Lucien said. "Maybe if you could make it understand, rightly, what it's supposed to do."

The apprentice threw up his hands. "Christ, what a weirdo," he exclaimed. "Now leave me alone, man. We'll give you a call when it's done, OK?"

Lucien left, feeling rather foolish for having said what he did. But, then again, nothing one might say seemed that implausible any more. He went back to the apartment and apprised Louie of the problem. Louie was rather sedate. "We've got another hangup. When are you going to speak?"

Lucien suggested the forthcoming Thursday. "You'll need a microphone, won't you?" Louie asked.

"I suppose."

"Well, anyway, you can't speak on campus unless you get permission, and you can't get permission unless you're an officer of an officially recognized club or organization, OK? Remember

what I said about an organization? We're going to have to form one for that reason. We get approved by the university, and then you can speak. But we need a name first."

Lucien thought for a moment. "Something that'll sum up what I have to say. Something appropriate for the end time."

"Then I've got it," Louie said with a smile. "The Eschaton Society. You know, eschaton, that means 'the end' in Greek. I took a semester of Greek in college."

"Sounds alright to me," Lucien said. "How do we go about it?"

First they obtained the appropriate forms from the dean's office at the university.

To be approved as an official club or organization at the University of California involved filling out forms with copious instructions and onion-skin duplicates. Lucien carted the forms back to the apartment and showed them to Louie. The second question went: "What is the purpose of the organization? The third one: "What is the structure of the organization and its officials?" Louie burst into wild laughter. "How can we answer these questions?" he laughed, forcing back tears. For the first time Lucien caught a sense of the hilarious irony of what he was doing. The project was so simple, and yet it exposed the ways of the world as ridiculous. Perhaps it was not he who should be accused of madness at all; for it was the ordinary way of doing and thinking about things that seemed absurd. Louie kept on with gales of laughter. And Lucien had to laugh with him. It was ecstasy to laugh.

Lucien said: "the purpose of the organization? Let's write down -- 'to manifest what has been true for all time.'" Louie and he broke up again, but he wrote that down. "The structure of the organization? Let's say we're all disciples, disciples of the

word made flesh. That'll throw them. After all, what does it matter what we write?"

Lucien went, together with Louie, to submit the application forms to the dean's office. A pretty, scrubbed little secretary informed them that approval of the application would take at least until the end of the week. "That's too much time," Lucien said as they went out. He felt the word burning inside him. "We have to do something else."

"Do you really need a microphone?" Louie asked.

He did not. The word did not require electronic amplification to be heard. And of what consequence would it be if the university did give their official sanction? Did Jesus follow all the regulations of the Sanhedrin when he carried his ministry to Jerusalem? What if he were arrested? To be harassed and scorned, if not scourged, was perennially the lot of a prophet. But that might make him a martyr of sorts, and history already was gorged with the dead bones of martyrs who had suffered valorously for a cause. No, the suffering martyr, the crucified, was not to be the hero of the eschaton. In the end there would be no martyrs or heroes, just plain people living their lives, loving each other, face to face with the God who lives and speaks through one another. That profound anonymity would be the majesty of God, the resplendence of the final coming; yet, then, why did he intend to bring in the end with such an historical spectacle? Such the inconsistency in his own conception of the pageant unfolding.

"No, we don't need a microphone," he told Louie. "I can stand up by myself." They crossed the concrete sink of Lower Sproul Plaza. "I can stand here," Lucien vowed, "and speak. My words will be heard no matter what. But we must do it soon."

Wednesday morning the printer telephoned to say the press was back in operation. "We got the thing working quicker than we thought," he reported drily. "You can pick it up this afternoon."

"Your man listened, didn't he," Lucien said, but the printer snorted like a big seal and hung up without a further reply.

Nonetheless, the flyers were not ready when Lucien appeared, now for the second time. The proprietor himself greeted Lucien, wringing his hands in frustration, though without a gesture of apology. "Damn machine's unreliable," the proprietor snarled. "It's like it was bewitched."

"When can you have it fixed this time, do you think?" Lucien asked with resignation.

"Hell if I know," the proprietor grumbled. "You want your copy back? You don't have any obligation to me."

It was actually too late to give the material to another printer. Most of them required lead times of more than a week. Lucien said he didn't have any other choice than to leave the material and hope the press could soon be restored to working order. Meanwhile, he wanted to have a copy for whatever use might arise, and he asked the proprietor to xerox one for him. Grudgingly, the proprietor obliged. When he had finished, the proprietor glanced at the text of the Proclamation. His face wrinkled, and he asked tartly: "what's this all about, anyway?"

"Nothing," Lucien said with deliberate nonchalance. "Just words, that's all."

Back at Louie's apartment they were discussing subsequent steps. "Maybe you ought not to do it after all," Louie said with a wariness that surprised Lucien. All along Louie had been his prime source of encouragement.

Let it be known that:

Christ has come, and all is fulfilled. We are all Christs to each other.

The promise of the final Kingdom of God is real and now. The promise is kept in the hour of meeting between person and person.

The living God has come into our midst. As one person lives, so God lives.

GOD IS LOVE. Just as the love of an adolescent is greater than the love of a child, so the greatest of love is between a man and a woman.

At the same moment that two persons come to know each other in truth, they also come to know the living God. Therefore every life can be known and is holy. No act of taking a life, including one's own, is justified.

No war or persecution or simple injury to another person may be justified in the sight of the living God. Every such act or intent shall be judged, for all must submit to the judgement which is now.

Every person owes allegiance to his fellow person. He shall have no allegiance prior to this allegiance. His first allegiance shall be neither to his occupation nor his community nor his society nor the flag of his country, but to the living God.

TO HAVE FAITH is to have faith in each other as Christ, for it is written that "the righteous shall live by faith." If any church which confesses Christ denies this truth of faith, then it denies the power of faith and has no right to claim faith.

The church is the body of Christ, but every living body is Christ's body. Therefore every church which denies the body denies Christ. The church of Christ shall have only two sacraments, The major sacrament shall be marriage, the minor one communion.

No one who understands this proclamation shall be condemned, but all shall have life. Just as in time one among men was resurrected, so the time has come when all men shall be raised up in the flesh. To love with both heart and body is to be raised up in the flesh.

This proclamation does not annul the Scriptures, but consists in their fulfillment.

No longer shall a man be known as a Christian, Jew, Hindu, or Buddhist, but all shall know the living God.

When this proclamation is heard, it shall be heard as the word of the living God. Hear the first address today at 12:45 in lower Sproul plaza.

Lucien was both jubilant and fearful. He would have people to listen to him now. He could not slip or stutter; he would have to deliver the word with force and authority, in order to launch the movement. The rest was in the hands of God, the "forces," whoever or whatever was guiding him now. Even Kevin, in his simple-hearted and compulsive way, was under their direction.

The final hours of the morning were painfully prolonged, intractable. Time seemed to be unwinding itself like the twisted ropes of a swing, gyring slowly, ever so slowly, until it reaches a still point. About eleven-thirty he told Louie he was ready to go. He asked where Kevin was. Louie had no idea.

Kevin was waiting for them at the palza. He had brought Laura along. Laura was wearing a thin, white dacron dress with a green and black flower print. Her long hair was fluttering, like an ensign, in the wind that had come up. She smiled at Lucien. "I've come to hear," she said. "I read the Proclamation."

Soon a herd of young people began to gather in the plaza. Lucien was amazed. Did they really know what was about to happen?, he wondered. None of them seemed to pay him any notice. Naturally, they would not notice him, because they did not know him by sight. His name had not even been on the Proclamation. He watched a young girl in cutoff jeans distributing flowers among the spectators. She carried a basket of red, white, and pink carnations. His whole body tingled. The flower was the paramount symbol of the eschaton -- frail beauty, in stark comparison to the rugged and splintered cross, signifying all the blood, travail, and dumb misery of two thousand years of history. He shivered at the notion -- two thousand years of history about to come to an end, the end of the age of the cross. The cross would be buried, a moldering block of wood hewn from a

tree that had died with its victim two millenia ago on Calvary. And from the ground would sprout a million flowers, their roots nourished in new soil. The girl drew near to him and with an innocent expression held out a pink flower to him. "It's yours," she said sweetly. "Special for the occasion."

"What is the occasion?" he asked, trying not to give away the fact that he was the one -- he knew.

The girl smiled. "You'll see," she said.

Suddenly there appeared on the west side of the plaza custodians with microphones and sound equipment. Lucien looked at Kevin and Laura and gasped. There were many who knew.

"Kevin, did you arrange this?"

Kevin shook his head, dumfounded.

Then there came musicians with electric guitars and drums.

"No," Kevin said. "It's a rock concert. This isn't what we had in mind."

Lucien was not panicked, but he was growing nervous. Perhaps they had not read the Proclamation, after all.

"Find out what's going on," Lucien barked to Kevin, who went trotting up toward the place where the band had been set up.

The band launched into a number -- a blaring, wordless number that Lucien did not recognize. And then he saw the same girl threading her way back through the crowd, passing out yellow leaflets. She handed him one too. The leaflet said "The Second Coming."

"What's this?" Lucien asked desperately.

"The Second Coming," she said. "It's a new group. I hope you'll like it."

Kevin came running back. "They're planning to play til one," he said, puffing. "I told them about you. They said you could use

their microphone when they're done."

Kevin shook his head and melted back into the crowd. Lucien stared at Laura. Her face was stupefied, unexpressive. Her lips quivered as she stood there, listening to the gusts of music that blew across the plaza with the shifting wind. The hour of one approached. Kevin presented himself once more. "They say after this number."

"OK," Lucien said, and he looked at Laura, hoping she would give him some silent encouragement. She smiled at him faintly, her face steeped in the mystery that he knew was beckoning for someone, if not him, to pierce like the veil of the temple, some day soon.

Through the crowd he sauntered toward the microphone. The music died away. The clock on the campanile above showed one o'clock. The crowd clapped enthusiastically. It could have been he the crowd was clapping for.

"Thank you, thank you," a voice drawled over the loud speaker. It was the first time anyone in the band had spoken. "We like you," the voice said, "and we're gonna do one more."

Immediately the band started playing again. Lucien grabbed Kevin by the arm. "I thought you said we could have the mike at one." Kevin threw up his hands. The band went into still one more encore. Lucien saw that some people in the crowd were drifting away from the plaza. Then his heart sank. A man in a sport coat and tie had come up to a member of the band and was relaying some message to him. The band member waved to the rest of the company, and the music stopped abruptly. The voice came back over the microphone. "Sorry, we've gotta split now. The people here say we've used up our time." Lucien saw the microphones being carried away. The crowd was rapidly dispersing. He was ready to stand

up and shout, but there was no one to listen now. In less than a minute the plaza had emptied, and Lucien stood alone, the words choking in his throat, and his ears filled with the whining of the wind.

He heard Kevin cursing loudly. "Goddam it, dammit!"

Laura was at his side. "That was weird, Lucien," she said, trying to console him. "That was weird."

"A damn piece of goddam luck," Kevin swore from behind them.

They were all drinking red wine in Kevin's apartment that evening. Louie had drunk himself to excess in a matter of twenty minutes and lay on the floor, sodden, recumbent against the couch, his head tilted backwards and his mouth pried open, issuing little squeaks and snorts that halfway resembled snores. Kevin was preoccupied with post-mortems on the noon fiasco. "I don't know how it could have happened that way!" he lamented. "It couldn't have happened just that way. Anyway, we can't sit on our tails now."

Lucien was intrigued by Kevin's passion to keep the movement on keel. "Can't you tell me why you're so wrapped up with this?" Lucien asked. "If I didn't know better, it would be easy to think---

"That I'm in it for some private profit? Look, you don't know me well enough."

Laura spread her eyes over Kevin. "Why are you so strung out about it? You've got more zeal than Lucien himself."

Kevin chuckled in a pitch that was familiar and starting to come across to Lucien as vaguely cynical. "I've got everything in this," he said with great seriousness. "I know what's right."

"What is right?" asked Lucien. "I'm not altogether sure. "I'm starting to get weary of it all. I'm tired of always being the joker in the deck."

Kevin gave him a strange look. "You're tired? We're just beginning. Look, you've got to get what you have to say across -- somehow." He smacked his fist against his palm with determination. And with hopeful, passionate, and moist eyes, he stared at Lucien, saying, "You can't back out now. You've got power, more than you realize."

Laura sighed. "Kevin, you've got to tell us what you're after. Lucien thinks you're using him. Isn't that right, Lucien?"

Lucien was unable to utter an immediate response. Now Laura was peering straightaway at Lucien. "Well, I bet you do think he's using you. But it shouldn't matter how people relate to your message. You've got to carry through with it, if you feel it's right. It doesn't matter what you have to say, so long as you feel it's right." She pursed her lips together in a musing smile. "And that's all that matters, really, isn't it?"

"Have you been listening to the news?" Kevin asked Lucien with agitation. "Nasser's gotten U Thant to pull the UN troops out of Gaza, and the Egyptian army's moving up to confront Israel. The two armies are face to face with each other."

"But there's no fighting yet?" Lucien inquired.

"No, not yet. The fucking Arabs are gonna get their heads shot off by the Israelis if they attack."

Lucien had been lying in his sleeping bag.

"Listen," Kevin said, "there's something I've got to talk with you about. Katy's coming up here next weekend, and, well, I'm gonna have to ask you to bug out for the time she's here. It's not like I'm kicking you out. I'm probably gonna have to say the same to Louie. You can come back when she's left."

"Don't worry," Lucien said. "I probably won't be around here."

much longer. The movement isn't going anywhere."

Kevin let out a sneeze; his eyes were beginning to run. "Hay fever," he muttered. "Hits me this time every year. No, I mean, I wish you wouldn't say that. I really like the stuff you're coming out with. I read some to Katy last night on the phone. I called her after you'd gone to sleep. She just didn't know what to say. Can you imagine that, man, she was strung out. She thought it as boss, I mean, beautiful too."

"Maybe that's about as far as I can go with it," Lucien remarked.

"Huh?"

"I mean, we don't need a movement. All we need to do is pass the word around silently. Let people discover the truth for themselves in their own way. You told it to Katy, and she was affected by it. That's the way to go about it."

Kevin sniffed. "We need a movement. If we don't, the thing'll die out. It'll go pffft, like a balloon that's been untied."

"But maybe the public isn't the way."

"But it's the quickest, isn't it?" Kevin said. "Isn't it the damned quickest?"

Soon Kevin went out again, and Lucien sat down to read through the newspaper. It was true -- the Arab and Israeli armies had squared off against each other; invectives had been issued by each side against the enemy, and the overriding question in the opinion of one news analyst was not whether there would be a skirmish in the Middle East, but when. Somewhere in the midsection of the paper, however, Lucien stumbled upon a different news item which sparked his interest. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church was meeting Sunday and Monday in Portland, Oregon. The

leading piece of business on their agenda was discussion and ratification of the so-called Confession of 1967. Lucien knew nothing about the Confession of 1967, but he thought consideration of it should not leave out of account his Proclamation. The more he mulled over it, the more he became resolved to make the trip, and one last attempt. He would go to Portland and ask to speak to the Assembly. They could hardly refuse him, since he bore tidings which stood fair to transform the church itself. Very likely Reverend Haskings would be attending. Haskings knew him, and quite probably he could arrange for Lucien to speak. The judgement and transfiguration would begin with the church itself.

He detailed his plan to Louie. Louie seemed agreeable. "But where're you going to get the plane fare?" Lucien remembered he had about \$75.00, just the right amount for a ticket, in a savings account he had safeguarded since a child. Immediately he went to the bank and drew out the balance. On the way home he saw Laura on the sidewalk. He stopped the car. "Want a ride?"

Laura's face brightened. "Sure." She got in. He drove her up to the dormitory. "I'm going to Portland on Sunday," he said. "I'm going to speak to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. They'll have to listen."

"Oh?" she said. "Did you know I'm from there?"

"No."

"You can stay with my mother. She'd be glad to have you. I'll call her tonight and tell her you're coming."

"That would be very nice."

"I think you'll get along with my mother. She's very hospitable to my friends. She likes to have them around. I guess she likes people because she's had so many hard knocks in her life."

"I didn't know that."

"Yes. My Dad, my natural father divorced her when I was two. My first stepfather died of cancer when I was about eleven, and my second stepfather -- well, I don't have to go into it. She's a strong woman, but she's lonely, and she'll be glad to have you stay."

"That's really kind of you -- to ask your mother. It'd be cheaper than some flophouse."

Laura climbed out of the car. Smiling, she said, "let me know the results."

Louie drove Lucien to the airport. The plane, a United flight -- was scheduled to take off about five o'clock. They were trapped in a traffic snarl on the Nimitz freeway not too far from the Oakland airport, and because Lucien still had to purchase his ticket, he nearly missed his flight. But the stewardess greeted him with a welcoming smile, escorted him to his seat in the rear, and within a few, brief minutes the plane was rolling down the runway, its great jet engines booming as it lifted into the air and soared out over the blue bay and into the sun-mellowed sky. The roar of the engines tapered off into a sleepy plangent hum. Lucien slumped backwards in his seat. Through the glass portal he watched as the dappled earth fell away far below, the houses and highways shrinking to tiny dark splotches, like midges in a dirty spider's web. He was going, in a sense, up to Jerusalem, where the wise elders and high priests would have to contend with him. They were not liable to understand. Indeed, they might prove hostile, for they had the past, not the future, to defend. They were partisans of the cross, the cross on which the flesh was torn and racked in eternal punishment. Perhaps they were not ready for the end. There

was too much at stake for them. They were not willing to let the old aeon slip away into what is past. He could imagine them questioning him, scowling at him, wagging their heads with pious and magisterial doltishness. And, when it was over, they would either be won over, or condemned to plod on with their ancient, crepuscular faith. They would be unaware that it was all over, that the end had come. No, he would make the end manifest to them. The cross -- yes -- he would tear down the cross, the cross that had stood erect for two thousand years, saying now, in victory, "it is finished. I am the Alpha and the Omega, says God, the beginning and the end." That would, indeed, be the end, but would they believe it. Would they let him do it?

The plane made an easy landing. Lucien barely felt the wheels touch ground. Hailing a taxi he was sped right to the hotel, where the assembly had convened. He was prepared for any eventuality, but he was shocked that it turned out to be so easy. There, sitting in the lobby of the hotel right by the front door, almost as if he had been waiting for Lucien, was Haskings. Haskings was smartly dressed that evening, outfitted in a beryl-blue blazer with discreetly matching shirt and tie. He was talking with some young lady, who was seated beside him. Haskings was surprised to see Lucien.

"Why, Lucien, what on earth are you doing here? Did you come to hear what's going on? You know, I'm on the committee that drafted the major portions of the new confession."

"I came," Lucien began slowly, "because I wanted to speak to the assembly."

Haskings cocked his head with a queer expression, attempting not to appear startled, though he was obviously. "Speak to the

assembly? But you're not a delegate. Only delegates can speak to the assembly."

"What I have to say is more important than any delegate has," Lucien said firmly, and he produced a copy of the Proclamation. "Here, read this. It's the gist of what I have to say."

Haskings took the piece of paper. He reached in his pocket for a pair of reading glasses, then hastily read over the Proclamation. Finally, he put it down and said, "so what is this? Is this something new?"

"Yes."

"But, it's not. You talk about faith and Christ. What's new about that?"

"It's just that. The words don't mean the same any more. We're all Christs to each other. I mean, we are all Christs. We can only meet Christ in the flesh, in the closeness of love -- marriage, that's the highest form of faith. That's the meaning of history. We've taken Christ down from his cross, and now we meet Christ in a thousand faces, most intimately in the face we deeply love. Don't you see? The kingdom of God that's between each of us -- it's here now, and we don't have to wait any more. It's the eschaton. We don't just look to one man. We have Christ, God, with us, here, now."

"The eschaton?" Haskings looked at Lucien, then at the young woman beside him, who was observing the exchange with no great interest. "What exactly are you talking about, Lucien?"

"I want to speak to the assembly."

"But you can't," Haskings blurted. "You're not a delegate.. Lucien, you don't seem to be able to understand these things. I wonder if you haven't gotten over your father's death yet."

Haskings' face was hard as stone -- his look insensible, unrelenting. "Lucien, why don't you get some rest tonight? Then come back and hear what the delegates have to say. You might learn something about the church."

But Lucien thought: "the church is dead now. It's time is over. Within ten years, if not sooner, you will see the final fissures appearing in its foundation." "No, I don't think so," Lucien said softly.

"Well, I'm sorry," Haskings said, and he turned his face away from Lucien, back to the young lady.

"Perhaps some other day," Lucien said, and he walked away.

Outside it was raining, just as it had rained at auspicious hours all through that winter and spring.

It was a lenient rain, a transient late spring shower. Up above a plaid of blue sky was becoming visible among the foaming clouds. Lucien found himself crying, crying with the spluttering rain. He could not contain himself. A vast, inchoate undertow of grief and longing sucked all his present feelings away. The world seemed to be finished, finished for him, for the eschaton, for the grand, quixotic caper he had set off on in his stiff-necked way. The old gods were bowing out, but not in silence. They had their last, pitiful laugh on him.

^{From} In his wallet he picked out the slip of paper on which he had jotted down the number of Laura's mother, a Mrs. Eloise Spooner. A gentle, woman's voice came on the line. He said that he was at the hotel and asked politely if she would come for him. Of course, she would come for him. She was more than happy to do so.

"Laura was telling me a bit about you," Mrs. Spooner said as they drove out of the city toward her suburban home. She was a

seasoned, silver-gray old woman with creases in her face who talked with a grating, Midwestern accent, the daughter of prairie farmers in South Dakota who, despite her uprootedness, still retained a look of earthiness. There was little hardness in the way she spoke; she warbled on about the lovely, green spring they were having, about her garden which, she disclosed, she was working on night and day. "I've been having trouble getting the tomatoes in," she said. "The soil's too wet. Anyway, Laura's been telling me some things. You come here for a church convention?"

"Yes. I was going to speak at the convention, but I got snarled in some red tape."

"That always happens," she said, "even in churches. It seems to me those church people spend so much time talking. Me, I don't have much time for church. Couldn't go this morning. I had to plant."

At the house she brewed him some warm, camomile tea and asked, "I hope you can stay a few days?"

"I have to get back tomorrow evening," Lucien said.

"Well, you do what you got to do. If you need to go back down tomorrow, I'll be glad to drive you in."

"I haven't decided," Lucien said. He saw no purpose, though, in going back to the assembly. Their ears would not hear.

Mrs. Spooner did not sit down with him, but bustled about the dining room and kitchen, attending to various little chores. "Laura said you've got some new religious ideas?"

Lucien took a slow sip of his tea before answering. "Yes, that's why I came up here. But I don't think they're going to listen."

"New ideas, old ideas. They're all the same. Religion don't

change much, do it?"

Lucien shook his head.

"It seems to me what religion is, is something between people. That's what religion is. I used to go to church all the time --

my papa and mama and brothers -- back in South Dakota. Always

thought it was something good for the family to do. I'm sorry to say I didn't have much time for it when I was raising Laura. Too many things raising that child, and too many husbands. I had to give my all to them and Laura. One of 'em walked out on me, you know. Maybe Laura told you that. The other two were kind men.

But even so, I had to give a lot of time to 'em all. And there was my daughter. It shows -- the time I gave to her -- because she's

a fine girl now."

Mrs. Spooner said, "Just a minute, be back in a minute," and

disappeared down the steps to the basement. Lucien glanced around the house. The furniture in the living room was out of date, the chairs rusty and overstuffed, and the house smeared of lemon oil. Everything about it was immaculate, tidy, and in order. Atop an

old walnut sideboard was a miscellany of old photographs in lacquered, dime store frames. Most of them were pictures of Laura -- a happy,

pearly-toothed, smiling kindergartner; a gawky and long-waisted

pre-teenager in a hoop skirt, playing with a little, fox terrier

on the lawn; a tinted portrait of a mature young woman. Each was

lapsed, but immortal moment that had left its clasp in the skein

of time. There was also the snapshot of another young woman, with

high, waving trees in the background. The snapshot was dull, brown

around the edges -- Mrs. Spooner perhaps when she had been Laura's

age. They were the same kinds of photographs that languished through

the generations in every home; yet each one gave hint of a unique

nexus of life unfolding, unique experiences, unique sorrows and

pleasures, unique memories and anticipations that filtered to the surface, like tiny air bubbles, in the wide, sluggish flow of

days trivial and unremembered. Each was a speck in time that somehow secured itself from the corruption of time; each registered

its own, inherent triumph over time. Time itself was irreducible;

it could be transformed, but not annihilated. In the living room

he heard a clock ticking, with the same indefatigable cadence as

he had heard the clock ticking in his own house, in the days his

father had died.

He heard Mrs. Spooner slowly mounting the creaking basement

steps. "Just some mint I had drying on some string down there,"

she said. "It'll be ready to add to tea in a few weeks."

"You must work pretty hard?"

"It's hard," she said, "but I get in the rhythm. When you're

old like me, and so much of your life is behind you, you get in the

rhythm. With Laura gone, I've got a lot of time, and I spend it

the best way I can. I make it hard for myself."

"If you don't mind, I think I'll go to bed," Lucien said.

"Go right ahead," Mrs. Spooner said. "Here, let me get you

some clean sheets. You can't sleep without clean sheets."

In the middle of the night he woke up to hear it raining. He

heard the rain gushing down from the eaves and spitting against the

pane above his bed. The wind was brushing through the trees out-

doors in the darkness, and every so often the room would become

iridescent with brilliant flares of lightning. He went back to

sleep, peacefully.

When morning came, the rain had stopped and the sun was shining,

The Coming

though he could still hear the wind gusting. Mrs. Spooner was not

in the house. He found her in the back yard stooped over her garden.

"Oh, Lucien, I ought to fix you some breakfast," she said, "but I've got to plant these lettuce seeds first." She was methodically sprinkling a handful of the tiny seeds into a shallow, wet furrow she had dug with a stick. She held her hand low to the ground to keep the wind from blowing the seeds away.

Lucien looked about the yard. The lot abutted on some newer houses which obscured the view to the west, but to the east lay an open, grassy field bordered by high trees. The wind was blowing out of the east, blasting his face.

"I guess I oughtn't plant when the wind's so strong," Mrs. Spooner declared. "These seeds are so tiny, so delicate."

Lucien watched as she laid the last few seeds in the furrow, and covered them over. She had not spilled a single one.

"They've go good, wet soil to grow in," she said, standing up. "Now I got to get you breakfast." She put down some garden tools and walked back into the house.

Lucien stood, his face to the wind, staring up into the bright sky. A rapturous feeling came over him, and he thought, "yes, I have planted the seeds, in spite of the wind that could blow them away. The word is like the tiny seeds; it must slumber in the earth for a short season, but in time it will grow, and it will grow into a full plant, which all shall enjoy. The time is still not yet; it is only spring, when the planting is done; but the time will come; the days are coming very soon when the fruits of my awkward efforts will be tasted. And everyone will know. But for now, I have done all I can do."

Just then a blackbird came winging out of the air and alighted

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Just then a blackbird came winging out of the air and alighted

on a post beside the garden. It looked around suspiciously, let out a fussy caw, and flew away toward the trees.

Louie was there to meet him at the airport. He was eager to hear the news. "Did you speak? I was waiting to hear something on the radio," he said with a facetious, but sympathetic trill to his voice.

"I didn't," Lucien said, "but it's OK. I've done what was needed."

Louie gave him a slightly bewildered look. "What did you do?"

"I learned the hard way."

Louie scratched his head. "I've had premonitions about you the past two nights."

"Oh?"

"Yea, premonitions that it wasn't going to turn out the way we intended. So where are we?"

"We're a few days older," Lucien said. "We've got to wait, for the right time."

"When's that?"

"When we grow up a little more, learn a little more, love a little more. That's all."

In the car Louie said, "I think I'm gonna take off tomorrow. Go back down south. There's a girl I want to get to know, back in my home town."

Lucien smiled at him. "So you've learned something too," he said.

lay, caged in his soul, disembodied. He fingered the rough cloth and which yearned for the resurrection of his body. The word still man, the one half who was still, especially in body, incomplete, had not come. His Christ had not yet come; he was only half a

thought. He was still alone in the world. And the end of it all and spirit. But the victory was only in the airy vacancies of his feeling, because he had just accomplished a victory in his own mind liness, the emptiness of his burnt-out world. It was a strange began to feel as he had not felt for weeks now -- the haunting loneliness to bed early. As he lay in his sleeping bag in the dark, he seemed to be in the right place at the right time. That night he not really answer that for himself, other than the fact that she he was in love with Laura. Why was he in love with her? He could before, because he had not been willing to admit to himself that in making it with Laura? He had not worried about that prospect Lucien felt a lump in his throat. What if Kevin did succeed a good thing, so I assume, with Katy. Strange guy."

when it comes to her. She won't go for him, and he's already got mind, but I sometimes think the guy's a little whacko, especially going to ask her out for an evening. I don't know what he has in he had gone. "He's out with Laura. It seems he decided he was Kevin was not around even for dinner. Lucien asked Louie where Lucien did not see Kevin when he returned to the apartment. I thought for a long time you were really a prophet."

Louie laughed. "You talk like a philosopher," he said, "and than we think."

don't we. The only thing is that our follies are sometimes wiser

"But we have learned. We learn through our own follies,

Louie grimaced. "You don't have to put it that way."

too, you know what I mean, and that's what the fuckers in the system man. That's all there is to it. But we've got to have screwin'

I heard your stuff about stopping the war. We've gotta have peace, the stuff about what's really important -- a man and a woman. And

"Hell, no," Kevin said. "I knew what you were talking about,

the Proclamation, a chance to get a screw?"

Lucien looked Kevin in the eye. "Is that all you read out of

bed, one night. I couldn't wait for Katy."

Get on much with her. I thought, maybe, I could just get her in

I said. She loves you for some reason. Hell, I didn't want to

"I hoped so myself. But she's got a mind of her own, like

expectations all to hell. I thought you two might hit it off."

was going to work, until tonight, and then -- you've shot my

known what you've had in mind all along, but I never thought it

"Kevin, look, you've got to square something with me. I've

me crazy, that woman. Now -- well -- Katy's coming in a few days."

business would win her over to me, just for a time. She drives

she's got her own mind. I thought -- I thought -- all this

"I put it on the line to her, but she wouldn't budge. Man,

"What did you say? What happened?"

Lucien sat up and gazed at Kevin with pained disbelief.

for you. She's yours. I was wrong. I was so wrong, man."

"She's in love with you. She told me that. She's waiting

"Got her?"

he expostulated angrily.

room and in a dither flipped on the light. "So you've got her,"

There was a crash at the door. Kevin burst into the dark

that. He wished there were someone sleeping beside him.

of the sleeping bag. What he touched seemed incorporeal, insubstan-

won't let us do. They won't let us have peace or our screw. They won't leave us alone. And I thought, hell, you were the one to bring it off. You put it so beautifully."

"What's Katy like?" Lucien asked.

Kevin's eyes lit up. "She's beautiful man, though I think she's had her head fucked up a little by her old man. She's a preacher's kid, you know, and she's been fed all this stuff about keeping it till she's married and waving her man off to war, and her old man has it in for me, I know. Well, I know Katy's gonna come round. She really liked the Proclamation. She's not just a piece of ass, Lucien. She's a beautiful person, somebody I could spend a lifetime with. Hell, I guess I didn't want Laura really. It was just this -- being alone, sleeping alone, not having her here to talk with. It was like being in hell, and I needed to be rescued."

"I'm with you," Lucien said.

"Sure you are, man, I know," Kevin said. "You're beautiful too. But --" he started to laugh. "There's this screwing business you and I, cause we're guys, see, can't do without it. You know there's an old saying -- 'absence makes the fondler grow harder.'"

"That's damn crude," Lucien said laughing. Kevin was laughing too. They repeated the joke to each other, and they couldn't stop from laughing.

In the morning he called Laura. He wanted to tell her everything, but not over the telephone. He suggested they go for a picnic up in Tilden, and she accepted.

He found the same path that he had walked over many months before with Elaine. He led her to the exact, same spot, where the wasps had been; but they were not there now. The place was lonely

and still. No sounds could be heard except for the hissing of crickets and the soft peeping of some birds. "Do you hear the birds?" he asked her, as they spread their blanket on the ground. "Most of us never hear them, but they're always speaking to us. They speak a language that's so rich and significant, if we could only understand."

Laura sighed and stretched her arms into the air. "It's so nice here, Lucien. But, tell me, what happened? Mother says you never got to speak to the church people."

"No, I didn't. But it turned out for the best, I'm sure of that."

"Why?"

"Because what I had to say couldn't be said in front of noisy rostrums. It has to be picked up, as subtle sounds and signals, like the birds."

She smiled. "You talk in riddles a lot. I have to admit, I never have really understood what's been going on with you. You speak beautiful words, but I have to wonder just what they mean. You really don't need to go off with a lot of high-sounding phrases. You're quite a person just as you are."

Lucien felt a rush of gladness, an all-encompassing, peaceful gladness. "I wish I knew you meant it when you said that."

"I do."

"You know, Kevin told me something last night."

"Oh?"

"About what you said."

Laura laughed. "Here we are, acting like two sixth-graders. Kevin said that I said this, and you say you know what Kevin said."

Lucien smiled and took her hand in his. She responded to

his advance eagerly, putting her other hand on top of his in a loving clinch.

"Why do you love me?" he asked. "I don't think anybody's ever really loved me."

"Oh," she said, "for no good reason. "You've got a kind of power over me."

"But you hardly know me."

"That's true, but I know my own feelings."

"Love isn't for children," Lucien said, "not the kind of love that endures in the end. Each of us has a dark side we haven't glimpsed yet."

"Most likely," she said, "but I'm willing to take the dark side with the light. I knew you had a dark side. Perhaps it could have come out right away, with this obsession you have."

"But it was an innocent obsession, wasn't it?"

"I don't know," she said. "Anyway, I think we can tame it together."

He pressed her hand now forcefully. "Laura, I have to say it -- I love you. People have been saying that in their sweet, sickening, and often hypocritical way for untold centuries, and often after a while it doesn't mean anything. But there aren't any words more powerful. To say it is a commitment, it really is. It says, to me, you're ready to stand the dark with the light, the horror with the fascination, the anguish with the joy, and you go on, riding those waves of life up and down, even til death. I love you, Laura. If I were a poet, I could say it better."

"You are a poet in your own way," she said, her eyes lightening.

"Oh Laura," and he drew her against him in an excited embrace. He laid his head against her breasts and wept. "I'm sorry I have

to cry. It's like the final shower before the sky clears, in this springtime of my madness."

She laid her hand firmly against the back of his head and stroked his neck. Tearfully, he looked up at her and his lips met hers.

"You've got one fault," she said suddenly, with a twitting but friendly tone that gave him pause.

"What?"

"You don't laugh enough. You can't be a good lover unless you can laugh."

"I think I can laugh now," he said. "I can laugh at how it's all turned out. The sad and lonely little orphan who became a prophet, and who came to root up and plant anew with his powerful word; but he turned out to be the silent prophet who spoke to no one. No one would listen except the one who finally came into his life. So much for prophecy..."

"Maybe you can be a prophet and a poet some day," she said.

He hugged her. "No, at least for a while. I need rest. I need to be silent a time, at least to the multitudes."

She nudged against his cheek with a little kiss. "Whatever you say," she said. "I need you to get my head together too. We have lots of time."

"To laugh and to love."

"To laugh and to love," she said.

"Would you teach me to laugh more?"

"I can't teach you," she said, and she reached for a stalk of grass and began tickling his face with it. Squirming, he started laughing and grabbed the grass from her.

She was laughing very hard. Even the birds seemed to be

laughing. They were the anonymous oracles of God -- the living God, the loving God, the laughing God.

And, laughing, he rolled over on top of her and began to kiss her with a vehemence she seemed greatly to enjoy. He felt her body -- warm, supple, squirming, throbbing -- tightly against his. And as he laughed and kissed her, he experienced a levity to both their bodies. "I love you," he heard her whisper with a mysterious clarity, and his own eyes seemed to fill up with a marvelous brilliance and splendor. They looked into each other's eyes, and together they became one body of light.

And now the end appeared definitely to have come. The events of his life were all being collected together, like iron filings drawn by a magnet. He received another communication from the draft board. He feared it was his final induction notice, but it turned out to be a letter informing him that a "procedural irregularity" had been discovered and that a medical exemption was under review once more. In the same batch of mail was another letter, the address composed in strange script. The letter was addressed to his father. It had been forwarded from his old address in Oakland and was postmarked Strasbourg, France. He had a sinking feeling, and his fingers shivered violently as he slit open the letter. Could it be from whom he thought? Why, now, at this momentous time, after all the years? The letter was not from his mother, but from a Mme. Danielle Kreuzer deLoup. The letter read -- in rather poor English:

Dear Mr. Lastman,

I am a friend of your wife, Mme. Martine Lastman, who I have regret to tell you died a most few days ago from the cancer. She did not want to tell you about her sickness until it was the end, but she did die suddenly and we not having expected it. I am ver sorry, Mr. Lastman. She has some things which I will send to you some weeks after now.

Truly,
Danielle Kreuzer deLoup

Lucien did not know what to think. He could not weep for his mother. She had been buried along with the past, the absent past. The past had been the wave that had swept him onto the shore of a new life with all its uncharted possibilities. And now the wave had broken. He could not weep for his mother, but neither could he be glad. In her death he felt a strange, diffuse, and unattached--yet reverent kind of love -- that one feels for all that is past, that has given birth to the present and prefigured the future, while at the same time has come to its own end, its own fruition.

He had one errand that still needed attending. He had to tell the old man about what had happened. He was walking across the campus on the way to his car, however, when he saw a crowd gathered on the sidewalk. They were listening to Hubert, who was declaiming about war, sin, and judgement. It was a familiar refrain.

"The armies of Gog and Magog are gathered," Hubert roared. "The end is near, the final judgement."

"Who's going to win, Hubert?" someone shouted, "the Arabs or the Israelis?"

Hubert raised his fist in the air. "Who will win? God will win. No man can win God's war. War and rumors of war. It's a great sign, I tell you. A sign of the end."

The old man, too, seemed near his end. He was strangely different than the wise old man Lucien had met before. When Lucien knocked on the door of Dr. Mueller's house, his wife answered and said, "Oh, yes, I remember you. You know Dr. Mueller isn't well. He's out in the backyard. Come."

Lucien found the old man lying in a chaise lounge, his head shielded by a tattered, straw hat from the hot sun. "I've come to talk with you," Lucien said. The old man seemed in a different space and time; his eyes were glazed over, and his jaw was trembling.

"Dr. Mueller isn't well," his wife repeated. "But I'm sure he would like to talk with you."

"What's the matter?" Lucien asked, placing his hand on the old man's shoulder.

The old man tried to speak, but he could only stutter. "I, I, I ----." He reached for a half-consumed glass of lemonade on the grass beside him and took a sip. "I haven't been well these days. Helen's been worried it might be a stroke, but I know better. It's the terrible things that are happening. Do you know what they're doing in Vietnam? And this Middle Eastern thing. God preserve the Jews. They're going to have a war, and it'll be a beastly war. It could be the end of the Jews."

"No, it won't," Lucien said. He thought: "the Jews have been the true Christians. They are the ones who have born the cross of suffering for two thousand years. They are the ones disenfranchised, torn from their bodies and from their home. But the age of the cross is over. They, like the bodies of all men and women, will be raised up in the general resurrection which is about to take place."

"Why do you say that?" the old man asked, bewildered.

"Because they're a sign, like so many other signs, that weave the tapestry that is this mysterious universe."

"I don't really know what you mean."

"I don't know," Lucien said. "I just feel it in my bones. You know, I was born a Jew, I'm half a Jew. That caused me to be divided against myself for so long, but now I'm whole."

"Divided? There're divisions everywhere these days. Look

what the Jews are clamoring about. Jerusalem -- Jerusalem's divided in two. The holy city. It's divided. You say you're half a Jew. Where's your other half?"

"My other half came to me today. She's wonderful. I'm in love with her." And Lucien thought: "the new Jerusalem adorned like a bride. ---"

Dr. Mueller managed a painful smile. "I'm glad," he said. "Is that what you came out of the desert with?"

"In a sense, yes,"

"You know, they're so many divisions about these days. I was hearing about what our church did up in Portland. They couldn't get together on anything. They were trying to write a confession, but what could they confess? They don't know. They write a confession like a committee of fools, and still they can't agree. It's because they've lost the power of the old words. Do you know, I came to the realization yesterday. What do the old words mean anymore? What does it mean to say, for instance, 'Jesus Christ died for our sins.' Did he? What are our sins? How does dying save us? I say to Helen lie with me for a little while, hold me, touch me. We're old, but we still do that, and I ask her, 'how does it make sense?' She's a very earthy woman, not like me, and she says, 'don't worry.' But I have to worry. I've spent my whole life interpreting the word, the word they say became flesh, but now I can't make any sense. I'm old, and my time is almost at an end. I've tried to interpret the word, but now it doesn't come any more. I wish someone could tell me if my life were justified."

"Will you take a walk with me?" Lucien asked. He thought a walk would do the old man good.

The old man slowly got up, shuffled toward the house, and grabbed his cane which was leaning against the door jamb. "Helen," he

said, "this young man and some words alone together. We'll be back shortly."

Yet it seemed to Lucien, as they walked, there was no need for words. The sun was warm. A flock of birds dove and rollicked overhead. The surrounding hills were drowned in a hush that seemed to spread out over the whole green earth. They started up the hill, along the path, where Lucien had first met the old man. The old man took Lucien's arm, clinging, as if he were relying on him for the least strength. And Lucien thought to himself: "old man, your life is not a loss. It's justified by the power that you have within, even if you don't know it. Right now, in your aged desperation, your mind is divided against itself, against your past, against your own interpretations. But you, too, have been made secretly whole. Right now the world too is divided, nation against nation, children against their parents, and it is made manifest in that most ancient division, the division of flesh, the separation of man and woman. But the days are coming soon when the divisions shall be repaired. The living God has left signs in the overgrown trail of time and history for those who have eyes to behold. The kingdom is at hand, and you have pointed to the first sign. Even Jerusalem, the old Jerusalem, the divided city, is filled with signs. But the signs still must be made apparent. Human history was, is, and always will be a sign of what is hidden in our midst, a sign of the living God's power."

On June 5, 1967 war broke out in the Middle East. The Israeli army swept to a swift and startling victory; and on June 7, Israeli soldiers fell to their knees in prayer before the wailing wall in Old Jerusalem, and the divided city was divided no longer.

Thursday, May 18, 1967

The Proclamation—1967

*(The following was submitted by
The Eschaton Society).*

Let it be known that:

Christ has come, and all is fulfilled. We are all Christs to each other.

The promise of the final Kingdom of God is real and now. The promise is kept in the hour of meeting between person and person.

The living God has come into our midst. As one person lives, so God lives.

GOD IS LOVE. Just as the love of an adolescent is greater than the love of a child, so the greatest of love is between a man and a woman.

At the same moment that two persons come to know each other in truth, they also come to know the living God. Therefore every life can be known and is holy. No act of taking a life, including one's own, is justified.

No war or persecution or simple injury to another person may be justified in the sight of the living God. Every such act or intent shall be judged, for all must submit to the judgement which is now.

Every person owes allegiance to his fellow person. He shall have no allegiance prior to this allegiance. His first allegiance shall be neither to his occupation nor his community nor his society

nor the flag of his country, but to the living God.

TO HAVE FAITH is to have faith in each other as Christ, for it is written that "the righteous shall live by faith." If any church which confesses Christ denies this truth of faith, then it denies the power of faith and has no right to claim faith.

The church is the body of Christ, but every living body is Christ's body. Therefore every church which denies the body denies Christ. The church of Christ shall have only two sacraments. The major sacrament shall be marriage, the minor one communion.

No one who understands this proclamation shall be condemned, but all shall have life. Just as in time one among men was resurrected, so the time has come when all men shall be raised up in the flesh. To love with both heart and body is to be raised up in the flesh.

This proclamation does not annul the Scriptures, but consists in their fulfillment.

No longer shall a man be known as a Christian, Jew, Hindu, or Buddhist, but all shall know the living God.

When this proclamation is heard, it shall be heard as the word of the living God. Hear the first address today at 12:45 in lower Sproul plaza.